

Bones, brains, and brawn...mathew "bones" hooks: the man who had it all

[Business](#)



The title of “ Renaissance Man” has clearly manifested itself well after the time period it refers to.

The phrase is designated for a select few, those who possess an innate ability to exceed in just about any field of study or area of expertise. Over the ages, the title has been bestowed upon several remarkably clever men, including Leonardo da Vinci, Akbar the Great, and Benjamin Franklin; while these are some of the most celebrated names in history, there remain other obscure polymaths who deserve recognition for their outstanding achievements. One such example of a man who, to put it simply, had it all is cowboy, civic leader, religious pacesetter, and businessman Mathew “ Bones” Hooks. Born into an impoverished African American family that was no stranger to slavery, Hooks went on to correct widespread misconceptions concerning the capabilities and restrictions of his race and leave an unforgettable mark on Texas history. Hooks’ unique potential and competence were made clear well before adulthood.

Mathew Hooks was born on November 3rd, 1867 in Robertson County, Texas to parents Alex and Annie Hooks, both of whom were former-slaves. Though he was a scrawny boy (hence the nickname “ Bones”), by 1875, at the young age of seven, Hooks already had his first job as the driver of a butcher’s meat wagon. Just two years later, Hooks switched roles and began driving a chuck wagon for a renowned Denton County ranch; it was through this occupation that he met cattleman D. Steve Donald, who would go on to have a major influence on Hooks’ life (Graham). “ Bones” enjoyed working with Donald, and the feeling was clearly mutual, as Donald eventually hired Hooks to work alongside the other white men as a ranch hand; this offer <https://assignbuster.com/bones-brains-and-brawnmathew-bones-hooks-the-man-who-had-it-all/>

effectively made Hooks one of the first black cowboys to be willingly allowed to work with those of the “superior race”, marking the first of “Bones” extensive list of accomplishments (Sance). In a personal interview, Nathan Muiruri, an African American whose family has lived in Texas for generations, stated, “Small achievements like this one shouldn’t be looked down upon.

.. ‘Bones’ really helped change the way African Americans were perceived at the time” (Muiruri). Known for his tendency to commit himself wholeheartedly into any given task, Hooks soon effectively established himself as one of the most hardworking men on the DSD Ranch, surpassing even the experienced grown men in prowess and dedication. Such was his commitment that he soon caught the eye of visiting cattleman J. R.

Norris, who owned the JRE Ranch on the Pecos River. Seeing Hooks’ pitiful appearance, Norris allegedly told Hooks, “I’ll buy you a pair of boots and make a real cowboy out of you if you come to work at my place on the Pecos” (Lane). Seeing an opportunity to attain success outside of his small-town roots, “Bones” accepted the offer and moved with Norris to Pecos, where Hooks began working as a horse trainer; Hooks also served as Norris’ right hand man on several trail drives to Kansas. History did indeed repeat itself, and “Bones” soon became known as the best horse-breaker in the area; Hooks later proclaimed that although all the cowboys in the region kept bringing him horses previously thought to be untamable, there wasn’t a single steed that “Bones” was unable to best (Thompson). Having made his mark on Pecos, it was only reasonable that “Bones” move on to attain

success elsewhere, so he then took his talents to a small town named Mobeetie and opened a grocery store before moving on to Clarendon (Todd).

Even though Hooks was one among an exceedingly small African American community in Clarendon, the simple prairie life, as well as the name he had made for himself as a renowned horse wrangler, kept him from leaving the area. True to his inherent tendencies as a polymath, “ Bones” did anything but remain idle while staying in Clarendon; in his twenty-three years in the city, Hooks founded and built the first Black church in the Texas Panhandle, while still dutifully adhering to his obligations as a cowboy (Massey). These occupations were only enough to occupy the well-rounded Hooks until 1900, when he began work as a porter at an Amarillo hotel. By 1910, Hooks had once again changed jobs, and he started work as a Santa Fe Railway porter. This post kept “ Bones” busy for the next twenty years, until his retirement in 1930 (Graham). Of course, being the “ Renaissance Man” he was, “ Bones” had several notable adventures while managing his ever-changing careers; perhaps the best known of these escapades is an episode that occurred during Hooks’ first year as a railway porter, an event now simply referred to as “ The Ride.

” The story has been told and retold so many times over the ages that the line separating fact from fiction has become blurred (Green); for Nathan Muiruri, though, this doesn’t make a difference. “ It doesn’t matter if the story is a little exaggerated. Bones Hooks was an amazing man, and as the saying goes, all legends find their basis in truth” (Muiruri). The accuracy of the tale is certainly debatable, but the myth is as follows: It was the summer

of 1910, and Hooks was diligently working when he overheard some of his fellow porters discussing “ Old Bob”, a black mustang that was known for its wild behavior. According to the porters, “ Old Bob” was impossible to control and his owners were unsure of what to do with him.

“ Bones”, who was unable to pass up any opportunity for a challenge, is said to have interjected and claimed, “ I can ride that horse” (Lane). The men scoffed at the “ Bones” boldness, and bet him \$25 (a rather significant amount of money at the time) that the horse was unbreakable. Hooks, of course, accepted, and the standoff was scheduled for the very next day. The fact that a large crowd gathered to witness the spectacle attests to “ Bones” immense popularity and fame as the best horse wrangler in the area; always one to put on a show, he did not let people leave his battle with “ Old Bob” disappointed. In Hooks’ own words, “ I combed that bronc from his ears to his tail, rode him to a standstill, collected my money, and was back on the train when it pulled out seven minutes later”(Lane).

As Muiruri put it, “ Bones was remarkable in that he could be as eccentric as he wanted and still manage to leave his mark on our culture. And that’s something we can always be proud of” (Muiruri). The accuracy of this statement is proved by yet another one of Hooks’ unique traditions, the presentation of a white flower at the funeral of anyone “ Bones” thought was worth honoring. Hooks sent out about 500 single white flowers in his lifetime, the recipients of which ranged from common deceased pioneers to celebrated figures such as Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and the forty-eight delegates representing the different nations at the 1945 United Nations

Conference in San Francisco (Thompson). It was only a matter of time before the public began following the famed “ Bones”, and before long, the white flower started appearing at the dedications of churches and new buildings in Amarillo (Massey). In fact, the majority of those who attended Hooks’ funeral in 1951 laid white flowers at his coffin to give back “ to the man who never hesitated to give his all” (Muiruri).

“ Bones” had never been the kind of person to be content with idleness, so the end of his days of working as a railway porter didn’t mean “ Bones” was going to stay at home and cut himself off from the busy and ever-changing community. In fact, the years after Hooks’ retirement in 1930 marked some of the most active and exertive times of his life as threw himself wholeheartedly into public affairs and civil service (Carlson). Some of his triumphs include becoming the first African American man to serve on Potter County Grand Jury, as well as the first of his race to join the XIT Association, the Montana Cowpunchers Association, the Pampa Old Settlers Association, and the Western Cowpunchers club (Lane). Always one to look out for the less fortunate, Hooks was also a prominent member of Dogie Club, an organization that provided aid for underprivileged black children, and a charter member of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society, which ensured that the citizens’ achievements received the acclaim they deserved (Stuart). Such was the extent of Hooks’ generosity that one could even argue that the man was so intent on providing for others that he sometimes tended to neglect his own needs.

As a result, when “ Bones” fell grievously ill in 1951, he was left penniless and with no means of access to the medicine he so desperately needed. This time, though, the community that Hooks had done so much for came together and created a public fund in his name. Unfortunately, the funds generated by the group weren’t enough to keep the hero alive, and “ Bones” died a peaceful death on February 2nd, 1951, at the wise old age of eighty-three (Todd). Legend has it that as “ Bones” lay on his deathbed, he told his housekeeper, “ Of course I’m going to die, but don’t you worry. I feel wonderful” (Lane). As Muiruri puts it, “ This is proof that Hooks was watching out for others even in his very last moments.

As far as I’m concerned, that’s the mark of a true hero” (Muiruri). Although the world lost a great man that February morning, the beliefs and ideas that Hooks fought for are still very much alive. The physical evidence of “ Bones’” contributions can be found at Bones Hooks Park in Amarillo, but far more prevalent are the immaterial implications of the man’s actions. Through all the achievements he made in his illustrious lifetime, Hooks effectively proved that his race was not to be considered a hindrance; if anything, the fact that Hooks came from an underprivileged family and was of African American descent made his accomplishments all the more noteworthy. In the words of Nathan Muiruri, “ Without ‘ Bones’, I don’t think we’d be able to stand as tall and proud as we do now.

And I do mean that in more ways than one”(Muiruri). Bibliographies (This includes all of the sources I looked at.) “ African-American Heritage.” Waco The Heart of Texas. N.

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