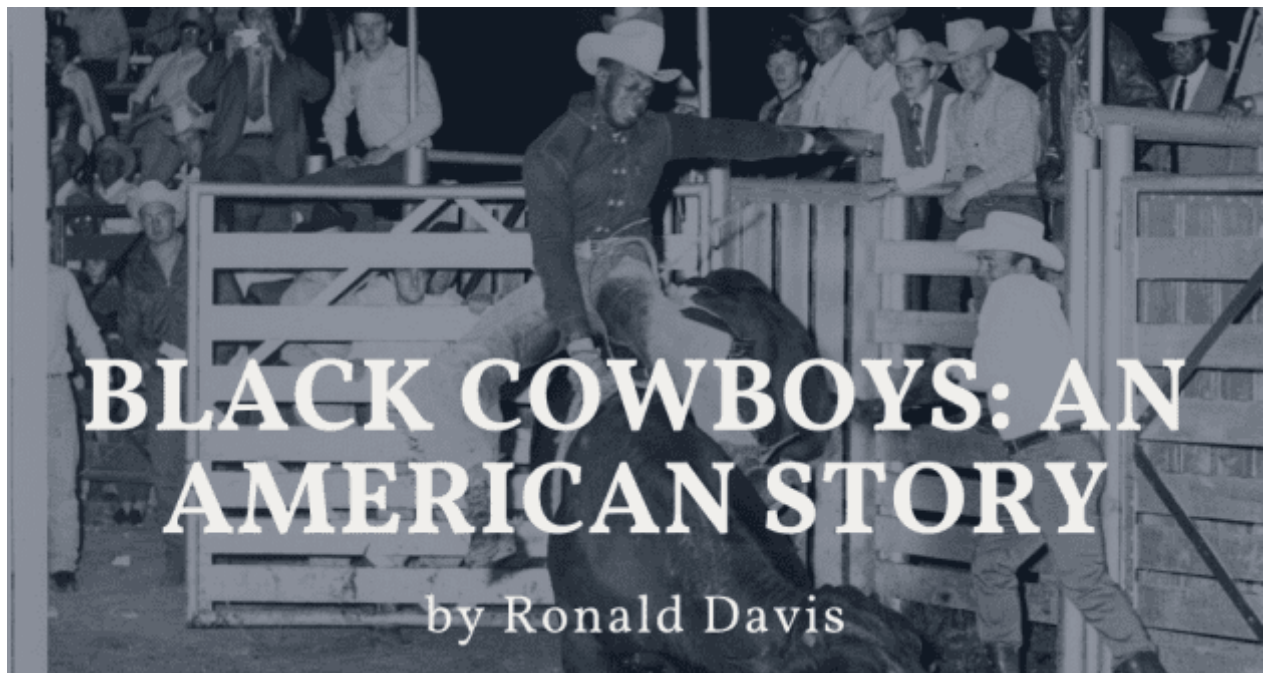


The past is never dead. It's not even past

NOT EVEN PAST



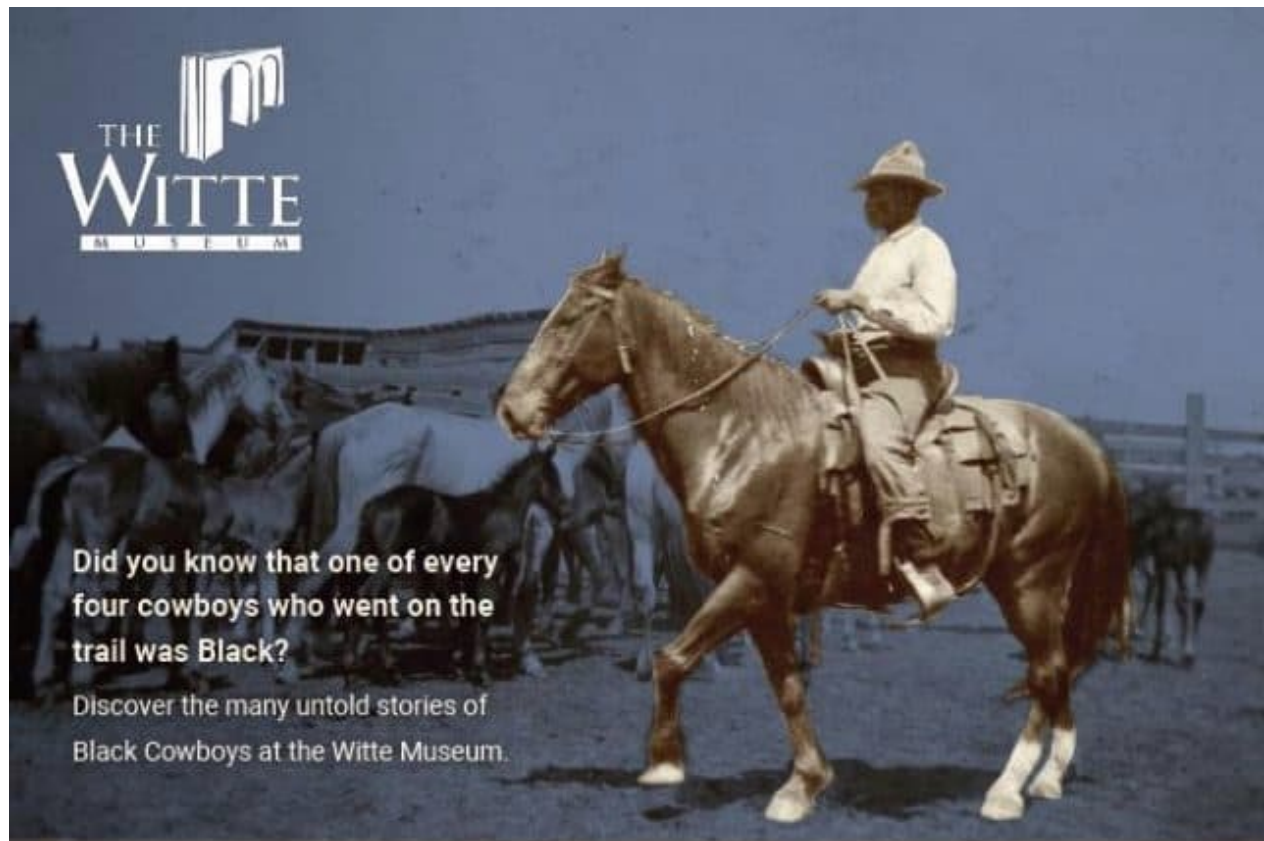
Black Cowboys: An American Story



By [Ronald Davis](#)

In 1921, while reflecting on the height of the cattle drive era, between 1865 and 1895, then President of the “Old Time Trail Drivers’ Association” of Texas, George W. Saunders, estimated that “fully 35,000 men went up the trail with herds . . . about one-third were negroes and Mexicans.”^[1] Eminent historians of African Americans in the West such as Kenneth Porter argue that, “twenty five percent” of all cowboys who participated in cattle drives out of Texas were Black.^[2] Yet, this is just the beginning. Some Black cowhands never journeyed to Kansas, driving herds of 2000 to 5000 cattle. Some of these women and men, stayed to work on ranches throughout Texas rather than “go up the trail.” They were cooks, &

swollen rivers.



THE WITTE MUSEUM

Did you know that one of every four cowboys who went on the trail was Black?

