



Episode 11, Bill Pickett Saddle, Oklahoma

Tukufu Zuberi: Our first story examines a worn saddle that may have crossed the color barrier in the American West. The Cherokee Strip in the Oklahoma Territory, June 11, 1905. Thirty trains bring 65,000 visitors to the famous 101 Ranch for a wild west show to outclass all wild west shows. Cowboys roping and bronc-busting, Cossacks riding and Geronimo shooting his last buffalo from a moving car. But the star of the show is the African American cowboy, Bill Pickett. In an astonishing display he jumps from the horse at full gallop onto the back of a 1000 pound steer. Then, in an audience stunning act, he literally bites the steer on the lip and hauls it to the ground. It's a stunt he is soon performing around the world. At a time when a color divide segregated the nation, Bill Pickett became an audience favorite and trampled the boundaries between black and white. A woman in Staten Island, New York, who collects African American historical artifacts believes she has a saddle Bill Pickett rode as he performed around the world, and helped transform how we thought about race. I'm Tukufu Zuberi and I'm meeting Elizabeth Meaders to see what she's found.

Elizabeth Meaders: Well, what we have here, I hope, is an actual Bill Pickett owned and used saddle. I bought it from an auction house in Pennsylvania.

Tukufu: According to them, this is a Bill Pickett saddle?

Elizabeth: In the catalog it was described as being slightly worn on the right hand side of the saddle, where Bill Pickett slid off to do his bulldogging act.

Tukufu: Someone appears to have etched Pickett's name into a ridge on the back of the saddle seat.

Elizabeth: And then the most important piece of evidence was a letter from an authority on Bill Pickett and the 101 Ranch....

Tukufu: A couple of seasons ago, my colleague, Gwen Wright, did a story on Geronimo, which also featured the 101 Ranch. It was famous for its Wild West shows, I remember. Do you own the letter?

Elizabeth: Yeah, I do have the letter. You want to see that?

Tukufu: The letter is from Jerry Murphey, the single-most respected collector of 101 Ranch objects. When it comes to the ranch, which is where Pickett did much of his riding, Murphey's word is usually final. He described seeing the same etched saddle in an antique shop and museum in Oklahoma City. The mother of the museum curator had worked on the 101 Ranch and the saddle had been acquired from a local African American family. This is what it says, "At this time I looked at the Bill Pickett saddle and a pair of spurs marked



Bill Pickett also.... He would not sell anything in his little museum. I never went back." Murphey believed the saddle was Pickett's – but there's no provenance, or proof, and that's what bothers Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: What I'd like you to do is to verify that it is actually Bill Pickett's saddle.

Tukufu: Now, I'm no expert in saddles, nor am I an expert in Bill Pickett. But I can tell that this is a very worn saddle. It's an old saddle. Over here, it's so worn that the leather appears to be gone. And back here, we have Bill Pickett's name etched into the leather of this saddle. Did Bill Pickett put it there? Is this even the kind of saddle that Bill Pickett rode on? I have absolutely no idea. First thing I did was to call Jerry Murphey. He wasn't able to meet, but stood by his judgment of the saddle's authenticity. Maybe I can find a reference to the kind of saddle Pickett used. Born five years after the Civil War, Pickett was of mixed Native American and African American heritage. The cowboy life gave former slaves a living wage and the opportunity to work as skilled ranch hands. While Hollywood mostly portrayed cowboys as white skinned, by some estimates as many one in four were African American. Bill Pickett grew up in awe of his cousins who worked as cowboys. He quit school after fifth grade and hired on as a ranch hand. He was barely a teenager when he came up with the idea of bulldogging; a technique trained dogs used for pulling steers to the ground. "I sees a dog throw a cow, and that's where I gets my idea. I throws them with my teeth." So Bill Pickett developed the art of bulldogging by observing how bulldogs pulled down a cow. And this is a picture of Bill Pickett grabbing the steer with his teeth. Pickett's break came when Joe Miller, one of three brothers who owned the 101 Ranch asked if he'd perform with their Wild West show. The 101 was the biggest ranch in Indian Territory. More than one 100,000 acres in Northern Oklahoma. It was virtually its own country. Pickett agreed to join them. And, despite the reality of segregation and the racial tensions of the day, he soon became a star an audience favorite. Zach Miller, the owner of the 101 Ranch, described Pickett as the greatest sweat and dirt cowhand that ever lived, bar none. He added, "When they turned Bill Pickett out, they broke the mold." His story is extraordinary. But I wasn't able to find out much about the kind of saddle Pickett might have used. John Cooper is a 101 Ranch historian in Stroud, Oklahoma.

