

THOMAS: Former George Ranch cowhand inducted into Bullriding Hall of Fame

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

He dropped out of school in sixth grade and when he was 21 witnessed a bullriding competition in Hempstead. He decided right then and there to become a bullrider.

It took him several rodeos to get the hang of bullriding, but it wasn't long before he started making a name for himself among the white competitors on the circuit.

Still, he had a tough time showing off his skills.

Whites simply wouldn't let Blacks compete in rodeos at that time.

One of the first times he was allowed to ride a bull in professional rodeo competition, he had to ride after the competition was over and the judge was instructed not to keep time, said Larry Callies, a Black cowboy and founder and curator of The Black Cowboy Museum in Rosenberg.

By the end of the ride, the bull — so mean no white cowboy would ride it — couldn't toss Thomas, said Callies, who was a close friend of Thomas and who has the Black bullrider's photos and memorabilia on display in the museum.

Decades later in 2004, the judge met up with Thomas and acknowledged the feat — and his shame at not ringing the bell after eight seconds, Thomas' family said.

Even when he did win, often times he wasn't paid his prize winnings, said Cash, who was born in 1948, the same year of Thomas' first rodeo.

Thomas finally cracked the professional rodeo circuit in 1952.

Even then, many whites didn't fully accept him.

Death threats

Many times Thomas was threatened with death, his family said.

One time in the 1950s, Thomas pulled his cowboy hat down over his eyes, put on a pair of gloves and entered a bullriding competition in Louisiana, Cash said.

Thomas won the competition, and when the white rodeo officials discovered he was black, they ran him out of town, Cash said.

They also refused to pay him the prize money.

"The high sheriff escorted me to the Texas line, and he told me don't come back or the Ku Klux Klan would kill me," Thomas recalled in one interview.

Thomas shared the story with Cash.

"Thomas told me he quit for one



Willie Thomas Sr. of Booth was inducted into the Bullriders Hall of Fame last month. His family and friends were there to celebrate the long overdue recognition. Showing off the buckle and plaque he received are, from

left, adopted son Dwight Davis, son Willie Thomas Jr., niece Debra Greenwood-sharp, adopted son Harold Cash, son Berkley Thomas and son Rodney Thomas. Willie Thomas Sr. died last year at age 90.

whole year because he had been done so bad," Cash said.

"But he went back and made things better for other Black bullriders. He never got the credit for what he did. He was always forgotten about."

Thomas said he often told whites, "You might cheat me, but you won't buck me off."

A loving father, friend and mentor

According to the Portal of Texas History, Thomas left the ranch in 1964, but not before meeting his wife, Ora Lee, who worked as a nurse's aide on the ranch before leaving to work as a private nurse.

The couple reared a passel of children — Sandra Pipkin, Dwight Thomas, Glen Thomas, Vicki Meriwether, Berkley Thomas, Willie Thomas Jr., Myron Thomas, Rodney Thomas, Sharee Thomas, oldest sister Johnnie Mae Greenwood and baby Lottie Solomon.

Five of the children were born on the George Ranch. His brother James, who is a year younger, was a champion bareback rider.

"He was a very loving father and the best man I've ever known," said youngest son Rodney.

Son Berkley fondly remembers following his father around on the professional rodeo circuit where the elder Thomas worked feeding rodeo stock.

One time, they went to a rodeo

at Madison Square Garden in New York, Berkley recalled.

Thomas' professional career lasted from 1952 to 1969.

Thomas worked for the Texas Department of Transportation for many years before retiring in August of 1991.

Willie Thomas Jr., who also rode bulls, said his father shared his knowledge of bullriding with anyone who wanted to learn, including his own kids.

Once, Willie Jr. was thrown from a bull and kicked in the face, dislocating his jaw and knocking out some teeth.

His dad said, "You didn't listen to what I taught you, did you?" Willie Jr. recalled.

Accolades, finally

Thomas was inducted into the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2004.

In 2005, the Texas House of Representatives and the Texas Senate paid tribute to Thomas with resolutions honoring his "outstanding career as a professional cowboy and bullrider."

"A pioneer for African American cowboys across the country, Mr. Thomas faced years of discrimination during the segregated 1950s with grace, humility, and strength," the resolution said in part.

"His accomplishments are especially impressive considering the great obstacles placed in his way

throughout his career, including racist rodeo officials who prevented him from competing because of the color of his skin."

In 2008, Thomas was inducted into the National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth and nominated for induction into the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's Rodeo Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.

During his 30-year career, Thomas won 25 saddles and more than 20 belt buckles, including the 1968 all-around title of the Southwestern National Cowboy Association. He also rode more than 4,000 bulls, and landed top rankings in the world.

Last month's induction into the Bullriders Hall of Fame added yet another buckle to his collection.

In addition, Thomas has held a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association gold card since he started riding in professional rodeos in 1952.

Thomas' induction into the Bullriding Hall of Fame makes him one of only three Black bullriders ever inducted into the prestigious association, Cash noted.

"The first two were Charlie Sampson, who was a world champion, and Myrtis Dightman — and they were both protégés of Willie Thomas," Cash said.

"To see the former champions

means a lot to his family," said Rodney Thomas.

"I'm not trying to make it a racial thing, but he was cheated and mistreated. What he had to put up with was total injustice. But he was still successful."

Good friend, good advice

Cash won the All-American Rodeo Association bareback championship in 1979 and 1981, which he attributes to Willie Thomas' training and advice.

And when Cash got angry and wanted to lash out at judges for their poor scores or at rodeo officials or white riders and fans who mistreated him, his mentor Willie Thomas encouraged him to channel his rage into his bullriding.

"He would tell me, 'just keep riding. It's not worth getting into a fight and getting kicked out of the rodeo. That's what they want you to do, fight, so they have a reason to kick you out of the association. So don't do it. Just keep riding.' It was great advice."

Want to learn more about Willie Thomas Sr.? Visit the Black Cowboy Museum, 1104 Third St., Rosenberg.

So... How's your plumbing?

The KATY PLUMBING COMPANY

www.yourkpc.com • 281-646-1700

MPL36673

Library to offer gift bags to newborns

Fort Bend County Libraries will continue its annual tradition of welcoming newborns to the wonders of books.

Every Fort Bend County baby born during the week of June 6-12, may receive a special baby book bag, courtesy of the Friends of Fort Bend County Library.

Each bag contains a book, a bib, a special certificate, a list of suggested reading for children, and information on parenting and on library services.

These bags represent the library system's commitment to providing library services for county residents throughout their lives, beginning at birth.

"We hope to start every child born in hospitals in Fort Bend County on a successful road to life-long learning," said Susan King, Coordinator of Youth Services for FBCL.

"We distribute the baby book bags to babies born during that week at area Fort Bend County hospitals, but ALL Fort Bend County babies who are born during the week of June 6 through 12 are eligible to receive one, while supplies last."



FBCL staff member Amanda Cox shows off the gift bag for newborns.

Families of Fort Bend babies born at other locations during this period should call the Youth Services department, at 281-633-4762, to receive their book bag.

Not only is reading to a child a wonderful opportunity for bonding between parent and child, it has also been shown to stimulate brain development.

Even the youngest baby can benefit from the chance to develop eye

focus by looking at the page of a book, while being comforted by the familiar voice of a parent.

Reading aloud to children exposes them to the sounds and cadences of a human voice, resulting in an earlier and stronger grasp of vocabulary skills.

Helping children develop early-literacy skills is a major goal for FBCL. Parents are encouraged to register their children for FBCL's annual "Summer Reading Challenge."

Children from infancy through school-age earn rewards for the number of books they read (or are read to them) during the summer.

Parents can register their child for the Summer Reading Challenge by going to the FBCL website, clicking on the "SRC Sign-Up" image, and using the link for the Beanstack app to sign up.

Easy-to-use online reading logs are available.

For more information, see the Fort Bend County Libraries website (www.fortbend.lib.tx.us), or call the library system's Communications Office (281-633-4734).

Get Your Vehicle SUMMER READY!

Davis Bros. Auto Supply#2

Order Online or Stop by for the Best Customer Service in Town!

www.davisbros2.com

Delivery & Curbside Pick Up! *Call for Details.

Auto Parts You Can Count On

MON - FRI 7:30 - 6 • SAT 7:30 - 5 • CLOSED SUNDAY

2811 Ave. H, Rosenberg, TX 281-232-7707

The Burger Barn
The Best Burgers & Wings in Town!

Over 25 Different Burgers

FRESH CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF NEVER FROZEN

10% OFF *
*Sun - Thu One Coupon Only Other Restrictions Apply

1101 Damon St. Rosenberg, TX 281-239-7800 www.TheBurgerBarn.net

HOT SUMMER DEALS

CASH SPECIALS \$2,995 & up
While supplies last.

2ND OR 3RD CHANCE FINANCE AND NO CREDIT, NO PROBLEM

WE CAN FINANCE YOU GUARANTEED!

Mike Espinoza 832.713.5446
Raymond Nanez 832.647.0212

SE HABLA ESPAÑOL FREE POPCORN!

2001 1st St. Rosenberg, TX 77471

www.MillenniumMotorSalesTx.com