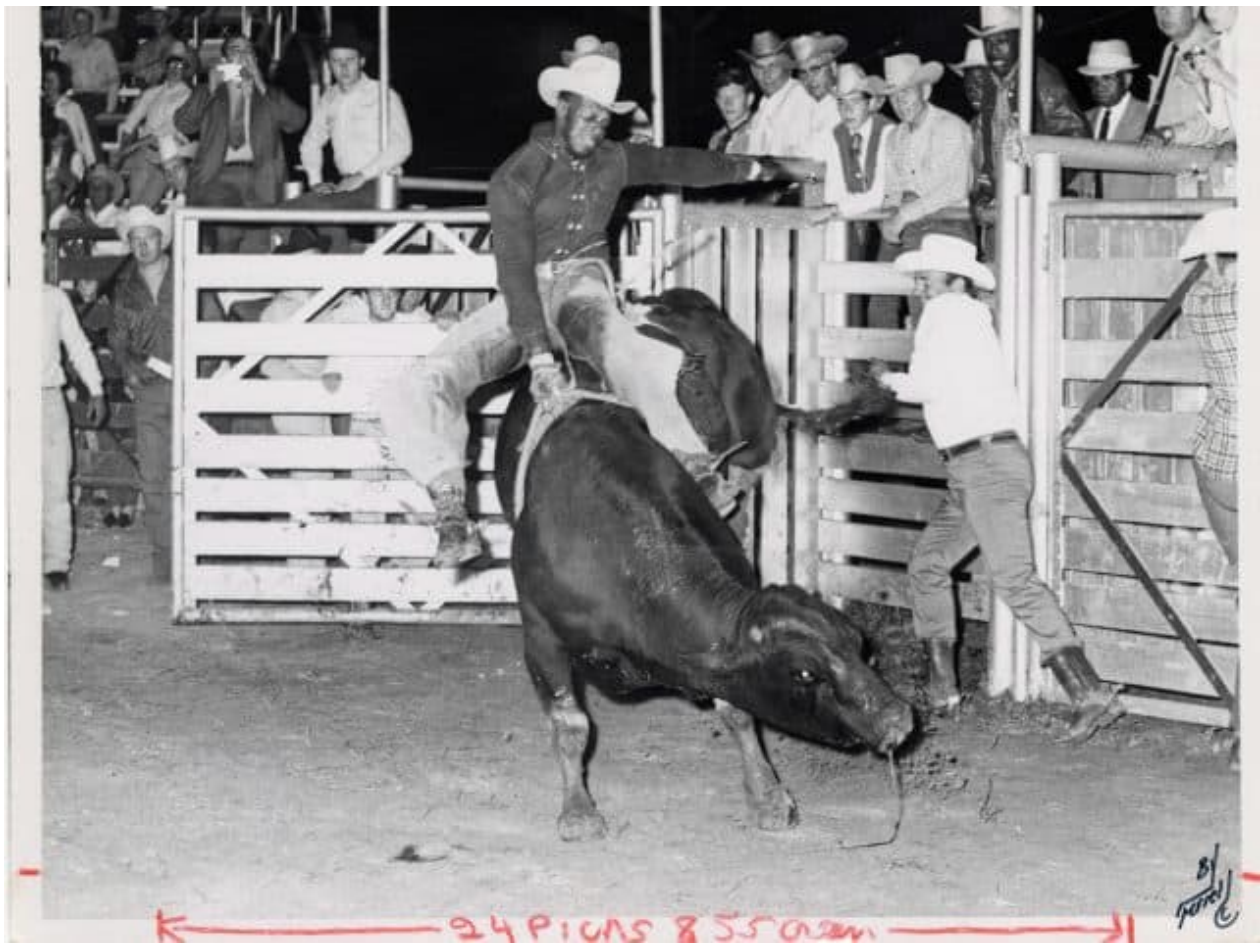
Discover the many untold stories of Black Cowboys at the Witte Museum.

BLACK COWBOYS

AN AMERICAN STORY

November 6, 2021 - April 2022

In our exhibit *Black Cowboys: An American Story*, visitors from Texas, and beyond will be introduced to a diverse group of African American cowhands, from Johana July, a free Black Seminole born in 1860 to Myrtis Dightman, called “The Jackie Robinson of Rodeo” who broke the color line at professional rodeos in the late 1960s.^[3] In addition to presenting the public with depictions of numerous Black cowboys, enslaved and free, the Witte Museum introduces the audience to the legacy of Black ranches and freedom colonies throughout Texas. The audience learns about several Black owned ranches that have stood the test of time, outlasting white supremacy and Jim Crow. These ranching families, who continue to ranch the land purchased and maintained by their ancestors in the nineteenth-century, display a tenacity of will and a commitment to their family traditions. They often withstood destruction of their family legacy by organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan while also weathering continual threats of encroachment from neighbors and state governments.



Myrtis Dightman raises his free hand high above the bull to ensure fair scores in a rodeo in Jasper, Texas in 1969. Source: Ferrell Butler, PRCA Rodeo Sports News Photograph, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.

