

# BONES HOOKS



# BONES Pioneer Negro Cowboy HOOKS

BY BRUCE G. TODD



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*To Mathew (“Bones”) Hooks, for the honor for which he stood  
despite the hatred in such uncompromising times*

*And for two friends whose names cannot be mentioned. M. H.  
encouraged me from the outset to succeed with the book, and G. J.  
M. D. stood with me in my personal hard times. I am greatly  
indebted to both of them.*



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## Preface

This book began out of the African-American Oral History Project of Potter County in the Texas Panhandle in an effort to document black pioneer history. As the wealth of information was collected it became increasingly obvious that much of this information should be published. One story that came from this project was that of a black cowboy and pioneer, Mathew (“Bones”) Hooks. Although Bones Hooks was widely recognized not only in the Texas Panhandle but in West Texas, Colorado, and Oklahoma too, and had been the subject of numerous interviews, a book-length biography of this astonishing man was never written until now.

Monica Hilling, a former professor of English and French at West Texas A&M, was the first to encourage writing such a book. The next was Rev. Jess Cortez, of black and Hispanic heritage, who supported the project from the outset and was as forthright and open as anyone I interviewed. Another person to impress upon me that my research in regional black history should be published was Dr. Charles Townsend, the author of Bob Wills’ life story, *San Antonio Rose*, and formerly a professor of history at West Texas A&M. Further support came from Walt Davis, president of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, and Lisa Lambert and Betty Bustos of the Archives department. Betty Bustos was always willing and

able to help out on this project. A special thanks goes to the Amarillo Public Library System, which furnished photos, newspaper articles, and advice. The entire staff was helpful, but particularly Art Bort, John Birchfield, Kay Johnson, Katie Anthony, Rob Groman, Greg Thomas, Sara Clark, Lana Hughes, Kevin Hill, Judith Sample, and Gayle Brown, who was responsible for indexing many years of the Amarillo newspapers.

However, the most important and pivotal assistance came from the black community and specifically Charles Kemp, the former president of the Black Cultural Center of Amarillo. He put me in contact with those whose parents and grandparents were some of the first blacks not only in Amarillo but the Texas Panhandle. Equally important were Juell Shorten Nutter and Charles Warford. Juell Nutter, whose parents were pioneer and community leaders, has long been considered the historian of her people in Amarillo and her research was invaluable to this book. Charles Warford came to Amarillo as a child in the mid 1930s and, like Charles Kemp, knew Bones Hooks as a boy. Charles Warford is a walking history book and recalled people and events with great clarity. I am grateful, as I relied heavily on his guidance in understanding Bones Hooks. I owe a great deal of thanks to these individuals, as well as those too numerous to name, including the dozens of men and women interviewed in the African-American Oral History Project. Without them, the story of Mathew ("Bones") Hooks could not have been written.

## Introduction

Bill Pickett, the famous black cowboy otherwise known as the “Dusky Demon,” was elected to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1971, and he was more than deserving, as many black cowboys still are. Yet there is one black cowboy whose career surpasses that of most, regardless of color, and who ought to be in the Great Westerners Hall of Fame but is not. His name is Mathew (“Bones”) Hooks.

Bones, as he was simply known all over West Texas, the Panhandle, and the Plains, was destined to be a cowboy—and not just a cowboy but a bronc buster with no equal. He left home at the age of nine to pursue that dream, and he rode his first wild horse in North Texas when he was twelve. By the time he was a scrawny fifteen-year-old, he had traveled to the rugged Pecos country of West Texas, where he made a name far and wide as a great bronc rider. He soon went into partnership with a white friend, Tommy Clayton, and had his own brand, *B*, presumably standing for Bones. He worked most of the ranches of that region. By his own admission, he was never an all-around cowhand, such as the great Jim Perry of the XIT Ranch, but a specialist. He went wherever his bronc-riding services led him.

