

This article from NYTimes.com

Alonzo Pettie, 93, a Creator of a Black Rodeo, Dies

August 12, 2003

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Alonzo Pettie, Colorado's oldest black cowboy, who after being barred from white rodeos helped start one for blacks, died on Aug. 2 in Denver. He was 93.

Mr. Pettie lived in Denver, which was a relatively small town that still had some dirt roads when he went to Colorado as part of his service in the Army in World War II.

"I've seen it all from cowboys and horses to cars and folk in suits," he said in an interview with The Associated Press in March.

In his later years, Mr. Pettie, who gave speeches about the experience of being a black cowboy, was a model in an advertising campaign for European jeans and lent his voice - joining Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover and others - in an oral history of American blacks.

In between, he rode wild broncos and angry bulls.

Despite the rarity of black cowboys in Hollywood Westerns, historians estimate that as many as one-quarter of real-life cowboys were black. Bill Pickett, a black rodeo star who was honored with a postage stamp and who was the subject of several biographies, was the best known, not least for inventing bulldogging, a rodeo event in which a man wrestles a steer to the ground.

Mr. Pettie suffered a succession of serious injuries during his career. At one rodeo in 1929, Mr. Pettie was bucked from a bronco and dislocated his shoulder. He went on to ride a bull with his arm in a sling. The next year he broke his pelvic bone.

"You just get back in there, get moving and get on that bull," he told The Associated Press.

Mr. Pettie was born on June 18, 1910, and named after a grandfather who was born into slavery. His father, Jim, was a farmer and lumberyard worker, and his mother, Annie, a midwife.

His mother died in 1919 and his father died in 1926. After his father's death, Mr. Pettie began to break horses to support himself.

Survivors include his daughter, Earnestine Himes of Donaldsville, Iowa; his brother, the Rev. Johnny E. Pettie of Fort Worth; his sister, Virgie Jones of Longview, Tex.; four grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and a great-great grandchild.

"I did not go to school too much," Mr. Pettie told the oral history project, HistoryMakers. "I did my learning working. Working. That was all I did."

He worked on a West Texas ranch in his late teenage years, and the rancher saw his skill with horses and taught him to ride.

He began to ride in rodeos where blacks were used as preshow entertainment. In a 1990 interview with CBS News, Mr. Pettie said he was paid "mounting money": the \$2 or \$3 that blacks received just to get on top of a bull and come out of the chute. The entertainment was supposed to be watching them being thrown from the animals.

"If you was a good rider, well, you would go ahead and ride," Mr. Pettie said. "And if you would get bucked off, you'd get your \$2 or \$3 or whatever."

"You could make \$10 or \$12 a day like that," he added.

Mr. Pettie served in the Army from 1942 to 1944, and then returned to the rodeo circuit in Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas.

In 1947, he and a friend began Colorado's first black rodeo. Mr. Pettie again broke his pelvic bone and spent three months in a body cast. After that, he stopped riding broncos and bulls.

In 1962, Mr. Pettie began working in the maintenance department at a Sears, Roebuck & Company store in Fort Worth. The next year, he tied for first place in a best-dressed cowboy competition. He transferred to Denver in 1965, and retired from Sears, Roebuck 10 years later.

He continued to ride horses until 1995, and, in 1996, was chosen by the London advertising agency for Levi Strauss to be a model in its Red Tab heritage campaign. Dozens of

European magazines ran a photograph of Mr. Pettie holding a lariat in his black-gloved hand.

This year Mr. Pettie told The Associated Press that if his legs were what they had been, he would never have stopped riding in rodeos.

"There ain't nothing like a good, solid ride," he said. "I don't care where you are or who you are. It's just like music - smooth and perfect if you do it right."

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