

Steer Wrestling with your TEETH? Really. No Bull About It!

Famous Cowboy, Bill Picket takes down a running BULL with his teeth!

Bill Picket was the original Steer Wrestler, or Bull-Dogger as it was first known. What does that mean? Well, as a young boy Bill worked on cattle ranches. One day he was out with his team herding the cattle when he saw one of the herding dogs (a trained bull-dog) rescue a lost cow from the brush, where it had gone to hide from danger. Bill observed the dog approach the frightened animal and gently take hold of the cow's lip with his teeth. The cow relaxed and the dog led the cow safely from the bush and back to join the herd. After that, he observed this scenario many times as a ranch hand, and it gave Bill Pickett an idea.

Pickett began practicing on young cattle. Standing alongside them, he would reach over the calf's neck and twist its head back and bite its lip -- and the calf would flop to the ground on its side. Those who saw the youngster do this feat were amazed. He practiced and perfected his technique on young cows, and then advanced this challenge by wrangling 500-600 pound steers. Pickett waited on horseback next to a chute where the bull was being held (a narrow holding area where the gate is opened to release the running steer). When the chute was opened, Pickett would race alongside the bull on his horse, Spradley, at a dead-run. From atop his running horse's back, Pickett would leap onto the steer landing with his arm over the neck and his body alongside the steers. He would grab the horns with each hand, and dig the heels of his boots into the dirt as a brake. He twisted and pulled the steer's head around so he could bite the lip of the bull until it dropped to the ground on its side. When the bull was down with all four legs pointing in the same direction within a timeframe of 5-8 seconds, it was considered a good run. This sport has become the fastest event in rodeo; and that, my friends, is Bulldogging!

Young Bill Pickett

William Pickett was one of 13 children born to his parents, Thomas Jefferson Pickett (a former slave) and Mary Virginia Elizabeth Gilbert near Taylor (in Travis County), Texas on December 5, 1870. According to Americacomesalive.com "The family lived in Jenks Branch Community in Texas. This was an area of Texas settled by a family named Miller who then opened the land for other African-Americans to come to settle there after the Civil War." Second oldest, and one of five boys, Bill Pickett finished the fifth grade and that is when he went to work on a ranch. By 1888, his family had moved to Taylor, Texas, and Bill performed in the town's first fair that year. Bill Pickett entered his first rodeo in 1888 at the fair in Taylor.

From that fateful day when he watched the "bulldog" pull that scared cow from the bushes, Pickett had become a popular rodeo performer by the early 1900s and went on to become the first famous Black Cowboy in history. Although a "Western Legend", Bill Pickett was only five feet, seven inches tall and weighed only 145 pounds. Clearly, size did not matter, because this small man was all muscle and became a "larger-than-life" Western Legend in his own time. People were so astounded at his bull-dogging feat that Bill Pickett became famous practically overnight, and audiences flocked to country fairs and rodeos to see him do his bull-dogging stunts. Other cowboys picked up the technique as well, but most of them didn't use their teeth; they just pulled on the horns and twisted the head around until the steer dropped to the ground. Pickett was called the "Greatest Cowboy" of his day.

Bill and his four brothers started a business breaking horses and bull-dogging cattle and called it The Pickett Brothers Bronco Busters and Rough Riders Association. Oklahoma Historical Society says they advertised "catching and taming wild cattle a specialty."

Husband, Father, Provider

In December 1890, Bill married Maggie Turner, was a member of the national guard, and a deacon of the Baptist church. On December 2, 1890, Bill Pickett married Maggie Turner (a former slave and daughter to a white southern plantation owner) and they had nine children together. Answers.com says that to support his growing family, Pickett began performing more widely, at bigger events, and sometimes with his brothers. In 1908 the Pickett family moved to the 101 Ranch near Ponca City, Oklahoma.

Famous Cowboy Performer

In 1904 Pickett performed at the Cheyenne Frontier Days (America's best-known rodeo). His act was considered "extraordinary and spectacular" and got the notice of the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Wild West Show (one of the shows started by William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody in 1883).

In 1905 Pickett joined the show, also becoming a full-time ranch employee with them in 1907. This Wild West Show introduced Pickett's bulldogging to the rodeo circuit. Pickett's "bite-'em-down" technique of felling a steer evolved into what is known today as steer wrestling.

That same year a newspaper, *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, described him as "a man who outdoes the fiercest dog in utter brutality." This sensationalism surely drew the crowds of the time to see him."

Bull-Dogging (Steer Wrestling) has become one of the most exciting rodeo events ever, and took Bill Pickett to stardom. Pickett stayed with the Wild Bill Cody/Buffalo Bill show for more than 25 years performing all over the world with Wild West Shows, circuses, and world fairs. Pickett traveled all over North America in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, to South America, Argentina, and England, where he performed for the British Royal Family.

On the off-seasons from the show, Pickett worked at the ranch as a cowboy and also competed against in hundreds of rodeos around the West. During that time in history, fresh after the Civil War, Pickett often competed as a Cherokee so he would be allowed to compete with the white cowboys. His heritage was Black, White, and Cherokee Indian, and the rodeo circuit allowed him to compete under his "Indian" heritage. Sources believe that if he had been allowed to compete against the white cowboys, Pickett would be one of the highest record holders in history. On the rodeo circuit, Bill Pickett was nicknamed Dusky Demon and The Bull-Dogger.

Retirement

In 1916, Pickett retired from performing in the Wild West Shows, and lived with his family on a small ranch he bought near Chandler, Oklahoma. When the 101 Ranch ran into financial troubles in 1931, Pickett returned to help.

