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"BILL" PICKETT
Oklahoma Half-Breed Cowboy

HAND to HORN BATTLE with an ENRAGED BULL

HERE Is Told in Full, for the First Time, the Story of "Bill" Pickett's Life and Death Struggle in a Mexican Arena, Bombarded the While with Missiles Thrown by Hostile Spectators

The Bull Hesitated for One Providential Moment . . . It Saved Both Men

BY W. C. THOMPSON.

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IT will come as a surprise to the people of this country to learn that an American is the only man in the history of bull fighting who ever battled, bare handed and unaided, with a Spanish bull; that the encounter took place before twenty-five thousand persons in the Mexico City arena; that all the southern republics are still angrily discussing the unprecedented event, and that the native newspapers published pages in text and pictures.

No sooner had Bill Pickett, an Oklahoma halfbreed cowboy, performed the feat and been dragged to safety from a fusillade of missiles hurled by the enraged Mexican onlookers than every outlet of news was closed. Neither by word of mouth, by telegraph nor by mail was news permitted to be carried outside of Mexico that an American had given a demonstration of nerve, courage, strength and daring that had belittled the boasted prowess of every professional toreador and that his achievement had nearly cost him his life at the hands of the mob.

But in spite of all the precautions, bit by bit the story has sifted into America. Here and there a picture or a hint of the amazing combat has appeared, but the full tale in all its splendid horror never before has been told exactly as it occurred.

The narrative is true in all its details. If you seek corroboration I commend the pages of El Imparcial, El Diario, El Tiempo, El Heraldo or any and all Mexican newspapers up to and including December 24, 1909. After that date they give no inkling of the event that for days had been their conspicuous sensation. Or interrogate the bull fight devotees even as far north as the Juarez or Laredo arenas. They'll shake their fists and hiss their abomination of the name of Pickett and all the national shame it recalls. Question one of the forty thousand American residents of the City of Mexico and the glorious memory of it will momentarily submerge even the omnipresent, all pervading dread of a revolution and its possible consequences to the colony. And that's some emotion, for I don't believe there's one of them who has neglected secret arrangements for sale and hurried flight if the dreaded clash of arms is heard.

Pickett is a strapping cowboy, whose mother was a full blood Choctaw Indian and father a mixture of the white, Indian and African races. He's commonly known in the Southwest as "the dusky demon." On the New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma ranches they never tire of the stories of his reckless daring with wild horses and cattle. Never has he failed to respond with grinning alacrity to the challenge of the rough and ready Westerner who vowed he could never subdue this man killing horse or wrestle and throw that murderous steer. Once they pitted him at the El Paso fair against a furious elk, with a tremendous sweep of snaggy, bladed horns and strong enough in its forefeet to have killed him with a single stroke, Pickett threw the creature on its back in less than ten minutes and emerged from the combat unscathed. Then the Southwest decided that the four footed herbivorous beast who could beat the man in a stand up fight didn't exist, and it was with this conviction that we penetrated Mexico.

Pickett's exhibition of daredevilry with the tent show that had invaded Mexico consisted of a mad scamper, a-horse, in chase of a Texas steer, a midair leap from the saddle of the galloping horse to the horns of the still fleeing quarry and a struggle for supremacy which inevitably ended in the overturning of the steer. The feat is not an uncommon one at prairie gatherings, but it was new to the Mexicans. It was the only American achievement they had ever seen that had anything at all in common, even vaguely, with their own beloved bull fighting. One afternoon the bull fighters came in a body to watch. They laughed contemptuously.

Joe Miller, one of three brothers who own the big 101 Ranch of Oklahoma, happened to also own half of the show. That night he was at the Café Colon, the rendezvous of the bull fighters, announcing his belief that for fun or money none of the fraternity would dare perform the trick. Bienvenida, famous for his eye and stroke, as cunningly dexterous and deadly a matador as Spain or Mexico ever produced, accepted the challenge. He would be at the scene at ten o'clock the following morning and give the boasting Americans a lesson in grace, courage and skill as applied to the subjugation of the bovine species. Señor Louis F. Correa, of the Mexican Herald, was the interpreter at the interview, and the details were duly chronicled the next morning in that publication and in the native contemporaries.

Well, Bienvenida didn't show up. No word of explanation or apology came from him. Two score guests waited and wondered. We despatched a messenger to his hotel. There lolled Bienvenida, rather shame faced and languidly regretful that he had been forbidden by the bull ring authorities under their contract with him from risking his valuable boues and body outside the national arena!

