# PART I

CHAPTER 1

# The Early Years

> Mr. Donald drove some cattle to Henrietta and left me there with them. I stayed and called Henrietta home. Well, it was just before this that I got the nickname "Bones." . . . I ain't never been able to get rid of that name yet and I'm seventy years old.
>
> —Bones Hooks

On an early March day in 1910, a slender black man, approximately five feet and seven inches tall, who was one of the legendary cowboys on the High Plains, made a truly historic ride on an outlaw horse. This particular black cowboy was not as obscure as many black cowboys had become due to being written out of history by white writers aimed at white readers, and he continued to be an integral part of the real West. His name was Mathew ("Bones") Hooks, and this was his final great ride on a worthy wild horse, a horse that was as much an expression of the Old West as was the bronc rider himself. This ride was going to be documented and go down in history, but more importantly, it was going to cement the bronc rider's reputation for all time.

"The Ride," as it was simply known, occurred when Bones was past the prime of a bronc buster, at the age of forty-two.

He had been retired since 1900. "The Ride" was not planned as a publicity stunt such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show might have planned. Actually, it was put in motion a couple of days earlier on a Santa Fe passenger train between Amarillo and Pampa, Texas. Bones was employed as a Pullman porter, a position he had taken the previous year. One day as he was working this train, some old cattlemen were aboard whom Bones knew, one of them quite well. They were discussing an outlaw horse that nobody could ride. Bones lingered nearby, dusting the seats so he could listen to the conversation. As he later recalled, "I hate to miss any horse talk."[1]

One of the men was J. D. Jefferies of Clarendon, a pioneer rancher and civic leader for whom Bones had worked as a wrangler. Naturally, Bones couldn't resist breaking into their conversation. The cattlemen, except for Jefferies, were certain that no one could ride the outlaw horse. Jefferies suggested to Bones that he ride it. Bones discussed it with the cattlemen, and a purse of twenty-five dollars was put up if he could ride the outlaw. Bones agreed, but more for the challenge than the money. He said, "Well, you tell him [the owner, Mart Davidson] to have his horse at the depot in Pampa the day after tomorrow and I'll ride him."[2]

Jefferies soon disembarked, but two days later, on March 12, the train that Bones was working rolled into the depot at Pampa, about sixty miles northeast of Amarillo, and the outlaw horse and its owner were waiting for him. A number of others were on hand, too. They had heard that the great Bones Hooks was going to ride the meanest of all horses. News also spread throughout the train as to what was about to take place. The passengers were filled with excitement as Bones took off his square porter's hat and white jacket. He was already wearing his boots and spurs and looked forward to this thrill and challenge. The passengers hung out the windows to see a real live bronc buster in action. For some

it was a first-time experience and one they were not likely to forget.

Bones quickly appraised the animal. In his youth, how many times had he rode an outlaw horse that they said no one could ride? It was too many to count. Was he now too old? He would soon know. Bowlegged from many years of straddling a horse, he put a foot in the stirrup, gripped the reins, climbed on top, and the wild ride began. The horse flailed and bucked, twisted and turned, but he stayed in the saddle, reminiscent of his former days of greatness, until he rode that wild horse to a standstill. Applause and congratulations poured forth, and he was as gracious as always. He collected the purse and immediately sent a wire to his friend, Jefferies: *Outlaw rode. Collected money. Gone east.* As he returned to his position on the train and put on his hat and jacket, the passengers looked at the Negro porter in a different way. They patted him on the back and offered him the respect that he had known before the turn of the century, when he was one of the most admired bronc riders on the High Plains. But nothing else had changed.[3]

Many times prior to "The Ride," Bones had been the topic of conversation among old cowhands and "The Ride" just fueled that talk even more, especially at the cowboy and pioneer reunions in the Panhandle. "The Ride" was the talk around campfires and just about anywhere old cowhands got together. It spotlighted a dying way of life. Talk of "The Ride" reached as far away as Chicago and New York, and later Paul Laune, a New York artist but a Texan by birth, immortalized Bones through vivid sketches of the event. After the famous ride, he wasn't criticized anymore but was given due respect as one of the greatest bronc riders of all time in an area dominated by whites. But perhaps most importantly, "The Ride" opened doors for Bones that were not open to any other black person in the West and probably the entire country. "The Ride" was one of the things that

elevated Bones' status to near that of whites in the region and it formed the base from which he would become a civic and social leader of his race.

