

# Bill Pickett, Bulldoggin' Cowboy

**Skills:** Language Arts, Visual Arts

**Objective:** The student will be introduced to Pill Pickett, An Oklahoma rodeo personality, who pioneered the rodeo act of bulldogging.

## Background

In movies and TV shows about the Old West, cowboys are usually white. In real life, nearly one out of seven cowboys was an African American freed from slavery by the Civil War. Bill Pickett was an African American cowboy who gained fame on the rodeo circuit for pioneering the daring act of bulldogging. In his time, he was known as “the best bulldogger in the world.”

When the US Postal Service decided to commission a series of stamps entitled “Legends of the West,” Bill Pickett was chosen, along with three other American cowboys, to be featured on the stamp.

The stamps were printed, sent out to post offices all over the country, and scheduled to go on sale in March, 1994. Days before the stamp was to go on sale, Bill Pickett’s family discovered the picture used on Pickett’s stamp was not of Bill but of his younger brother, Ben. An urgent memo went out to the nation’s post offices. The stamp was not to be sold but returned to the main post office in Washington, DC.

In the state of Washington, between five and eight sheets were sold by mistake. Each sheet contained 20 stamps, with five stamps honoring each of the four famous cowboys on each one. That meant there were five Bill Pickett stamps on each sheet and between 25 and 40 Bill Pickett stamps somewhere in Washington state.

The US Postal Service offered a commemorative stamp mug to anyone returning the erroneous sheets. No one came forward to accept the offer. Rumors began to spread that an anonymous stamp collector would pay \$100,000 per sheet.

The US Postal Service was now stuck with 3 million incorrect stamps. The descendants of Bill Pickett began to worry that Bill would be remembered for the stamp rather than for his achievements as a rodeo star. Finally the postal service and the Pickett family came to an agreement. The postal service would release 150,000 sheets of the stamps for sale in October, 1994. That

## P.A.S.S.

### GRADE 4

**Reading**— 1.1,4b; 2.2; 3.1ab,2d,3ab;  
4.1b; 5.1bf

**Writing**—2.1

**Visual Literacy**—3

**Social Studies**— 1.1; 5.1,5

**Visual Arts**—3.1

### GRADE 5

**Reading**— 1.1a,4b; 2.2; 3.1ab,2e,3b;  
5.1af

**Writing**—2.2

**Visual Literacy**—3

**Visual Arts**—3.1

## Ag in Your Community

1. Invite a stamp collector to speak to the class and share information about his or her hobby.
2. Arrange a class visit to your local post office so students can view the daily routine of postal workers.
3. Contact a local rodeo club or riding stable to get the names of participants in local rodeos, and invite one or more to visit the class and talk about rodeos and modern bulldogging techniques.

Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom is a program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, 4-H Youth Development, in cooperation with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

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## Vocabulary

**bulldogging**—Method used to get cattle to lie down by grabbing the horns and twisting the head until the animal falls to the ground.

**cattle branding**—A mark indicating identity or ownership, burned, tattooed or painted on an animal's coat or hide.

**commemorate**—To honor the memory of someone or something.

**consciousness**—The state or condition of being aware of one's own existence, sensations and thoughts and of one's environment.

**dazzling**—Something that inspires admiration or wonder.

**descendant**—A person born into a particular family.

**enthusiast**—A person who is intensely involved with a particular subject.

**gelding**—A castrated male horse.

**history**—Events from the past that are remembered by large numbers of people.

**horse breaking**—To tame a horse or train it to obey.

**lariat**—A long rope with a running noose (hondo) used for catching livestock.

**mannerism**—A special way of doing something.

**originator**—The person who brought something into being.

**rodeo**—A competition in which cowboys display skills such as riding broncos or lassoing.

would decrease the value of the stamps that were sold by mistake, even though stamp collectors will always be interested in obtaining copies for their collections.

The remaining 2.5 million stamps are in a regional postal center in Kansas City, Missouri. They are not for sale.

## Language Arts/Social Studies

1. Read and discuss background.
2. Introduce vocabulary words, and discuss possible meanings.
3. Hand out student worksheets.
  - Instruct students to look for clues in the reading material to discover the meanings of the vocabulary words or to listen for them as you read the materials as a class.
  - Have students complete the questions about Bill Pickett on the student worksheet.
4. Have students research online to find the names of the other famous cowboys included in the US Postal Service "Legends of the West" series.
  - For what achievements were these cowboys famous?

## Visual Arts

1. Have students design stamps that reflect their own personal interests.
  - Encourage them to make the stamps as accurate as possible so as to avoid mistakes like the one the US Postal Service made when designing the Bill Pickett stamp.
  - Discuss the importance of research in the development of a series of stamps.

## Extra Reading

Conrad, Pam, *Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher*, Scholastic, 1992.

Katz, William Loren, *Black Women of the Old West*, Atheneum, 1995.

Kroll, Steven, *Pony Express*, Scholastic, 1996.

Pinkney, Andrea Davis, Harcourt Brace, 1996.

Schlissel, Lillian, *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West*, Simon and Schuster for Young Readers, 1995

Walter, Mildred Pitts, *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World*, Knopf, 1991.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Bill Pickett, Bull Doggin' Cowboy A

## Vocabulary Words

bulldogging  
rodeo  
cattle branding  
horse breaking  
lariat  
mannerism  
originator  
commemorate  
descendant  
dazzling  
history  
gelding  
enthusiast  
consciousness

Bill Pickett, Oklahoma cowboy, made *history* two times—once in his lifetime and once in ours.

Pickett was the *originator* of a *dazzling* rodeo act called "*bulldogging*." A *descendant* of South Carolina slaves, Bill was born and raised in central Texas. He was one of 13 children born to a family with a long history of cowboys' ways.

Bill didn't go to school past the fifth grade. That was not unusual for a black child

growing up in Texas in the early 1900s. Many children were not allowed in the schools because of their skin color. Instead, Bill concentrated on learning all he could about horses and ranch life. He would stand for hours studying the *mannerisms* of the cowboys as they swung their *lariats* to *break horses* and throw cattle down on the ground for *branding*.

One day in 1881, Bill watched in amazement as a bulldog bit a cow on its upper lip—and hung on! The cow stood perfectly still until the dog let go. A few days later, Bill decided he would use the dog's trick to wrestle a cow to the ground.

He grabbed the cow's ears and bit down on her upper lip. With an easy flip, Bill threw the animal to the ground, all the time holding on with his teeth. The trick came to be known as "bulldogging" among the cowboys in the area, who used it as a way to get cattle to the ground for branding.

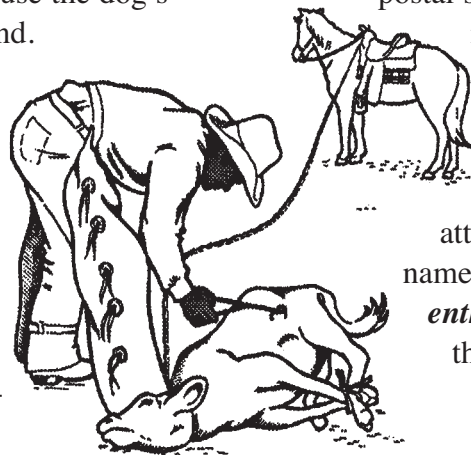
Bill began *rodeo* bulldogging after he got married, because he needed to earn extra

money. His fame spread quickly, and on June 11, 1905, Bill went to work for the Miller Brothers 101 Wild West Show near Ponca City. The show's name came from the fact that it was located 101 miles from Tulsa, 101 miles from Oklahoma City and 101 miles from Wichita, Kansas. Pickett's bulldogging act was soon a featured attraction. Sometimes he did the act as many as three times a day. Pickett estimated that during his lifetime he bulldogged about 5,000 head of cattle.