If we'd only been content with this moral triumph—for we were convinced that Bienvenida had deliberately shown the coward's white feather and so publicly expressed our exultation—the most exciting chapter in the history of the Mexican bull ring would never have been written. But Joe Miller's glee knew no bounds and his Americanism was running rampant. To the Café Colon he and Señor Correa hurried again, and the dumfounded bull fighters and their assembled worshippers heard him propose to match Pickett, bare handed and unaided, against the most blood hungry, man hating, fighting bull the republic could provide. Incidentally, I may mention that he hadn't ever consulted Pickett in the matter!

The apparent superiative folly of the proposition and why to the Mexican mind its execution meant the sure, speedy and sickening death of the luckless man may not be obvious to the American unfamiliar with the bull ring and its practices. I'll explain.

You see, in the combats as professionally provided for the entertainment of the public the bull fighter relies upon his quickness of eye and foot. He evades the mad rushes of his antagonist, never grapples. The fight has been described as a tragedy in three acts. The picadores, mounted on worthless, blindfolded horses, first receive the charges of the bull with lances. Whenever a horse is wounded the rider betakes himself to flight, and when either this happens or a picador is thrown the chulos rush in and attract the animal from his prey by their red cloaks, saving themselves, if need be, by leaping over the palisade which encloses the arena.

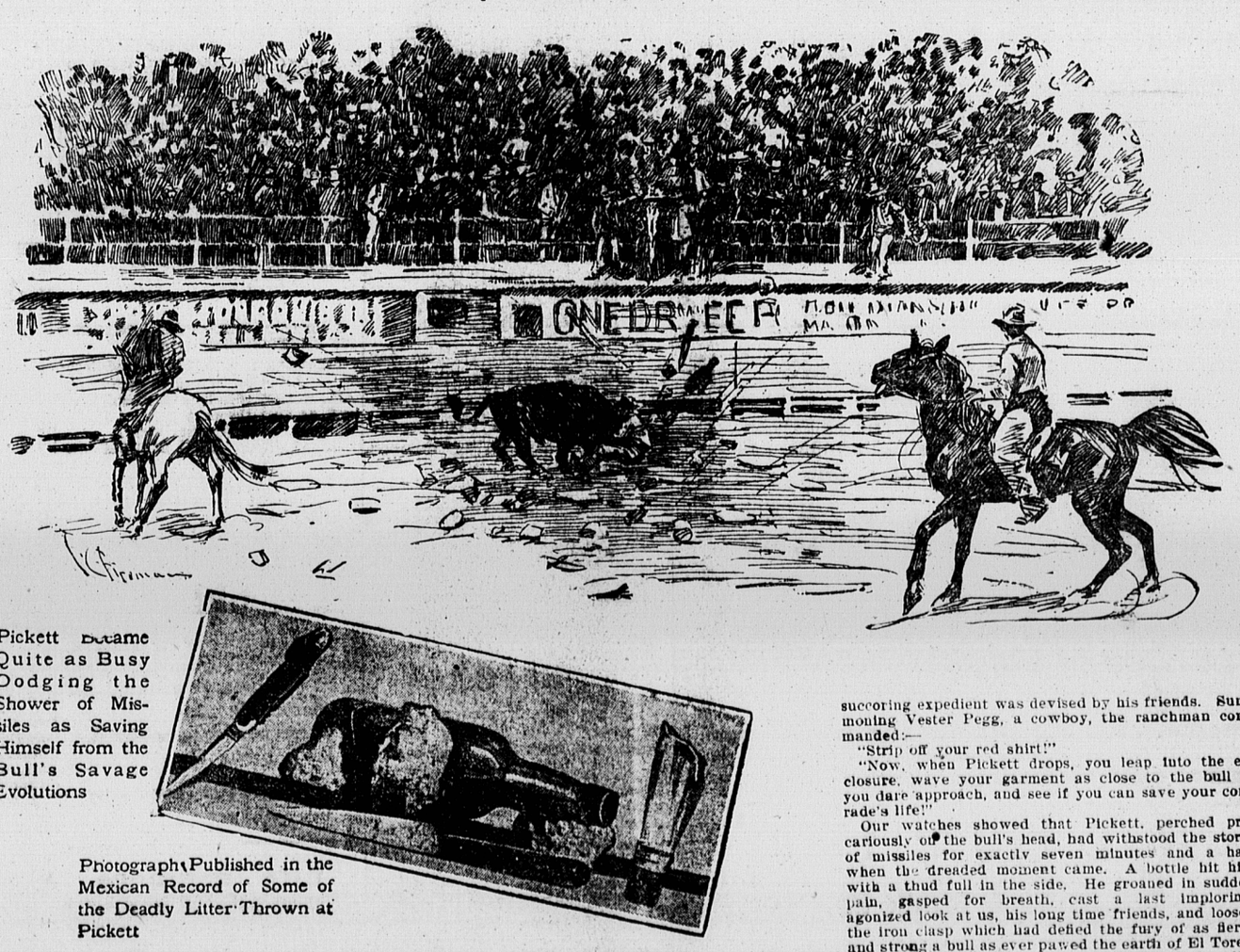
When the bull has been roused to frenzied fury by the proddings the picadores are replaced by the chulos, who bring with them the banderillas, barbed darts which they drive into the beast's shoulder. Then the matador enters to complete the tragic business. The bull is weak from loss of blood and bewildered, but still fierce and active. In his right hand this chief combatant holds a naked sword; in his left the muleta, a stick with a piece of scarlet silk attached. As soon as the bull's eyes catch the muleta he rushes blindly at it, the matador dodges nimbly, dexterously plunges the sword into the spine and the animal drops dead at his feet.

The bull fighters thus, you will understand, perform their deadly work at a distance from the four footed foe. Never would one of them dare to even lay hands on a bull. They save their precious lives by their remarkable agility in evading the animal's furious assaults. Moreover, the brandished cloth, the color of which the bull has been taught from infancy to detest, is the target of attack, not the man who flourishes it and springs aside. A bull, too, closes his eyes when he charges. A steer doesn't. Few not intimately familiar with bovine habits know this.

To return to Joe Miller and his cowboy, Pickett, the gay Mexican capital was immediately agog with the story of the audacious challenge. The bull fighters laughed uproariously. The Mexican newspapers and the Mexican public demanded that the Americans make good. If Pickett wanted to sacrifice himself upon the altar of American egotism let him do it. They would turn out in force to witness the "fun," they promised, for human death in the bull ring affords only hereditary amusement to the patrons of the "sport."

Señor Rivero, impresario of El Toreo, the big new steel and concrete bull ring, promptly gave permission to hold the encounter there, and Mr. Miller delegated him to select the animal against which the cowboy should be pitted. He named Bonito, a great, fierce, coal black bull, who had once been loosed in the arena, who had killed two men and half a dozen horses, and who had been spared the death thrust upon the entreaties of the spectators. So fierce and strong a bull, they cried, should not suffer an inglorious death. The tribute was one paid not more than once or twice before or since in the history of Mexican bull fighting. Bonito was returned to the corrals, and there he remains to this day, pawing the ground ceaselessly and bellowing his unabated longing to fight and kill.

This, then, was the lamblike creature selected to gore the American to death and fling the lifeless body triumphantly in the air. A rare afternoon's entertainment, Mexico City agreed. Bienvenida accelerated public anticipation by publishing over his signature in the newspapers "El entierro de este Pickett sera el segundo acto de este drama," whose free translation is, "Pickett's funeral will follow his foolhardiness."



Pickett Became Quite as Busy Dodging the Shower of Missiles as Saving Himself from the Bull's Savage Evolutions

Photograph Published in the Mexican Record of Some of the Deadly Litter Thrown at Pickett

How much effect the dire prediction had upon the "dusky demon" may be gained from the fact that we persuaded him with difficulty from attending a dance the night before the battle which would have kept him awake until daybreak. Instead, we directed his reluctant steps to the Hotel St. Francis and saw to it that he was securely locked in a room for the night.

The largest crowd ever assembled in El Toreo was there to view the spectacle. Figures showed an attendance of more than twenty-five thousand persons, and probably not one hoped or expected that Pickett would leave the arena alive. Every visitor to Mexico knows that the native has no love for Americans. Added to this pervading general hostility was the knowledge that Pickett's successful accomplishment of his hand to horn combat would shame the efforts of every toreador. We American circus people, several hundred strong, escorted Pickett to the bull ring. Señor Rivero, impresario, and Señor Bravo, presidente, received us. Both were obviously apprehensive. They told us afterward that they had felt certain that Pickett would lose courage at the last moment and refuse to chance his life. But the cowboy was coolly confident and eager for the fray. Never did man so impress me with the virtue of physical courage and a contempt of death.

Then, while the crowd was pouring into the enclosure, came the staggering news that the Governor of the federal district had forbidden the battle. A delegation of American women, residents of the city, had waited upon him at noon and protested in the name of humanity, arguing that the outcome of the affair would inevitably be the death of the brave but rash Oklahoman. They had earlier enlisted the influence and assistance of powerful American officials and business men, which the Governor could not resist, and he had grudgingly revoked the permission given with alacrity several days before.

The bull ring managers, much relieved at their escape from the awkward position in which they found themselves, attempted to promptly announce the cancellation and dismiss the spectators, but Mr. Miller, schooled and ready witted in dire exigencies, would not agree.

"The Governor has forbidden Pickett to fight Bonito," he affirmed quickly, "but you have other bulls just as savage. Pickett will meet any one of them you pick."

A new license was in our hands before the nonplussed impresario and presidente could frame other excuses, and while the well meaning American women complacently congratulated themselves in their homes preparations for the cruel struggle went on apace.

As a substitute bull M. Rivero stipulated Frijoli Chiquita (Little Beans), fully as wild, wary and wicked a creature as Bonito, and awaiting his call to combat in El Toreo stalls. The bull was bred on the famous Tepeyahualeo granaderia. His short, thick, powerful neck commended him to the experienced impresario even more forcibly than Bonito, for it would be upon the neck and horns that Pickett would exert his strength to throw the beast if ever he succeeded in getting a hold.

Meanwhile an unfair advantage of us was being taken in the arena. A twenty foot board was displayed before the gaze of the partisan spectators bearing in Spanish this announcement:—"By request Bonito has been withdrawn and another bull substituted." The implication, of course, was that we had made the request in fear of Bonito's prowess. The crowd howled its rage and derision, which was little assuaged when we discovered the imposition and posted a second bulletin with the emphatic declaration that by order of the authorities Bonito would not appear, and that the bull ring impresario had selected Frijoli Chiquita as quite as worthy a combatant.

We had planned to present our regular circus tournament as a preliminary to the fight between man and bull, but the tremendous audience would not have it so. They demanded "El feroz fenomeno negro de Oklahoma!" The mad lust for bull ring blood and battle, come to them through generations, was upon them. Soon their attitude became menacing and we desisted.

A mob of twenty-five thousand frenzied, hostile Mexicans, many of them irresponsible peons, is not a force to wittingly antagonize. We retired behind the barriers and the "Gran Lucha Taurina-Humana" was announced.

There is no doubt that Pickett had underestimated the awful danger of his undertaking. His victories in the American Southwest had made him overconfident of his prowess. He had never even seen a Spanish fighting bull, I am told, and in his mind had likened the big bellowing monsters, quivering with life and strength and rage, unto the vicious Texas steers which he had so often conquered. Frijoli Chiquita's size and proclivities were as much like his bovine American brothers' as a wildcat is like a chipmunk. And while the cowboy was saddling his horse and receiving from us worthless suggestions as to the tactics to employ half a dozen El Toreo vaqueros were tormenting and torturing the bull in the effort to arouse him to the extreme pitch of man hating fury.

Pickett's entrance into the enclosure received mingled hisses and cheers; then a wild tumult of acclaim as a gate was thrown open and Frijoli Chiquita dashed upon the scene, sighted Pickett and made for him with the power and speed of a runaway locomotive. The man's face blanched momentarily; for the first time he fully realized the peril of his position and the overwhelming odds against him in a fight for life with this bovine demon. But every nerve was steady, every muscle ready and all the consummate craft and cunning of his calling summoned as he awaited the irresistible onslaught. Nor less prepared was Spradley, the wary cow pony he bestrode, learned by long, stern experience on the prairies to know the moods and moves of cattle as a shepherd dog knows his sheep. Never before had such a terrifying thing hurled itself toward Spradley, but the shock of it didn't bewilder him.

Like a flash he dodged and implanted his hind hoofs with all his strength full on the charging bull's side. Back rushed the bull, not at all disconcerted, and the attack was too suddenly renewed for defence or evasion. The cruel, needle pointed horns penetrated the helpless horse's shoulder. As they withdrew, blood covered, Pickett leaped between them to the bull's head and clasped his arms around the neck.

This was the expected moment that had drawn twenty-five thousand Mexicans to El Toreo that afternoon. Experts had conceded that the wonderfully lithe and agile American might, perhaps, secure a hold on the bull, but never, they declared, could he maintain that hold for half a minute. One toss of the powerful head would dislodge him and then the end would be a matter of seconds, as he lay prostrate and exhausted.

It looked to me as if every man, woman and child was on his or her feet, straining for a clear view of the grewsome spectacle the Mexican mind had fondly pictured. Not a sound they uttered, but a concentrated paean of wild exultation was waiting on their lips.