Riding wild broncos and bulls, Pickett's rodeo career spanned more than 40 years as a professional cowboy and rodeo champion.

Pickett later performed in several "motion pictures" and became the first black cowboy movie star. According to answers.com, Richard E. Norman Studios (of Jacksonville, FL) was an all-black film production company who featured Pickett in two movies about African American cowboys: *Crimson Skull* (1921) and *The Bull-Dogger* (1922), both filmed in Oklahoma. When the films were released, they were a big hit among African Americans who had heard of, but had never seen, African American cowboys.

Death

In March 1932, Pickett tripped while roping a stallion he was about to break. He fell under the horse, which kicked him in the head and fractured his skull. Bill Pickett hung on for the next eleven days, but died in the hospital on April 2, 1932, in Ponca City, Oklahoma.

Answers.com states that "famed humorist Will Rogers announced the funeral of his friend on his radio show". Pickett's funeral was one of the largest ever held in Oklahoma.

He was buried high on a hill at White Eagle Monument, where the Cherokee Strip Cowboy Association set up a limestone marker in his memory near a 14-foot stone monument to Ponca Tribal Chief White Eagle and the tribe's friendship with the Miller Brothers on Monument Hill in Kay County, Oklahoma.

Pickett was later described by [Colonel Zack Miller](#) of the 101 Ranch as having "guts, bull strength, and the same peculiar sense of timing that makes art out of dancing." According to Frank Billings, Miller called Pickett "the greatest sweat-and-dirt cowhand that ever lived," and wrote a poem in his honor.

Fame after Death

1971 - Bill Pickett was inducted into the National Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame.

1989 - Pickett was inducted into the Pro-rodeo Hall of Fame and Museum of the American Cowboy at Colorado Springs, Colorado.

1994 - A postage stamp was created to honor Bill Pickett as part of its "Legends of the West" series. It was a great idea, but after it was printed and distribution began someone realized that the photo on the stamp was not Bill Pickett, but one of his brothers, [Ben](#). The post office quickly pulled them from circulation, but people who were interested in the stamps in the first place wanted to have a copy of the misprinted stamps as a collector's item which were then valued at thousands of dollars. Those who had bought the "mistake" tried suing the post office to keep the "mistakes" from circulation so that the stamps they had bought in error would be more valuable. The lawsuit failed and the post office did sell the rest of the "Ben Pickett" batch through a lottery for the remaining 150,000 sheets. The correctly printed stamps with Bill Pickett's photo were also sold. For more details on this story, visit

http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/artofthestamp/subpage%20table%20images/artwork/rarities/Bill%20Pickett/bil_ipickett.htm

1987 - A statue was unveiled as a tribute to Bill Pickett in front of the stands of the Cowtown Coliseum where Pickett performed when it opened in 1908. This area is known as The Stockyards in Fort Worth, Texas

Pickett's Legacy Continues Through His Ancestors

Pickett's great-grandson, Frank S. Phillips, Jr., has been a resource for providing missing information and documentation about Bill Pickett. Bessie Pickett Phillips was Bill's second-oldest daughter, and she raised Frank (her grandson). Frank learned about his grandpa through stories that Bessie shared about her father and other cowboys who were famous in Texas and Oklahoma when she was growing up. Frank Phillips would go to the movies to see the cowboys his grandmother told him about, but there was no mention of them or any other black cowboys in the movies, in magazines, or in western novels. He couldn't understand why they were omitted.

Answers.com shared the following stories:

"At a show at Madison Square Garden in New York City, a steer was frightened by the noise of the crowd, stampeded right out of the chute, jumped over the arena fence and thundered up into the stands. The steer climbed up the seats, as people scattered right and left in front of it. The legendary American humorist, Will Rogers, was Pickett's partner and the hazer for this event. He got the steer to turn around at the third balcony and Pickett rode his horse up into the stands, among the panicked people, and grabbed the steer by the lip. Rogers then roped the steer by the leg and dragged both steer and Pickett back down into the arena.

Some people claimed that Pickett had wrestled a buffalo bull and a bull elk with full horns to the ground. This may have been just publicity, but whether or not it's true, it is certain that none of the animals he threw ever tried to gore him after he got them on the ground.

In 1890, Pickett performed in a Mexican bullfighting ring after one of the Miller brothers bet 5,000 pesos that Pickett could ride a Mexican fighting bull for five minutes. He stayed on the animal for seven and a half minutes, winning the bet, but his horse was gored and Pickett broke three ribs and was severely gashed. Men from the 101 Ranch ran into the ring and roped the bull. The Mexican crowd, angered by what they saw as disrespect for their bullfighting tradition, threw bottles and trash at Pickett and the other cowboys until mounted police stopped them."

For more information on the famous cowboy, Bill Pickett, visit these websites:

<http://americacomesalive.com/2012/02/24/bill-pickett-ca-1870-1932-african-american-cowboy/>

<http://creativeone59.hubpages.com/hub/Black-American-heroes-in-the-old-west>

<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/P/PI003.html>

<http://www.famoustexans.com/billpickett.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Pickett

<http://www.answers.com/topic/bill-pickett>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo_Bill

http://chattanoegasoul.com/info.php?subview=community&community=hub&feature=soularticle&article=bill_pickett

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/arthistory/subpage%20table%20images/artwork/rarities/Bill%20Pickett/mislabeledphoto.htm>

http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM73RZ_Bill_Pickett_Fort_Worth_TX

http://www.stockyardsmuseum.org/index_files/BillPickett.htm

To see the modern-day Bill Pickett show, visit their website for locations and times:

<http://www.billpickettrodeo.com/index.html?reloaded=true>