His story, however, does not begin in Amarillo, nor even the Texas Panhandle. It begins in Robertson County, in East Texas, where he was born on November 3, 1867. He said that he was born in old Orangeville, but records indicate that an Orangeville never existed in Robertson County, although an Owensville did from 1859 to 1870. Owensville was the county seat for awhile, but when the H. & T. C. Railway extended to Calvert and did not come to Owensville, the old county seat became isolated and Calvert eventually became the county seat. Owensville finally turned into pasture and farmlands, until there was little evidence that it ever existed.[4]

Bones was born to Alex and Annie Hooks, who were believed to have been slaves of Cullin (Carlin) Hooks of Bowie County in Northeast Texas, about twenty-five miles west of Texarkana. This is where the town of Hooks, Texas, later grew up. Emancipation came to black Texans more than two years after Pres. Abraham Lincoln's proclamation on January 1, 1863. The news was slow in coming to Texas slaves and when it did arrive, the war was already over. Their news of freedom arrived on June 19, 1865, a date that is unique in Texas history but that is now celebrated annually far and wide, known as Juneteenth. Like many ex-slaves, Alex took his former slaveholder's last name.

However, as a slave under the Hooks family, Alex quickly proved his intelligence and was segregated from the field hands. He became an "errand and library boy" and was taught to read and write so that he was able to carry out his responsibilities more than adequately. The education that Alex acquired was going to play an important role not only in his life but the lives of his entire family.[5]

Shortly after receiving their freedom Alex and Annie

married and moved away from the Hooks Plantation, finally settling in Robertson County. As a man of some education, Alex was greatly esteemed among his own people and perceived as a leader. According to Mattie L. Grant, Alex Hooks was "a very capable preacher, influential for good." Unfortunately, that had no bearing on his family's impoverished situation.

With the Civil War and the institution of slavery not far removed, wounds were still fresh in every ex-slave's mind, body, and soul. Alex and Annie found out that freedom did not mean that life was going to be much better than it was on the plantation. During Reconstruction there was, naturally, much hostility aimed at the newly freed blacks, not to mention the animosity between the Southern and Northern whites as well. Although a regiment was stationed at nearby Cameron to keep trouble down with the Ku Klux Klan, the Freedmen's Bureau and other authorities faced much opposition. However, carpetbaggers did not wield as much power in Texas as they did in some of the other former Confederate States. Blacks were represented and politically active in the area until about 1895, serving in the state legislature and as constables and county commissioners. Hearne and Calvert were black districts in the county because of the plantations. Still the freed blacks faced dire threats and overt hatred.

## Bones' Childhood

Meanwhile, Alex and Annie had eight children, five boys and three girls, with Bones being the oldest. Bones, of course, was going to become a cowboy, but his brothers and sisters were going to become schoolteachers and doctors, reflecting the influence of their parents. However, money was scarce and the only jobs available to Alex and Annie

were on the plantations and the menial labor and domestic jobs that might be available in town. Some blacks were able to secure a portion of land, but not many. Needless to say, it was difficult for this family to have shelter, food on the table, clothes on their backs, and shoes on their feet. Yet Alex was a good provider and community leader, with an exceptional woman at his side. Apart from working long hours to support his family, he gave time to his community as a schoolteacher and Baptist preacher. These latter activities paid little if anything at all, even in the Freedmen's Bureau, but they did set the example that Bones would emulate throughout his life and especially as a senior citizen, when he would give black youths both academic and religious instruction.