But down in the arena the unexpected—no, the supposedly impossible—was happening. The dreaded bull was frantically tossing his head with all his great strength, bellowing his rage and bewilderment, pirouetting in dizzy circles, and there still dangled Pickett, his bearlike hug unshaken and he clinging like a burr. Never before had such disrepute been cast upon the noble sport of bull fighting. How infantile the strength, how clumsy the skill, how feeble the courage of the adored toreadors in comparison with the exhibition being given by this hated stranger from the north! A shout of anger at the ignominious sight swept through the seats and some one cried in Spanish:—"Remember Bienvenida's words, Pickett's funeral will follow foolhardiness!" And then pandemonium broke loose.

Pickett was meanwhile giving a continuous and convincing demonstration that Frijoli Chiquita had met his human match. Not only could the bull not toss or trample or otherwise harm his antagonist, but the cowboy actually had the beast tottering on his feet. The haughty, shaggy head was aslant under the force exerted upon the horns by the swinging man. The hold was Pickett's favorite and never before had four footed creature withstood it.

Whether Frijoli Chiquita would have been added as a historic victim of the Oklahoma man's prowess will ever remain a moot question. A chair cushion, thrown with accurate aim and judgment, struck him full in the face. A great chorus of approval and a fusillade of the canvas missiles followed. Pickett became quite as busy dodging the shower as saving himself from the bull's savage evolutions.

The some one shied a stone. It hit the luckless, beseiged man on the cheek and drew a stream of blood. It seemed then as if every person in the seats became a participator in the ensuing shameful proceedings. Fruit, bottles, canes, and even opened knives fell upon the brave cowboy who was battling for his life, single handed, with that blood hungry bull. Not one person in that great hostile throng lifted hand or voice in protest or defence. I am not exaggerating. The arena was bedded with weapons. The Mexican Record, next day, published a photograph of the deadly litter, and even the instantaneous picture in El Imparcial, the government organ, plainly showed the missiles on their course.

You can imagine the helpless wrath of us handful of Americans. We appealed frantically to the police. They laughed in our faces. Pickett's cowboy friends pleaded with Mr. Miller for permission to retaliate with American cartridges, but the ranchman forbade. He and the wiser heads knew one wholesale extermination would have followed. Our hats were reeking with expectorations from the mouths of the human brutes over our heads above the barrier. Pickett was no longer on the offensive and weakening fast. It seemed inevitable that his funeral would take place in Mexico, after all, as Bienvenida had promised. Once his hold relaxed the furious foe would have him at his mercy and gore him to death.

In all that awful bedlam Joe Miller alone kept his wits. He realized that sooner or later Pickett would be desperately wounded by a missile and that his end would come with shuddering suddenness unless some succoring expedient was devised by his friends. Summoning Vester Pegg, a cowboy, the ranchman commanded:—

"Strip off your red shirt!"

"Now, when Pickett drops, you leap into the enclosure, wave your garment as close to the bull as you dare approach, and see if you can save your comrade's life!"

Our watches showed that Pickett, perched precariously on the bull's head, had withstood the storm of missiles for exactly seven minutes and a half when the dreaded moment came. A bottle hit him with a thud full in the side. He groaned in sudden pain, gasped for breath, cast a last imploring, agonized look at us, his long time friends, and loosed the iron clasp which had defied the fury of as fierce and strong a bull as ever pawed the earth of El Toreo. Frijoli Chiquita, the incarnation of brute ferocity, relieved of the maddening burden, lowered his horns for the death thrusts. Pickett lay a limp and writhing form almost under the animal's nose. The Mexicans yelled their joy.

Over the barrier at one bound hurdled a half naked figure. The bull glimpsed it even more quickly than the astonished and dismayed human audience, for the hated color red was being brandished almost in Frijoli Chiquita's face. Vester Pegg was obeying orders in the desperate emergency with hazardous implicity. The bull hesitated for one providential moment whether to turn upon the insolent newcomer or to vent his vengeance upon his helpless and fallen adversary. Short as was the respite it saved both men. Pickett staggered to his feet, scrambled groggily to the barricade and our outstretched hands dragged him to safety. Pegg retreated precipitately and beat the bull to succor by a foot. Frijoli Chiquita, doubly robbed of prey, bellowed his impotent rage and hatred to an empty arena.

So ended the only struggle of its kind that ever has or probably ever will take place. The tumult over the unexpected deliverance was, of course, appalling. We took refuge behind iron gates in one corner of El Toreo and remained concealed for two hours. The Governor then sent two hundred mounted soldiers to the scene. They dispersed the more violent of the spectators who remained, threatening our safety, and escorted us back to our tents. There were small demonstrations against us that night at our quarters on the Paseo de la Reforma, but in twenty-four hours the hotheads had cooled. The feeling against Pickett personally remained bitter, however, and he did not again make public appearance.