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London Harness: Legendary Black Cowboy

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LONDON HARNESS
Courtesy Emporia Gazette

London Harness: Legendary Black Cowboy

Compared to other residents of the Dunlap community, and certainly compared to any one person in the community, much has been written about London Harness. Newspaper articles and books have told the “story of his life,” so we know without ever having met him that his grandparents were slaves and that they came out west and settled in Morris and Lyon counties as landowners.



That at a very early age London was a cowboy, could break horses not just for himself to ride, but for others too. That he rode over pastures all over this part of the state herding and gathering cows. That London and his wife, Anna, made what might be to some of us a hardscrabble life for many years together. All that took place before I ever met him.

London was past fifty in 1959 when our

family bought and moved to a farm just east of his. Working in Emporia, I thought I had good reasons not to neighbor much with any of the people living nearby. Some called, some didn't. After a few years, one day our son ran to me crying, “Mama, Mama, there's a man coming down the road on a horse!” This would become the mental picture that appears when I think about him. You know how most people

bounce in the saddle? London did not bounce, he and the horse and saddle moved together as one. They were in a slow trot, rider not slouched but upright, on their way home, probably had been helping a neighbor to the east with some cattle. Something I learned about London, his wife Anna, and later their daughter Janetta when I got to know her, and then their son Raymond--they wasted nothing. Not effort, money, garden produce, nothing. So why put the horse into a "gettin' home" gear?

One winter a few years later, London needed cataract surgery and my husband Clayton, with our pre-schooler Jordan in tow, went over every day to feed London's cows. Jordan got to stay in the house with Anna and get spoiled. London slowed down after that and I got to know them both. I was always impressed with how much London could remember about the families that had lived in our community, right down each road and on both sides, maybe on forty acres, maybe more, the Worcesters, the Millers, the Sowerses, the Burri's, all

in that general vicinity but now so few, the old foundations and a fallen-down shed or barn where a house and family had been. My regret is I just listened, maybe even half-listened, and when in the early 1990s it finally dawned on me I should be recording this, I didn't have much time.

London was the Great Describer. Emancipation Day at the height of Dunlap's "golden" era was important to London. He talked about going to town to celebrate. When I asked what time he came home that night, he gave out that cackle of his and said not that night, "next day." People came to the celebration by train, horse-drawn wagon, horseback, early auto, and, like London, they walked. London could describe each and every one. The Emancipation Day outfit for the women was "a white dress with a blue sash around the waist." The Sowers sisters walking to church in Dunlap wore "flowered dresses with long skirts that fluttered in the wind."

After marrying Anna Chaves,



EMANCIPATION DAY CELEBRATION, 1900

Courtesy Joan Lee and Juanita Elldred

originally from the Junction City area, attending or hosting the Chaves reunion was an important event for London and Anna who kept meticulous notes on attendance and food.

London told of Hank and Clara Burri Dohring, who lived where we live in the thirties, hearing a loud party across the creek on the Bridges' place. Finally they were overcome with curiosity and decided they would sneak around by the road and come in from the east and see what was

going on. They were spotted, and not knowing who they were a gunshot from the party went off in the air. London said, "Hank beat Clara home, he did."

A lot has been written about how hard times were for London and Anna, and how they persevered by raising a garden to feed their family and selling eggs to buy things they couldn't raise. But those stories don't tell it all. London was not a saint, and not only that, he was more than a little



THE SUMMER FAMILY
Maternal Grandparents of London Harness
Kansas State Historical Society

superstitious. The man who built our house, Roy Blair, told of using a little Ford tractor while he and London were building fence and sharing a bottle of whiskey. Roy had on a ball cap (something I can't remember London ever wearing) when the tractor lurched and threw his cap off. At that moment London looked down and saw the rear tire run over the cap and thought Roy's head was still in the cap and he had killed Roy. London probably got real sober real fast. Another time, Clayton

was with London and a group of riders going across a pasture when the riders in front went over a sharp knoll. London stopped and didn't want to proceed believing the riders had been spirited away. Then they had a good laugh when the others reappeared.

Anna was particularly bothered by a big black snake that kept slithering up on the back step. By the time London got his gun, the snake was back in his hole. London told me he finally got tired of it and went out the front door, which

was rarely used, to go around the house and "got him."

After Anna's death in 1986 and despite his loneliness, London still went to church and to town for one of his favorite foods, a chicken-fried steak. And wherever he went—Bluestem Farm Supply or Price Chopper—when people saw that silver-belly Stetson, they migrated over to him to talk and listen. Both London and Anna had specific sets of clothing for certain occasions, be it work, town, church. Inside on the back porch on top of the freezer were London's leather work gloves. He had a pair of boots for work and a pair for "good." It was the good boots with the pointed toes that were eventually his downfall. I told him he was vain and he giggled even though he was by that time in pain from wearing the boots which caused him to have to have a toe removed, something that would not heal, and made walking so hard. On my way home from work each night, I stopped to see him and to feed his dog. Often he was playing tapes of friends and relatives singing wonderful

gospel songs. His health did not improve, and one night I arrived to find him out by the trash barrel on the ground. When he recovered he wore the alarm system connected to Newman Hospital, and they called one evening to say he was on the floor in trouble. Another neighbor came and together we got him to the hospital. After his hospital stay he was in a nursing home until his death. Through all this, he was London. He could laugh at life and what it had given him. He had his memories. Lots of them were good: his family, his horses, his friends. And he was always ready to go to the next adventure, and then tell you all about it.

Pat Finney was born in Nebraska and moved to Americus, Kansas, after high school in Iowa. She graduated from Emporia State University with a major in Business Administration and minor in Public Administration before graduating from the Washburn University School of Law. Retired now from Farmers and Drovers Bank, she lives in rural Dunlap, Kansas, with her husband Clayton. Their son and daughter-in-law live on the former London and Anna Harness farm.