

[Johanna July--Indian Woman Horsebreaker]

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by

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Indians - Tribal remnants 223 KINNEY COUNTY, DISTRICT #15

JOHANNA JULY — INDIAN WOMAN HORSEBREAKER

One of the most interesting characters of the so-called Seminole tribe to ever cross the border from Mexico was Johanna July, a horsebreaker. She came across to Eagle Pass with her family as members of the band who signed a contract in '71 with Major Perry of the U. S. Army to help clear the Texas side of the Rio Grande of depredating Indians.

This tribe of Seminole Indians was a mixture of the Seminole Indians with the Negro. Fleeing from Florida after the Seminole War, a number of Negro slaves came with the Indians into Mexico. After crossing into Mexico they became so thorough in clearing their territory of the marauders, their fame spread into the U.S. which prompted the invitation from the army. They were first brought across the Rio Grande to Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass, then to Fort Clark at Brackettville, where a tract of land was assigned them to live on adjoining the post.

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Johanna was a colorful girl, whose Indian blood was dominant. Her love of horses, her wily and daring ways, her bright dresses and ornaments were that of an Indian. Her quick, darting eyes, aquiline nose, thin lips and high cheek bones showed more Indian blood than Negro.

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Her horsemanship was her pride. Being practically forced into the job of breaking horses after her father died and her brother “runned away,” Johanna lived the life of a carefree Indian boy. She scorned a saddle, preferring to ride bareback and sideways.

“I couldn't ride a hoss like dey do dese days,” she said. “I couldn't straddle 'em. I didn't use no bridle either, just a rope around deir necks and looped over de nose. We called it a 'nosin.' — same as a half-hitch. Old man Adam Wilson learned me how to ride. He was an old scout. Right today I don't like a saddle an' I don't like shoes. I can sure get over de ground barefooted.”

As a girl, Johanna was not required to do a woman's work about the place. Her meals were always ready for her and her clothes were washed. Her job was to break horses, take them to water, cut grass for them, look after the other stock and ride, ride, ride.

Dressed in a bright homespun dress, ropes of beads around her slender neck, long gold earrings nearly touching her shoulders, her hair in thick, black braids and her feet bare, she flashed among her horses like a bright bird, soothing them with a masterful hand and soft words. A shuck cigarette of Black Horse tobacco between her lips, Johanna rode as well as a boy, her eye always quick and her senses alert.

The horses were there to break and Johanna, being dextrous and nimble, was quite able to accomplish the task, though she devised her own means of doing so.

“I could break a hoss myself, me and my Lawd,” she declared 3 soberly. “Many a narrow scrape I've been through wid hosses and mules. I'll tell you how I broke my hosses. I

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would pull off my clothes and get into de clothes I intended to bathe in and I would lead 'em right into de Rio Grande and keep 'em in dere till dey got pretty well worried. When dey was wild, wild, I would lead 'im down to de river and get 'im out in water where he couldn't stan' up and I would swim up and get 'im by de mane an' ease up on 'im. He couldn't pitch and when I did let 'im out of dat deep water he didn't want to pitch. Sometimes dey wasn't so wore out an' would take a runnin' spree wid me when dey got out in shallow water where dey could get deir feet on de ground, and dey would run clear up into de corral. But I was young and I was havin' a good time.

“I was used to hard ridin'. I've been chased by de Indians. One day it was cloudy and I went out to cut hey for de hosses, and as de Lawd should have it, I got so sleepy I said, 'Suppose I lay down here an' take myself a nap an' den finish cuttin, my hay,' but I thought 'No, I better go on and cut my hay,' an' about den, I seen de hosses gettin' nervous an' dey had deir ears up lookin' at somet'ing an' actin' scared. I had a big bay an' I could call 'im up to me so I hollered to 'im, 'Come Bill, come Bill!' An' all de hosses come runnin'. I jumped on a little gray hoss named Charley, an' when I cut my eye aroun' here come a Indian in full gallop, leanin' over on his hoss, en' I started runnin' an' run clear by de army post, me and all dem hosses. The post sent the scout out and dey took up de trail. Dey was two Indians an' dey followed 'em clear into Mexico and brought 'em back. But dat didn't break me. I was always out wid dem hosses.”