One day in March, 1932, Bill and some other cowboys were gathering up some horses for a sale. A three-year-old unbroken *gelding* knocked Bill to the ground and kicked him in the head. He was rushed to a Ponca City hospital but never regained *consciousness*. On April 2, 1932, the man who invented bulldogging died. Bill Pickett is buried in the triangle pasture that once was part of the famous 101 Ranch.

In March, 1994, Bill Pickett made history again. The US Postal Service decided it wanted to issue a stamp *commemorating* famous American cowboys. Bill Pickett was one of four chosen. When the stamp was released, Pickett's family was shocked to discover the picture was not of Bill but of his brother, Ben. The mistake was a costly one for the postal service. It was forced to recall 3 million stamps. Bill's family worried he would come to be known more for the postal service mistake than for his achievements.

The family eventually agreed to let the postal service release 150,000 sheets of the incorrect stamps. They hoped that act would take some of the attention away from the mistake. A big name for nearly a century among rodeo *enthusiasts*, Bill Pickett now has a place in the history of the US Postal Service as well.



Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Bill Pickett, Bull Doggin' Cowboy B

Use complete sentences to answer the questions below.

1. Describe Bill Pickett's style of bulldogging. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Bill Pickett was to have been honored by having his picture placed on what object?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Whose picture was accidentally used instead? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Bill Pickett worked most of his life for what Oklahoma ranch and wild west show? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

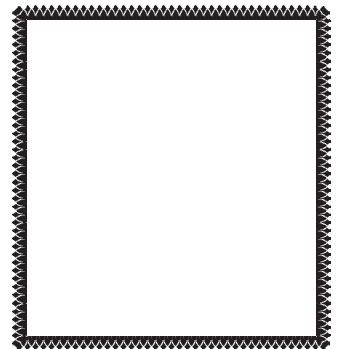
4. Write a short paragraph in your own words about the incident leading to Bill Pickett's death.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*In a dictionary, look up the following vocabulary words. Write the word, showing the syllables, the accent marks and the origin of the word.*

rodeo \_\_\_\_\_  
lariat \_\_\_\_\_  
mannerisms \_\_\_\_\_  
descendent \_\_\_\_\_

Write the vocabulary word that is the name for something with which you can catch a horse or cow. \_\_\_\_\_

Create your own stamp promoting something you do or something you know about. (Note: Postal service guidelines do not allow stamps showing pictures of people who are still living.)



Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Bill Pickett, Bulldoggin Cowboy (answers)

Use complete sentences to answer the questions below.

1. Describe Bill Pickett's style of bulldogging. He grabbed the cow's ears, bit down on her upper lip, and threw her to the ground, all the time holding on with his teeth.
2. Bill Pickett was to have been honored by having his picture placed on what object? Bill Pickett was to have been honored by having his picture placed on a stamp. Whose picture was accidentally used instead? His brother's picture was accidentally used instead.

3. Bill Pickett worked most of his life for what Oklahoma ranch and wild west show? Bill Pickett worked for most of his life for the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Wild West Show.

4. Write a short paragraph in your own words about the incident leading to Bill Pickett's death. He was gathering up some horses for a sale when a three-year-old gelding knocked him to the ground and kicked him in the head. He never regained consciousness.

*In a dictionary, look up the following vocabulary words. Write the word, showing the syllables, the accent marks and the origin of the word.*

rodeo—ro de o, from the Spanish "rodear," meaning "to surround."

lariat—la ri at, from the Spanish "la reata," meaning "to tie again."

mannerisms—man ne ri sms, from the Latin "manuarius," meaning "of the hand."

descendent—de scen dent, from the Latin "descendre," meaning "to climb down."

Write the vocabulary word that is the name for something with which you can catch a horse or cow. lariat