The exhibit investigates the lived experiences of African American cowhands using their own words. *Black Cowboys* presents to the audience the childhood experiences of the enslaved on plantations and ranches. James Cape, while being interviewed by the Works Progress Administration, remembered that “[w]hen I’s old ‘nough to set on de hoos, dey larned me to ride, tendin’ horses.”^[4] Hector Bazy, who wrote an unpublished manuscript detailing his life as an enslaved child and then Black cowboy states, “I had to work on the plantation from the time I was able to crawl.”^[5]





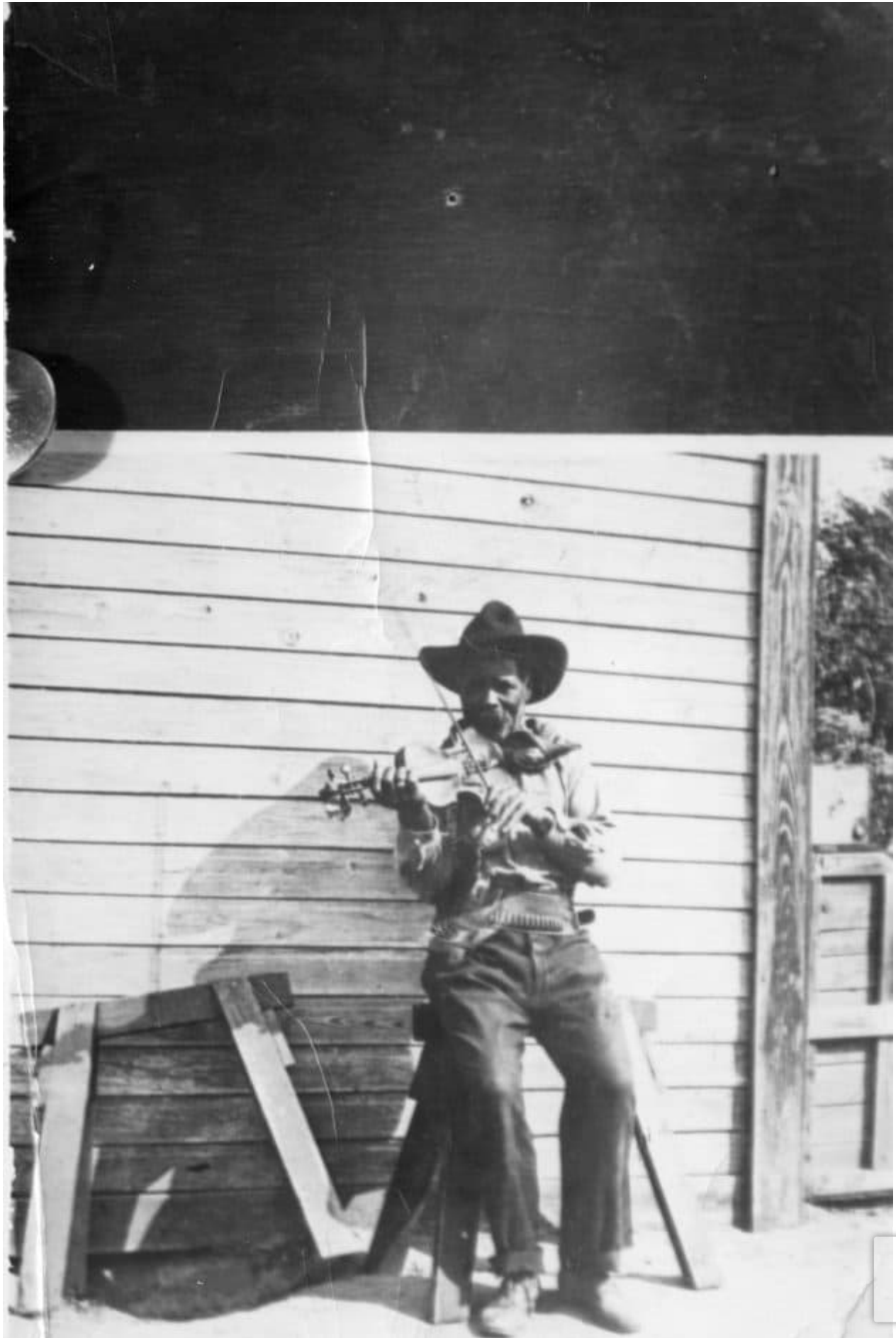
Johana July was never enslaved, but was photographed and interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project as an "ex-slave" in Bracketville, Texas in 1937. Source: Johanna Lesley, ex-slave, Bracketville. United States Bracketville Texas, 1937. July 8.

Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99615327/>.

Black Cowboys: An American Experience tells the story of over 30 black cowgirls and boys as well as ranchers and cattlemen, many of whom, the people of Texas and the United State have never heard of. Black cowboy and camp cook Jim Perry explains his inability to receive a promotion on the three million-

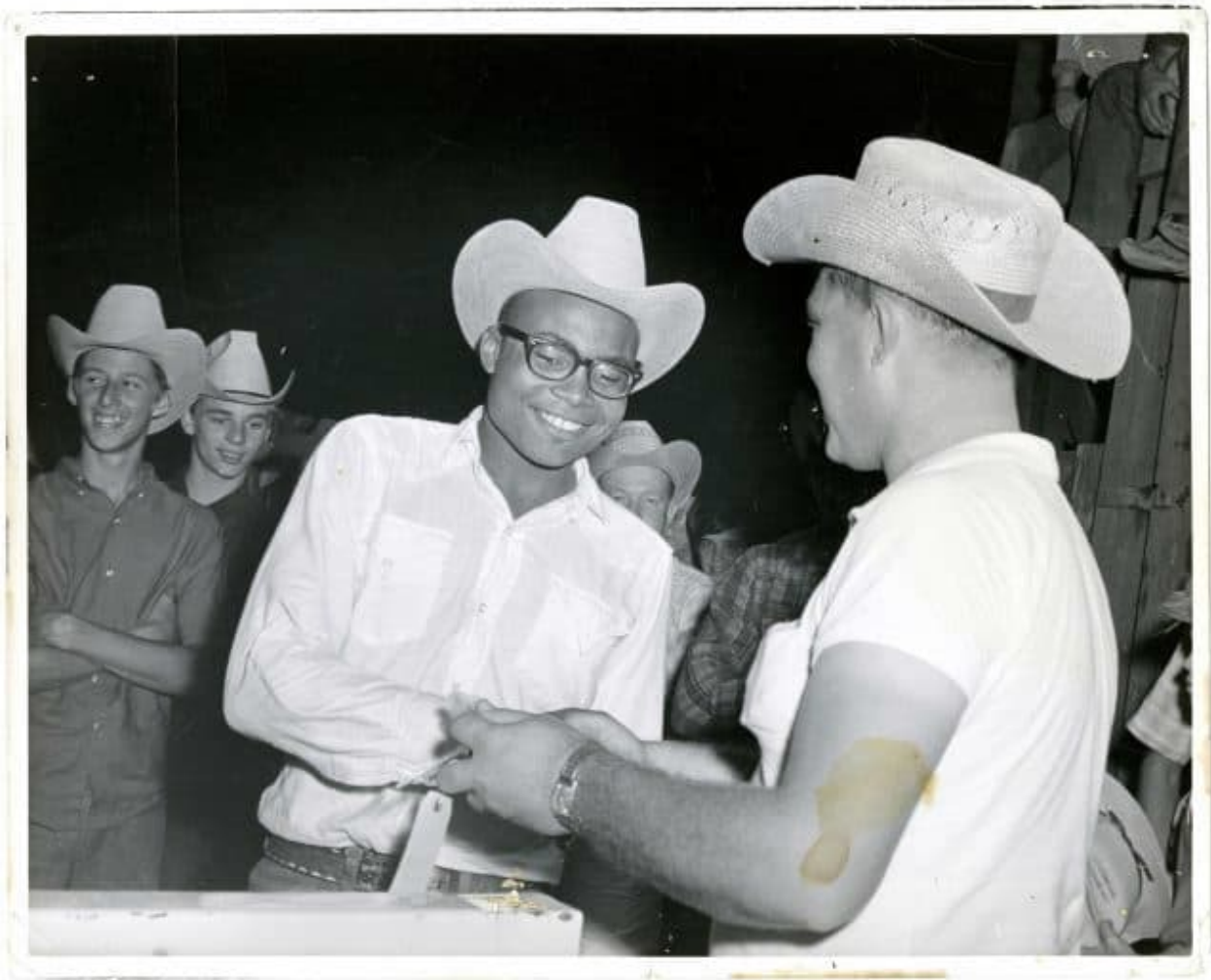
explains, "If it weren't for my damned old black face I'd have been boss of one of these divisions long ago."^[6] Contemporaries of Perry described him as one of the two best cooks to ever work on the XIT ranch and argued that he deserved the promotion to foreman, yet racism limited his opportunities for advancement. The exhibit also highlights the Wilcox Ranch in Guadalupe County. Stewarded by the grandchildren of Ella Jay Wilcox-Moore, the ranch has remained in the family since 1870. The patriarch of the family, Henry Wilcox, walked from the middle of Seguin, Texas to the Freedmen's Settlement, Jakes Colony and purchased land once thought undesirable by white Texans. Wilcox became a cattleman and master distiller, his son, Thomas Wilcox, followed suit.^[7]





