Interview with Bones Hooks, pioneer Negro cowboy

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Interview with Bones Hooks

Matthew (Bones) Hooks, who for years worked on Panhandle ranches as a horse wrangler and “brone-buster”, knows many tales of cowboy life in the early days, but he refuses to tell the most interesting ones because it would rattle skeletons in the closest of prominent families—old-timers who are still living or their descendants.

Bones, without calling embarrassing names, recites a case in point. Called as a witness before a grand jury recently, he recognized in the judge a pioneer cattlemann.

“Bones, do you know anyone who has stolen cattle”—the judge caught the glint of memory in the piercing black eyes and hastily added—“now?” And Bones, whose lips had been forming the question, “What time are you talking about, Judge?” could honestly answer, “No”.

Both of them were recalling a certain day in the past when the judge, then a young man just starting out in the cattle business, and a young Negro cowboy drove a fine young male calf from the pastures of the Capitol Syndicate (XIT Ranch) to the white man’s ranch.

The embryo cattlemann could not afford to buy a good bull—Bones said “surly”; he would not use the word “bull” before a lady interviewer—which he needed for breeding purposes. He went to the Negro cowboy, who was working on the XIT at the time, and asked him if he knew where he could get one. Bones looked over the range and, seeing no one near, selected a fine-looking calf, which they drove toward the home ranch of the judge-to-be. Coming upon a still better animal, Bones exchanged the tired calf for the other, and proceeded on his way.

The young rancher tied up the calf until it was weaned to keep it from getting back with the mother cow. “It took about four days to wean a calf,” said Bones. “After that time he would go down to the water hole and drink and then run away on the range and eat grass and forget all about his maama”.


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Bones was certain that they were going to add him to their victims, when Skilletty Bill spoke up in behalf of the colored lad, saying that he was a mere boy, wrangling horses for the boss and only carrying out orders of the cattle thief, whom he had taken to be a long-time cattlemen.

"A red-haired man astride a limb of the tree gave the rope around my neck a rough jerk," Bones vividly recalled; and said, 'Aw, come on, let's get it over with'; but Skilletty Bill saved my life."

After this narrow escape, Bones went into Oklahoma (then the Indian Territory) and so successfully "lost" himself that his own family and others thought him dead. At last he ventured back into Greer County. Walking through the streets of a Panhandle town, which he refuses to name, he came face to face with the sheriff (Skilletty Bill).

The sheriff looked at him closely and finally said, "I thought you were dead. How long are you going to be here?"

"Only a little bit—a few days", Bones replied.

The sheriff started off down the street, turned back, and said, "How long did you say you were going to be in town? Did you say 'a little bit'?"

Bones answered quickly, "Yes, sir, a little bit." He knew what would happen to him if he did not get out of town in a "little bit"—and he got.

The pioneer Negro broncho-buster knew cowboy life as few white persons now living. He was an interested listener around the campfires of nearly every ranch in the Panhandle. He heard many a lurid tale around a cow-chip blaze—words that can not be repeated in the hearing of ladies or in polite society. "Every horse, every man, bread and other articles of the camp, had a nickname, often unmentionable in mixed groups," he said.

Bones recalls an incident that occurred during a visit of Mrs. Charles Goodnight to a camp one day. One of the cowboys, who did not know of the lady's presence, said, "Bones, bring me up a horse."

"Which one?"

"That old—," the cowboy stopped suddenly and clapped his hand over his mouth,
preventing the escape of the horse’s unmentionable name when he saw Mrs. Goodnight standing there. "You know which one I want," he added significantly.

Bones honors and reveres the pioneer women of his beloved Panhandle, because they helped him as they helped so many others. When the cowboys tormented him—as they were always doing in some fashion—they took his part and made the white boys stop shooting blank cartridges at his feet or whatever they were doing to him at the moment.

It was one of those pioneer women who taught Bones not to "cuss". His favorite by word was "I'God"—a corruption of "by God". This pioneer mother came to him one day and said, "Bones, young Bob is taking up your speech and I don't want him to say 'I'God', I can't keep him from saying it as long as he hears you, so I'm going to have to break you of the habit. If you'll quit, I'll buy you a Sunday suit."

Bones wanted that suit. When Bob repeated the byword, the Negro boy would say, "Bob, white boys can get suits any time, but this the only way that I can get one. You mustn't say 'I'God', or I won't get that suit."

Bones, who attends every celebration of old-timers, at one of these recent gatherings met the daughter of one of the pioneer families for whom he used to work—he frequently associated with the children of the early settlers, especially the boys. He reminded her of the time when she was a very young lady indeed. At that time she had never seen a colored person.

"Remember when you first saw me eating with the other cowboys?" he said. "You peeked out from behind your mother’s skirt and said, 'Mammy, one of them didn't wash his face!"

Bones said that he usually ate with the other cowhands. Once, when someone objected to the presence of the Negro boy at the same table, a pioneer housewife told the objector, "Everyone is treated alike at my table."

"In the early days," Bones said in answer to a question, "when a cowboy died on the trail, accidentally or otherwise, he was buried in a hole dug in the sod without loss of time and without much ceremony. The name of the dead man was sent to his family
if anyone knew his real name or who his people were.

"Later, coffins were made of pine boards. Those who died were buried as soon as possible in those days, for obvious reasons. Relatives and friends sat up with the dead to keep the cats and dogs away.

"Services for the dead were held by a friend or someone who was qualified—later by traveling preachers. Towns were far apart, and preachers and doctors had to go miles and miles to serve these communities.

"Meetings”—church services—"were held in the homes of pioneers until churches were built", he concluded.


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