As a youth Bones didn't pay much attention to his father's preaching nor the education his father tried to give him, although he corrected those oversights as an adult. The oldest child in a house with many mouths to feed, he had to help put food on the table as soon as he became of working age. Thus, his reading and writing lessons were interrupted. As far as his religious training was concerned, he did learn to say the blessings at the supper table. Unfortunately, there was a lot more blessing than food. About all they ever had at any time in the house was "a little slab of meat, a little sugar in a paper, a jug of syrup and some flour." Then one day he was over at a white boy's house and he saw "hams hanging up, a whole barrel of sugar, a barrel of syrup," and other good things. He thought, "This is the heaven that Pa is always praying about right here." Bones promised himself he was going to have some of these good things someday and make earth a little more like heaven for himself and his friends.[6]

Bones took his first job when he was seven years old, driving a meat wagon for a butcher. At the ripe old age of nine, he was working on the Keeland Farm, where he learned to be a teamster. Still, he had chores at home and continued his often-interrupted education and religious training. As

the eldest, he also had the responsibility of looking after his siblings. He was fond of saying, "They made me rock the cradle for my brothers and I've been rocking somebody's cradle ever since." The former part of the statement was certainly true, but he actually didn't rock his siblings' cradles too long. The wide-open spaces were calling, and he was listening.[7]

Undoubtedly during his childhood Bones witnessed several cattle drives passing through the county for Northern markets. It is likely he was greatly inspired by the large number of black cowboys sitting tall in the saddle on fine horses, each wearing a wide-brimmed hat, boots, spurs, a lariat, and usually a six-shooter on one side. Perhaps such an encounter as a wide-eyed youth influenced his decision to become a cowhand. Bones' birth coincided with the beginning of the cattle-industry boom, and by the time he was nine years old, trails to Northern markets were well traveled by outfits from South and West Texas. Robertson County was not as active in sending cattle up the trails, but cattle did play an important role in the county's financial progress. George Dunn, Tom Bates, and the Beals family sent a number of cattle up the trails to the markets at Dodge City and Abilene, Kansas.[8]

By 1875, when Bones was just eight years old, several black cowboys from Texas had already made names for themselves. One of the most respected was Bose Ikard of Weatherford, Texas. Bose had been a slave of Dr. Milton Ikard, who was probably his father. After being freed, he joined up with veteran cattleman Oliver Loving and then Charles Goodnight. The three of them, and others, pioneered cattle trails through badlands and hostile Indian territory. They blazed the Goodnight and Loving Trail through West Texas and New Mexico and up into Colorado. On one of their trails, Loving was killed by Comanches. After Loving's death, Bose loyally remained with Goodnight, until he returned home near Weatherford to operate his own ranch.[9]

## Bones Leaves Home

These were truly times of great adventures and tales, as the whole country was enamored with the West. It was especially exciting for a youth whose imagination ran wild with stories of cowboys, cattle drives, and Indians. Bones was no different from any other boy in that he dreamed of being a cowboy. And if it was his destiny to become a cowboy of no little fame, then the beginning of that road wasn't long in coming. While he was employed on the Keeland Farm, opportunity arrived in the form of Daniel Steve Donald of the DSD Ranch, who had come to purchase feed, cattle, and a wagon with a team of oxen. As it turned out, Donald needed someone to drive the wagon and oxen back to his ranch near Lewisville in Denton County on the Red River north of Dallas. Keeland knew that young Bones was a competent teamster and suggested that Donald hire him. Alex Hooks also had the utmost confidence in his son and gave his blessing. Although Bones had never been out of the county, he was ready for some adventure. After all, he was a man according to the day's standards and had proven that he was a youth of unusual responsibility and maturity.[10]

Upon reaching the DSD Ranch, Bones remained for awhile before returning to the Keeland Farm. Donald arrived again the following summer to purchase more supplies and cattle and Bones went with the cattleman once more. This time, however, he stayed on the DSD as a full-time hand, journeying home each summer to be with his folks. Donald gave Bones a mule named Dynamite, leading Bones to declare himself "a cowboy on a mule." Thus began Bones' trail toward a cowboy life and career to which he was naturally suited.[11]