Jim Perry, a cook, from Austin, Texas, playing fiddle. Source: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Repository

Rounding out *Black Cowboys* are current cowboys and rodeo champions from Tex Williams, the first African American to compete and win the Texas State High School Finals rodeo in 1967 for Bareback Riding and Myrtis Dightman, who rodeo professionals credit with breaking the color line in Professional Rodeos in the late 1960s.^[8] These rodeo performers achieved championships and greatness (with many eventually inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame) despite unfair treatment and discrimination.



Tex Williams won the bullriding competition at a rodeo in Sinton, Texas in 1966 while in high school. Source: Tex Williams

Next time you are in San Antonio visit The Witte Museum's *Black Cowboys: An American Story*, it will be on display until April 2022.

[1] George W. Saunders, "Reflections of the Trail," in *The Trail Drivers of Texas: Interesting Sketches of Early Cowboys and Their Experiences on the Range and on the Trail during the Days That Tried Men's Souls: True Narratives Related by Real Cow-Punchers and Men Who Fathered the Cattle Industry in Texas*, ed. J. Marvin Hunter (San Antonio: Jackson Printing Company, 1920), 412.

[2] Kenneth W. Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900," *Labor History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 347.

[3] Florence Angermiller, *Johnanna July-Indian Woman Horsebreaker: a machine readable transcription*, Texas, Manuscript/Mixed Material, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh002207/> and Christian Wallace, "The Jackie Robinson of Rodeo," *Texas Monthly*, 2018, July edition, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/black-cowboy-the-jackie-robinson-of-rodeo/>.

[4] Sheldon F Gauthier, "James Cape," in *Slave Narratives*, 2nd ed., vol. XVI (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1941), 193–96.

[5] Hector Bazy, *Hector Bazy manuscript, 1910*, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian (unpublished, 1910), 3. He is portrayed by actor Eugene Lee in the exhibit.

[6] Cordia Sloan Duke and Joe B. Frantz, *6,000 Miles of Fence: Life on the XIT Ranch of Texas*, The M.K. Brown Range Life Series (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1961), 172.

[7] Lola Wilcox-Moore of Wilcox & Moore Legacy Restoration Project, interview, October 15, 2021.

[8] Dightman was not the first black rodeo performer. The history of the rodeo began with small competitions between ranches in the late nineteenth-century. It evolved into a profession during the twentieth-century although Jim Crow created numerous barriers to Black participation. Sometimes this meant exclusion from competition entirely, to unfair judging and results, or unusual requests, such as forcing Black riders to compete in empty arenas before or after the rodeo. For more information of Black participation in rodeos throughout the U.S., the creation of a segregated rodeo circuit and those who insisted on competing during the Jim Crow era see Christian Wallace, "The Jackie Robinson of Rodeo," *Texas Monthly*, 2018, July edition, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/black-cowboy-the-jackie-robinson-of-rodeo/>, Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2020) and Demetrius W. Pearson, *Black Rodeos in the Texas Gulf Coast Region: Charcoal in the Ashes* (New York: Lexington Books).

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