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Johanna knew nothing of housekeeping, sewing or cooking, when, at eighteen, she married a Seminole scout named Lesley. Her life had been as free and untamed as a bird's. She could judge a horse's age, endurance and speed, she knew where the eagles nested and the coyote kept her whelps and she could point out the dark pools where the yellow cat fed in the Rio Grande.

But that wasn't the knowledge she needed when she married the scout who brought her to live at Fort Clark away from the Rio Grande and her horses. However, she tried hard

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to be a dutiful wife. There were days when she attempted to sew and the thread knotted, the material was cut wrong and the whole garment wouldn't fit. She scorched her beans and rice, got the stew too dry and forgot to put the corn to soak. The husband came in with harsh words, and a hard fist. Instead of the kindness she had known, she was introduced to a life that seemed more like a prisoner's. At length, her tears dried and her cunning brain began to deliberate on escape. She was not capricious for life in the open had prepared her to face facts with an open mind, and her grief was genuine.

Thus, her fearlessness and endurance were to be put to the test. After a particularly stormy encounter with her husband one day, in which she felt that his cruelty had passed the limit of her endurance, she slipped quietly from the house and stole into a neighbor's field where a work horse was kept. Having no rope, she took a small, worn pocketknife she carried and cut strips of pita (Spanish dagger) into strings and made a rope. As she rode out from the post toward Eagle Pass where her mother was living, she heard the canon cannon fire at sunset.

"I couldn't get dat old pony out of a trot," she remembers, "and I rode dat forty-five miles dat night. As I got to Fort Duncan I heard de sentry call out, 'Four o'clock an' all is well!' I know I said to myself, 'All may be well, but I don't feel so well after dis ride!' I met two batches of men an' I guess dey tole I was a woman 'cause dey heard me talk. Dey tole me, 'Who comes dere?' and I said, 'Frien!' Den dey said, 'Whar you headed for?' and I tole 'em, 'Fort Duncan,' an' dey let me pass an' didn't offer to hurt me. I guess dey was rangers. De next bunch I met was about a mile from de fort. Dey didn't speak an' I didn't either.

"I never did go back to 'im. He come down dere three or four times to get me but I wouldn't go. He shot at me two different times but he missed me, den he tried to rope me, but de Lawd fixed it so my head was too low and de rope went over. I got to de brush an' he never could find me. He would have killed me, an' I knowed it!

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“After he died I married twice mo'. I helped my last husband break hosses an' mules. I 'member one bad mule. He was the meanest one I ever had any dealin's wid. He was 'hip-shotten.' I had to tie his good front leg to his good back leg an', don't you know, he'd catch me by de clothes and toss me and shake me if he could get hold of me. I never did break 'im, I got 'fraid of 'im. I've had some awful scrapes. I hunted and trapped wid my las' husband and sold many a hide. I could get out and cut a cord and a half of wood, easy. Down here on de Fadillas ranch I've had mules run away 6 wid me an' sometimes tear de wagon to pieces.

“My last husband has been dead eight years now. My first husband was so mean to me I suppose dat was why de Lawd fixed it so I didn't divo'ce 'im an' he didn't divo'ce me, an' now what little bread I'm gettin', I'm gettin' it right off of him.”

Johanna lives on a hill in the northeast part of Brackettville. She, like the others who were moved from the post, resents the government's having moved them from Fort Clark. With only two of the original scouts who signed the contract still living, and only three of the oldest woman who were wives or sisters of the first scouts, it would seem that the government had fulfilled its contract with them long and well.

Active and nimble at 77, Johanna moves about her small place on the hill, tending a garden, keeping house, gliding over the rocks barefooted and rolling her cigarettes with a steady hand.

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