Bones worked on the DSD for four or five years, from 1877 to 1881-82. This was a tough period in Denton County, with the town of Denton being the rowdiest of all. A number

of outlaws operated in the vicinity, including the likable Sam Bass, who had a Robin Hood-like reputation. Bass was shot and killed in a bank robbery in 1878. It is unknown if Bones and Bass ever crossed paths, but Bones frequented Lewisville and Denton, and he was a youth who always made acquaintances.[12]

The DSD was the first real ranch to employ Bones, but it would be far from the last. Donald took a serious liking to young Bones (which seemed to happen everywhere he went) and treated him fairly enough, and Bones was too young to know about bigotry and things relative. Yet he must have been aware of prejudice in volatile Robertson County. Perhaps all that Bones knew or wanted to know was that he was living on a ranch and living a life that beforehand he had only dreamt of.

As far as Bones was concerned, Daniel Steve Donald was honest and straightforward with him. Bones was naive and impressionable when he arrived at the DSD, but by the time he left he would know a lot about white men, and about Donald in particular. For instance, Bones had been hanging around a Durham bull breeder by the name of J. King, who was a Northerner. King had the reputation of being the best bull breeder in the area, and when a Southerner needed a bull, he went to King. Donald, Southerner that he was, didn't want Bones hanging around this "blue-belly." There was still a lot of bad feeling between Northerners and Southerners. Bones didn't understand the language Donald was using, so he took his boss's words literally. Bones recalled, "If he [Donald] told me to go after a horse with a white spot on his face I knew I'd find that kind of horse. So, I believed King had a blue belly." But on another day Bones was over at the King Ranch and saw King working with his shirt off, displaying a belly just as pale as Donald's. Bones naturally went to Donald and told him what he had found out. Donald explained that a "blue-belly" was what

Southerners called Yankees because of the color of the uniforms they had worn during the Civil War. Bones quickly learned such lessons and become a student of human character. He soon realized, "It's a good plan to investigate before you make up your mind about folks that others are calling names." This lesson and many others were secured in the back of his mind and would help form his own well-known cowboy philosophy later in life.[13]

Bones was really close to the Donald family, especially Donald's younger brother, Bob. Bones once reminisced:

> Bob and me were always cutting up together. One day Donald and all the boys ate at a restaurant in town. Bob and me were behind the rest and we ran a race to the café. I beat Bob, jumped off my horse and ran in. There were two empty seats at the counter and I took one.

But when the café man came up to Bones, he demanded to know what he was. Bones asked what he meant and the café man said, "What nationality are you?" Bones answered, "I'm Negro." That's when the café man ordered Bones out, saying, "We don't allow no niggers to eat here." The café man had a gun and reached for it. Bones jumped up and Donald told the café man to leave the youngster alone. Then he added, "I came a thousand miles to kill a so-and-so like you. Bring the boy his meal!" The café man backed down and brought a beefsteak. Bones said he didn't enjoy the beefsteak much, as it seemed to get bigger and bigger in his mouth with each chew. Afterwards, he asked Donald if he wasn't afraid the café man might shoot him. Donald said, "Naw, I knew he wouldn't shoot." Bones replied, "I wished I'd known he wouldn't. Maybe I could've enjoyed that meal."[14]

Certainly, this little bit of justice was at Bones' own peril, but it was a little justice, indeed. Apparently, there were men like Bob Donald in the Old West who stood by their men regardless of color. It is of no little wonder that Bones

admired men of character such as Donald despite their other flaws. Incidents like these continued to shape Bones' unique outlook on life.

Time went by quickly and Bones was growing strong and lean. By the time he was twelve years old he was a working wrangler, feeding and taking care of the horses but not breaking or training them. That took a more experienced hand. However, he took pleasure in watching the other cowboys working the horses. He loved horses and began studying them. He noticed that a lot of the white cowboys were afraid of the meanest horses. The meanest horse on the ranch was Old Bill, whom Bones was told no one was able to ride. One Sunday morning, while the Donalds were at church and Old Bill was in the barn, Bones decided to try the outlaw horse and prove everyone wrong. He thought, "If he did throw me, he wouldn't get away with the saddle as the barn door was shut." He put the boss's saddle on him, and that went well. Then he crawled onto the saddle.

