

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Old Bill Pickett

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Old Bill Pickett's gone away,
Over the great divide
To the place where all the preachers say
Both saint and sinner abide

If they check his brand like I think they will
It's a runnin' hoss they'll give to Bill
Some good wild steers 'till he gets his fill
And a great big crowd to watch him ride

Old Bill Pickett's a long time gone
Left me here to sing this song
Old Bill Pickett's a long time gone
Left me here to sing this song

Old Bill Pickett was a mighty black man
And he rode for the One-O-One
Way down yonder in the Cherokee Land
Around when the West was won

He'd jump a steer from a runnin' hoss
And throw him down with a mighty toss
He worked for many, but he had no boss
He's the last of the great cowhands

Way down south in Mexico
He took a great big dare
To try and hold a fightin' bull
To see how he would fare

He grabbed Old Toro by the horns
Grabbed the bull's nose in his jaws
That crowd never seen such a thing before
For an hour and a half they cheered

With the great Will Rogers and Wild Tom Mix
He rode in the rodeo
For all who paid their fifty cents
They gave a great big show

For all who paid to come and see
Bill wrestled steers with his teeth

We've never seen such a mighty feat
'Cause he left us long ago

Way down on the Miller ranch
In the year of thirty two
Bill Pickett roped a sorrel stud
To see what he could do

That sorrel stomped and jumped and bucked
And tromped Bill's body in the dust
At seventy-three, Bill was out of luck
He took eleven days to die
There was nothin' they could do

They laid him down in a six-by-three
Beneath the land he knew
And they left a cross for the world to see
Said, "Of his kind we've seen few"

That night for Bill they drank some wine
And old Zack Miller wrote these lines
And left 'em here for me to find
To put to music and sing to you

Note: The Bull Dogger

In many ways, the exciting saga of Bill Pickett tells us what happened to Black Indians as the last frontier entered the twentieth century. Pickett was born in 1870, the second of thirteen children, to Black Cherokees in Oklahoma.

After completing the fifth grade, Pickett left the dull confines of a frontier classroom for the wild life of the range. He landed a job as a ranch hand and developed his roping and riding skills. But Bill Pickett wanted something more of life.

He found it among the animals he tended. Some people say that when he was only ten, Pickett began to practice a technique for holding calves quiet at branding time. Others say he began his startling skill later in Texas as brush country where roping a steer was difficult if not impossible. What Pickett did was to create a cowhand technique for holding cattle that required delicate coordination, great strength, and pure macho guts.

It is called "bulldogging" or "steer wrestling" and became the most famous cowboy sport. Pickett would race his horse Spradley after a steer and leap out of the saddle onto the animal's back. Grabbing a horn in each hand, he began the hard part. He twisted the horns until the beast's face turned upward and the huge animal fell over on its side. Rider and steer skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust.

For a final touch, Pickett sunk his teeth into the steer's upper lip or nose and let go with his hands. The startled beast lay still,

shocked someone was biting its nose or lip. Everyone watching was amazed that the cowhand's only grip on the big animal was white teeth clamped onto a lip or nose.

Pickett had a wife and many prizes they were soon barred from local cowboy competition.

Miller took his rodeo on the road, and they entertained in Mexico City, London, New York, and in Argentina and Canada. Everywhere their featured act was Bill Pickett's bulldogging. Billed as the "Dusky Demon" or the "Wonderful Colored Cowboy" Pickett's daring act drew the applause and admiration of young and old, cowboy or city slicker.

Pickett's five foot six, 145-pound frame swept through his bulldogging feat with the agility of a ballet dancer. He never appeared to get scratched. His other ranching talents were such that Zack Miller called Pickett "The greatest sweat and dirt cowboy that ever lived, bar none." That lofty title may still hold.

At one time or another in his rodeo career, Pickett had the assistance of two other 101 cowhands destined to win fame and fortune - Tom Mix and Will Rogers. Back then they were just beginners who assisted the Dusky Demon in his famous act.

In his later years, Pickett made two silent films. One was a while on foot turned on him. From coast to coast he was remembered, and in New York, comedian and actor Will Rogers wrote to the New York Times about his brave buddy. He told how Pickett had created a sport that brought ranch and cowpuncher life to millions of people who had never been out West.

Pickett's enduring legacy is that he single-handedly invented a sport as challenging and rough as the American outdoors. He demonstrated that one man with courage and stamina can overcome dangerous beasts.

Aboard his favorite horse, Spradley, Bill Pickett rode into the twentieth century. He had invented and mastered a perilous technique for handling steers and turned his creation into a rodeo performance. He loped in casually, as was his style, wearing his talents like comfortable western jeans. He appeared to perform his miraculous act effortlessly.

Bill Pickett's life brings our story of Black Indians to a close. He began life in the last century as a ranch hand with a large family to feed, and ended up in this urban life, and counted on a white world for his livelihood. It offered even Bill Pickett limited opportunities.

(Bulldogging is the only one of the seven major rodeo sports that can be traced to an individual.) DP

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