

# Myrtis Dightman, SR. the man behind the Crockett, Texas Rodeo and Trailride

Cover Story

Crockett, TX. - Trailrides and local rodeos have been very popular around East Texas with black cowboys and cowgirls since the 1980s.

You won't find black cowboys in Hollywood's old Western movies, except maybe as slaves. You won't find them in history books either. They are the black cowboys of the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s. From the plantations of the South to the plains of Texas, black cowboys made their mark on the cattle industry and rodeos of our nation.

As early as 1825, the Mexican government gave grants to colonists promising to raise cattle on the land. Plantation owners were enticed to come to East Texas in hopes of becoming wealthy. These immigrants came with their wives, children and slaves.

Between 5,000 and 8,000 black cowboys, mostly ex-slaves, are said to have ridden the cattle trails and helped maintained ranches between 1866-1896.

Myrtis Dightman, Sr. of Houston, formerly of Crockett, Texas is a true blue cowboy at heart and spirit, who followed in the footsteps of the early black cowboys. Having qualified for the National Rodeo Finals in 1966, he blazed a trail to the National Rodeo for the black cowboy.

On Labor Day weekend, Saturday September 1, hundreds of Crockett citizens and people from around the state took part in celebrating the nineteenth annual Myrtis Dightman Rodeo. The Rodeo not only celebrates Myrtis Dightman's place in history, but it provides family entertainment and the opportunity for cowboys of today to showcase their skills in riding, roping, steer wrestling and barrel racing.

Myrtis' parents Ada Lee and O. D. Dightman raised him on a ranch. He attended school in Crockett and learned the ins and outs of ranching from O. D. as he worked beside

him on the ranch. In the 1950's he moved to Houston to find a job. Each year he noticed rodeos came to town. He noticed there were never any black cowboys that participated in those rodeos. It bothered him so much that he went to the organizer of one of the rodeos and questioned him. He was told, "You can participate in the rodeo, but the white guys won't like it."

You will be called dirty names and they will mistreat you. "What you should do is start your own rodeo".

So, along with his longtime friend, James Francis, in 1957 Myrtis went to the administrators of Prairie View A & M University, told them his concerns and asked for help. They agreed to help him under one condition, that he would never have alcohol on the campus. The black rodeo and trail rides were organized and became a part of activities held at Prairie View. It was soon taken to Houston. One of the parade routes centered around Shepard Street and Washington Avenue to Memorial Park. Myrtis watched Rodeos on television and never saw black cowboys. Again, this bothered him. "I only

wanted to show the world and other black cowboys that we could be successful in the Rodeo arena",

Mr. Dightman said. "The judges will not give you the score you deserve.

They will treat you unfairly and mark you down," he was told by his friend Freddie. Against the advice of friends, Myrtis set his heart on competitions that would get him to the National Rodeo. He was a diesel truck driver, but he started fighting bulls as a rodeo clown. In 1961 he began riding bulls. It was difficult, because he never got the score to place.



Rider prepares to rope, throw and tie calf.

He would alternate between riding bulls and driving truck. Soon after entering the arena, Dightman earned the respect of cowboys of all races.

Finally, in 1964 he placed 15th. In 1966, he became the first black cowboy to qualify for the National Finals Rodeo. In 1967 he finished third in Bull Riding World Standings. He went seven times to the National Rodeo. When he was in California he was approached by Charlie Sampson wanting him to teach him to ride bulls. The first time Dightman told him to finish school, then he would help him. He became Charlie's mentor, teaching him what he knew. When he became famous, Myrtis received a call to come to California to pull Charlie's rope in championship competition.



Myrtis Dightman, Jr. and J. T. Thomas deo, he worried more about Brahma

During the era of segregation he often slept in his car rather than risk being turned away from hotels. In the dangerous world of professional rodeo,

Bulls than he did racial prejudice. In 1982, Charlie Sampson became the first Black Cowboy to win a world championship. It was fitting that Myrtis was one of the first to offer his hand in congratulations. Dightman wasn't the first black cowboy to compete in the R. C. A., but he was the first serious contender for the world title.

Myrtis Dightman was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1997, the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2001, and the Ring of Honor at the 2003 PBR Ford Built Tough World Finals in Las Vegas. He has one movie to his credit for acting in "J. W. Coop" starring Cliff Roberson, John Crawford and Christina Ferrare.

Myrtis has five children and grandchildren. His mother, Ada Lee, still lives in Crockett and he still has three sisters Earlie Mae Martin, Lillian Bell and Nannie Francis. He comes to Crockett every two weeks to visit family and take care of the Dightman Ranch. More than 19 years ago he brought the rodeo to Crockett. "It was difficult to find a place to hold it the first time", Mr. Dightman stated, "but after the permit holders checked me out and found what my record looked like, the permit was issued and we have had no problems since. I do start in a timely manner each year by taking care of the necessary things to hold the parade and rodeo."

September 1, 2007 The 19th Annual Labor Day Weekend Myrtis Dightman, Sr. Rodeo was held at the Porth Agriculture Indoor Arena in Crockett with participants from around the states and fans filling every section.

The world's only living Black National Cowboy Hall of Fame inductee was there to mingle with fans and participants and to enjoy the day. He spends his Sundays driving the church bus for Rev. Ed Young at Second Baptist Church, Houston and his days enjoying his buddies and of course horses, at J. W. Marshall's Big Ten Ranch in Houston, Texas.