In 1886 he arrived in Clarendon and was in the

Panhandle during the terrible blizzards of the 1886-87 winter. He worked as wrangler and bronc buster for the formidable pioneer and trailblazer Col. Charles Goodnight on more than one occasion. Goodnight never told Bones how much he appreciated his skills, but he spread the news all over the Panhandle to his rancher friends, building him an even stronger reputation. Bones went back and forth from the Panhandle to the Pecos for a number of years until 1896, when he settled in the Panhandle. After marrying in 1900, he retired from bronc busting. That same year he traveled to Denver to the world rodeo that was already established as a great Western event, but he was denied participation because of his color. This was the first time that blacks were kept out of the sport since it had become popular in the early 1880s. He returned to the Panhandle and tried ranching in New Mexico for a few years. By 1909 he had taken a job on the Santa Fe Railroad as a Pullman porter. A year later, he was coaxed out of retirement to ride an outlaw horse that no one else could. A friend and pioneer rancher thought Bones ought to try. The event happened in the Panhandle in Pampa, Texas, with a number of witnesses on hand. At the age of forty-two Bones pulled off this amazing feat. Drawings and poems were created in his honor, and his name spread as far away as New York. The great bronc rider who had not been allowed to participate in the Denver rodeo was praised by the world bronco champion, "Booger Red" (Samuel Thomas Privett), who told the world that whatever he could ride in a saddle, Bones could ride bareback.

In the years that followed, Bones' great prowess on a horse was memorialized through more poems, songs, and, of course, stories around campfires. In 1926, just before one of the cowboy reunions in Amarillo, four old cowmen were discussing who was the greatest bronc rider of all time. Several names were mentioned, including Chuck Yarborough, who

reportedly won a \$250 bet with Buffalo Bill. The *Amarillo Daily News* ran an article based on the cowmen's conversation titled, "Old Bones, a Pioneer Negro Porter on Santa Fe Called Best Bronc Rider on the Plains." In the article, one of the old cowmen spoke up after hearing all of the other arguments. He said, "I reckon Old Bones is the best rider ever to straddle a horse on the Plains. . . . Yes, Bones is a Negro, but those who know him say he is undoubtedly one of the best riders the United States has ever known. . . . I guess Old Bones is the best bronc buster the Panhandle has ever known."

If Bones' story ended with his cowboy achievements, it would have been a great story, but Bones was much more than an old cowboy. He became a leader of his people, a civic and social worker, a Western-style philosopher, and a builder of character and self-esteem. He helped organize the first black church in the Panhandle while he was still breaking wild horses near Clarendon, and after he moved to Amarillo he quickly established himself as a leader there. He was on hand when the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church was organized and may have helped establish the Fred Douglass Elementary School. He built a Negro town just outside of Amarillo's city limits that was annexed by the city, he erected a community center named Pioneer Hall, and he was prominent in establishing the area's first black high school. He founded the Colored Panhandle Pioneer Club, was one of the original members of the Negro Chamber of Commerce, and founded the Dogie Club, an organization for young boys that gained widespread recognition and praise.

As impressive as this list of accomplishments is, Bones' achievements did not end here. He used his name to raise money for various black causes and traveled all over the country on a Santa Fe Railroad pass representing his race in Panhandle history and other black accomplishments. In

addition, he proudly carried on the old cowboy tradition of giving honor to whom honor was due by presenting a lone white flower to individuals or a bouquet of flowers to families and groups, first to pioneers and later to those who contributed to a better society. The first honored were West Texas and Panhandle pioneers; later he extended the tradition to dignitaries around the world, including Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Bones did everything he could to make things better for his race and was often called a “peacemaker” in that he tried to close the gap between the races. He personally was not subjected to much prejudice and crossed the race barrier with ease. He lived a lot in the white world but not for personal gain. He used all of his influence for his people, but sometimes his ways were not understood. He belonged to several white organizations such as the Western Cowpunchers Association, the Old Settlers Reunion, and the XIT Association. He was the first and, at the time, only black member of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society and was often interviewed for a column in the Amarillo newspaper called “Bones Bits,” recollecting the pioneer days.

No, Bones’ story does not read like that of other black cowboys. His story is unique, indeed. The life he led and the things he accomplished were nothing less than amazing when one considers the era in which he lived and the attitude toward blacks in general. Perhaps that is why his name lives on even to this day in the Texas Panhandle.

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