Evidently, Bones misjudged the wild horse. It broke down the barn door, tore across the lot, knocked down the stile block at the gate, and continued up the road bucking wildly, with him still in the saddle holding on for dear life. Just as the Donalds returned home from church in the buckboard, Bones somehow brought the outlaw to a halt. The astonished Donald asked, "What are you doing on that horse? He'll kill you." The boys back at the ranch were amazed, too. They asked what made him think he could ride such a horse. Bones recalled, "He [Old Bill] was made like all of the other horses and they rode them. So, I figured Old Bill could be rode, too."[15]

And he was right.

Bones also went on his first cattle drives while on the DSD. The ranch was a good-sized operation and ran a large number of cattle up the trails. Bones went on a cattle drive with Donald into what was then called Indian Territory

(Oklahoma). By then, Bones was old enough to be a real cowhand, but he was often the butt of jokes being a cowboy on a mule.

Jokes were a cowboy tradition, although some scholars have recently said that jokes were just another form of prejudice. However, ranch work and trail drives were hard occupations with little outside company for long periods, and jokes helped to break the monotony. Though Bones was the subject of lots of jokes, he learned to play jokes on other cowboys with equal cleverness. Jokes were going to be a significant outlet throughout his life, whether it was to get back at another cowhand who played a joke on him or as a way to deal with prejudice. For Bones, humor was going to break down many barriers, make lifelong friends, and open doors that were not usually open to blacks in his lifetime.

On that first trail drive into Oklahoma, the boys found an opportunity to play a good joke on Bones because he had never seen any Indians. The wars with them in this region were in the past, but some left the reservations on hunting and horse-stealing parties. The cowboys filled Bones' head with stories of Indian raiding parties and how they were able to steal a horse right out from under a man. There was a place near the river where they grazed the horses and Bones, who was in charge of them, took a nap with his mule tied to his arm. The boys discovered him while he was asleep, turned his mule loose, and let out whoops and shouts like the sound of attacking warriors. Bones jumped up and ran for his life to the stomach-gripping laughter of the cowhands. They had to cut him off before he got too far. Bones recalled years later, "I thought the Indians had me."[16]

Bones got plenty of opportunities to get back at them, and one time he played a good joke on his boss, Donald. Bones was helping him dig a well. Donald was down in the well while Bones was driving the old blind mare, Brownie, who was hauling the dirt up. Donald knew the whereabouts of the

mare by the bell around its neck. Bones went into the house for something and when he returned he got the idea to take the bell off the mare's neck. He started walking toward the well while ringing the bell. Donald thought the old blind mare was walking right into the well. He started calling to Brownie, "Whoa! Whoa!" Bones recalled, "I took some dirt and threw it into the well and jingled the bell right close and Steve was sure hollering, 'Whoa, Brownie!'" Needless to say, Donald was sure worried that the old mare was going to walk right into the well and fall down on top of him.[17]

## To the Wild Pecos Country

An impromptu joke played by the boys gave Bones his nickname. It all started one day when some of the hands returned from town and one brought back some dice. These dice had everything to do with his nickname and nothing to do with the fact that he was a bony and scrawny youth. Although there have been several stories, Bones personally set the story straight.

> I had never heard them called bones [the dice]. One day I happened to be around and one of the boys said, "Hand me them bones." [He misunderstood and became angry.] "My name ain't Bones!" Of course, that was as good as a bunch of cowboys wanted, to have fun. One after another was called up and it was proven that my name was Bones. I ain't never been able to get rid of that name yet.[18]

From that moment on he was never known as Mathew again, and someday the name of Bones was going to be legendary all over West Texas and the Panhandle. Bones didn't seem too upset with the nickname, for many of the cowboys

had nicknames or aliases that set them apart. This name also set Bones apart. Not even a last name was needed to know who the bronc rider Bones was.

Not long after Bones got his nickname, his life took off in another direction. The DSD was running cattle on the Red River near Henrietta, Texas, in Clay County not far from Wichita Falls. Bones stayed in Henrietta awhile to tend the cattle lest they try to return from whence they came. By this time a well-traveled trail went through Henrietta, but originally the town had been slow to develop due to Indian hostilities, particularly the Comanches, and the Civil War, which had left settlers unprotected. Most left the area during the war, but deserters and desperados stayed until the end of the war. Later, ranchers grazed cattle in the area but continued to be harassed by various Indian tribes who were trying to remain on their land. Settlement eventually began about 1869, when Henry A. Whaley set up a colony, but the 1870s still saw some attacks. In spite of this, a buffalo hunters' supply center was established and a cattle trail went through Henrietta. More settlers arrived between 1875 and 1879, and by 1880 the Indian troubles appeared to be over and the county became the judicial center for the Panhandle. The Fort Worth & Denver Railroad laid tracks through Henrietta in 1882, headed for the Panhandle, and certain things in the name of progress were inevitable.[19]

Bones may have been in Henrietta when the railroad went through. He had certainly been in Gainesville in neighboring Cooke County the previous year. At the time Donald left him in Henrietta, it was considered serious cattle country. Many outfits drove cattle through Henrietta and some were from the West Texas frontier. Bones noticed one of those outfits one day as it came across the plains with a wagon and remuda (several horses). Bones got on his mule and rode out to meet them to find out who they were and where they were going. He was a curious youth who seemed

never to meet a stranger and turned most into friends. The outfit, he learned, was run by J. R. Norris of the JRE Ranch in the Pecos country, a wild and untamed region.

The JRE cowboys had a few inquiries of their own and wanted to know if the slender, black youth on a mule was a real cowhand. Bones proudly said that he was and they laughed at him, insinuating no cowboy rode a mule. Bones angered, but had grit. He quickly challenged their best rider to a horse race. They eagerly accepted and confidently let Bones choose one of their horses out of the remuda. They did not realize that, though young, he was an excellent judge of horse flesh. To their humiliation, he beat their best rider with one of their own horses.[20]

J. R. Norris had been watching the proceedings with interest. He was a pretty good judge of character and was impressed with the scrawny youth. Norris offered Bones a deal. He promised a new pair of boots and five horses in exchange for the mule and promised to make him into a real cowboy if he joined the outfit. Bones immediately took Norris up on his offer, parted company with his mule, and rode out of Henrietta with the Pecos outfit. Not surprisingly, Bones did not ride any more mules after that.[21]

Bones' decision that day was based on trust in the man, J. R. Norris, according to his first impression. Traveling with strangers to parts unknown was a gamble, indeed. Bones was fortunate. Sometimes youths, especially blacks, were tricked or forced to go on cattle drives. More often than not, these orphans were usually the ones chosen to test swollen waters or a dangerous, shaky swinging bridge over a river or canyon. A number of stories illustrate this danger and one in particular, that of Birl Brown, a contemporary of Bones, magnifies Bones' good judgment about J. R. Norris.

Birl Brown lived in a rented house on the outskirts of Tyler, Texas, with his mother, who was employed by the owner of the house. One day, as a result of youthful curiosity,

Birl followed a cattle-herding outfit and got too far from home. Suddenly, a rider came up and offered Birl a ride, which he accepted. He was placed in a wagon driven by the outfit's cook, a black man named Boze, and the cook was ordered to guard the kid well. Unknown to Birl, this was no ride but a kidnapping. When Birl realized the situation, the cook poured whiskey down his throat to sedate him. He awoke hours later after the outfit had long been on the trail. The boy never saw home again and ended up in Clarendon in the Panhandle, where he spent the rest of his life.[22]

Bones' situation on the trail was not at all similar to that of Birl. J. R. Norris did not kidnap Bones, but promised him a job and kept that promise by treating him like a real cowhand with real cowhand wages. In the Pecos country, Bones honed his skills and became a great bronc rider whose reputation spread far and wide. Also here, Bones grew into a man of strong character, not forgetting the instructions and influence of his father, the teacher and Baptist preacher.