John Cooper: Well, glad to meet you.

Tukufu: My pleasure.

Tukufu: He says he might be able to help.

John: Let's go over and look at the longhorns.

Tukufu: Alright, that sounds good. How big were those steers that Bill Pickett was bulldogging?

John: Well...around 750, 800 pounds.



Tukufu: 800 pounds.

John: And wild.

Tukufu: So what was life like on the 101 Ranch?

John: Depended on how up the ladder you were.

Tukufu: How about for Bill Pickett?

John: If you liked low pay and lots of work, why that was the place to be. Bill said he could make more money picking cotton than he could with that eight dollar salary on the show. We will look the saddle over and see what it's like.

Tukufu: Absolutely. John's got some pictures he wants to show me. They show Pickett on the 101 Ranch. And his saddle is clearly visible.

John: But you don't see too much of his saddle there. You see his hammer. He's got his hammer there to work on fence with.

Tukufu: How about in that one? Does it show in that one?

John: I would say that this saddle and this saddle are not the same saddle.

Tukufu: Not the same saddle. Why do you say that?

John: That trim around the front.

Tukufu: So you believe this trim, which is here, but you can't see it here is an indication to you that these are not the same saddles.

John: It's not the same saddle.

Tukufu: Although John says a working cowboy would normally own one saddle, perhaps our worn saddle was replaced by Pickett. But John certainly doubts that the saddle Elizabeth bought was ever used for a rodeo or Wild West show.



John: I would think if he was going to the big rodeos in Fort Worth and such places as that and performing, he would have had a nicer saddle.

Tukufu: Right. John's got me thinking. If Pickett was such a big star, why would the carving on the back of his saddle look so crude? I'm headed to the National Saddlery Company in Oklahoma City to talk to saddle maker and leather expert John Rule.

John Rule: Nice meeting you. How are you?

Tukufu: He confirms it's from the right period.

John: Well, it's an Askew saddle. Their saddle shop was in Kansas right before the turn of the century into the 20s. Just by looking at the patina on it and look at the wear and the styling, I would say 1900, 1910 is pretty much about when that saddle was made.

Tukufu: John thinks he knows how the name was etched into the saddle.

John: The name was drawn on with a hot iron of some type. I think we can kind of duplicate that. It would be with an electric soldering iron, but we can get pretty close. I'm going to take this burner and we're just going to kind of draw on this old piece of leather. It's probably real close to the timeframe of the saddle you've got up there. If Bill Pickett did it, of course, he would not have had an electric soldering iron back then. But he could have done it by forming a piece of metal and heating it up over a fireplace and doing just exactly what we're doing here. It looks new there, but I'm going to rough it up a little bit and some of that new black is going to go away. And then I'll let you be the judge on if it's possible...

Tukufu: Alright, so let's compare them.

John: It's not exact, but you can see how it would have been done. But it could have been done back then just like we just did it now.

Tukufu: John says some of the 101 cowboys might have been famous. But at the end of the day, as John Cooper told me, they were just working cowboys. Branding his saddle would be a simple way to keep tabs on a crucial tool of his trade.

John: He would have wanted to identify it to keep somebody else from getting off with it.

Tukufu: The wear on our saddle confirms it has seen long days on the range.



John: This tear right here would be real consistent with roping a steer or a cow or a bull and getting a rope underneath one of these buttons and kind of ripping it. So, they rode this saddle pretty hard.

Tukufu: In your opinion, could this have been Bill Pickett's saddle?

John: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, yes, it absolutely could have been.

Tukufu: I want the opinion of a professional rodeo cowboy, so I'm meeting Ronnie Fields at a ranch near Henryetta, Oklahoma. He's ranked third on the national rodeo circuit. Oh, man! After making some practice throws, Ronnie tells me a little bit about the finer points of steer wrestling. Pickett's technique of biting a steer on the lips is a thing of the past.

Ronnie: You want to ride the horse up to the point of the hip is where you start getting off. You have to reach to where you can get a horn, but you want to be able to sit on your heel in the stirrup of your horse, like when you're getting off. And you hold onto the saddle horn.

Tukufu: Okay.

Ronnie: And you wait till you get to the point where you can get over the steer's back. You have to slide him. And what I mean slide, like you'll be in position and they will push you three, four, five feet before you can actually get them slowed down enough to get their position turned. For us to get a qualified time, you have to change the direction of the animal. Meaning, if he's going this-a-way, head first, he has to be coming this-a-way when you're done.

Tukufu: Ronnie shows me how a rodeo steer wrestling saddle is different from a working saddle.

Ronnie: They're slick on the seat, which helps you to slide out. The horns on them are made to where you can actually get a hold when you roll. You have to be able to go from this point over here and let it roll around.

Tukufu: Okay.

Ronnie: So you want a low backed saddle because it doesn't grab you, like when you go to slide out. This actual particular saddle, I won it myself in '03.

Tukufu: Oh, you won this.

Ronnie: Yeah.



Tukufu: So this is a championship saddle.

Ronnie: Uh huh. Yeah.

Tukufu: And you use it? You don't just have it framed somewhere?

Ronnie: No.

Tukufu: So, you mind if we take a look at my saddle?

Ronnie: Absolutely not. We can actually put it on this horse, if you want.

Tukufu: Alright, let me go get it.

Ronnie: This one's kind of been hanging around for a little while, hasn't it? Yeah, that's quite different of the...today's saddle.

Tukufu: I asked him how the two saddles compare.

Ronnie: This one would be a little hard to get out of, as far as catching a steer. You don't want any hang-ups. And this right here would hang up. And there's guys if they wore spurs, or something, it would catch, so you don't want the high back in our event. This is more of a ranch saddle. They like the high backs, you know, because they were in the saddle for a lot of hours of the day. And so they used it more of a backrest.

Tukufu: So would Bill Pickett have performed his bulldogging stunt from a saddle like this?

Ronnie: It just looks like a death trap. If Bill Pickett actually rode this and done his event, as well as the same event that I do now today, he's a pretty good hand....

Tukufu: Ronnie doesn't know how it was ever used in a rodeo show. But even if it were just Pickett's working cowboy saddle, he's impressed.

Ronnie: It definitely deserves to be put somewhere in a museum or someplace very, very safe.

Tukufu: It seems pretty clear that our saddle was not used for bulldogging. And truthfully, I've got no proof our saddle was even owned by Bill Pickett. Oklahoma City is home to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, the biggest Western museum in the country. I'm headed there to see rodeo curator, Richard Rattenbury, and curator Don Reeves. They quickly throw my investigation to the ground.



Don: This is the kind of saddle that he would have used.

Tukufu: Don explains that in Pickett's day, rodeo was a kind of social event; a bunch of cowboys getting together to show off their skills.

Don: The fellows that were working in the Wild West shows, as well competing in the rodeos, were using typical stock saddles of the time.

Richard: Wild West show saddles would really be much the same, except for the impresario or the owner of the outfit, which in that case would have a very embellished saddle. The Miller brothers had two or three of them. A lot of silver work and fancy carving, and so forth.

Tukufu: Okay. Now on the back of here, we have Bill Pickett's name. What does that tell you?

Don: I've got something else to show you. Right over here.

Tukufu: Alright.

Tukufu: And what they take me to see gives me my answer for Elizabeth. I tell her the saddle is from the right period. It's also the style of saddle Pickett would have used working on the 101 Ranch. And, bulldogging in the Wild West shows.

Elizabeth: I'm glad to hear that.

Tukufu: What I hadn't been able to do was prove a connection between Bill Pickett and the saddle.

Don: This is what I wanted to show you. This is the saddle that is generally accepted as one that was owned by Bill Pickett.

Tukufu: Really?

Tukufu: Don tells me that this saddle came to the museum in 1971 from the son of Guy Schultz, a rodeo champion and bulldogger who performed with Pickett in the 101 Ranch show. Is this the kind of saddle that Bill Pickett would have used in the rodeo in the Wild West shows?

Richard: Very definitely. It's of the right era, much like your specimen. By a different maker, Miles City Saddlery, but both were makes of quality stock saddles.



Tukufu: This could have been Bill Pickett's saddle. It's the kind of saddle that he would have used when he was working on the ranch and it's the kind of saddle that he would have used when he was bulldogging.

Elizabeth: I can't ask for more than that, because a provenance for a personally owned item is, I think, the hardest kind of provenance to prove.

Tukufu: As the popularity of Wild West shows began to fade and Bill Pickett got older, he finally stopped performing and mostly retired from ranch work. When the 101 Ranch went bankrupt in 1932, he went back to help separate out some horses that Zach Miller was saving from auction. Bill fell and was kicked in the head by one of the horses, and died 11 days later. He was buried on a hill on the 101 Ranch. In 1971, he became the first African American cowboy to be inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame.