

Henry Harris

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At the turn of the century, there were a lot of ranch horses and wild mustangs in Nevada, so the state had produced numerous good riders of green horses. Among the very best was a cowboy named Henry Harris. "If it has hair, Henry Harris can ride it," was the often-repeated compliment paid northern Nevada's top bronc rider. To be known as a good rider of unbroken horses was a common thing, but to be known as the best was an unusual mark of excellence. Besides his skill as a horseman, Henry Harris was a marked man on the sagebrush ranges because he was a black cowboy.

Henry was born in central Texas as the state struggled out of the post Civil War reconstruction era into the great range livestock boom. The son of a slave, he participated in the westward expansion of the livestock industry and played an important part in John Sparks' building of the largest ranch in the West.

John Sparks had extensive ranching and banking interest in Williamson County, Texas, where he maintained a residence after starting ranching operations in Nevada. On one of his trips back from Texas in 1885, Sparks brought with him 17-year-old Henry Harris to serve as a houseboy for his family at the H-D Ranch in Thousand Springs Creek Valley of Elko County. Henry was a wild, free-spirited teenager who proved more adept at riding and roping than being a valet.

Henry became a cowboy and by the time he reached his early twenties, a foreman for the firm of Sparks-Tinnin. At first, Henry was foreman of a crew of black cowboys at the Boar's Nest Ranch on Salmon Falls creek in extreme north-eastern Nevada.

If you travel in northeastern Nevada and south central Idaho and visit with the natives, the name of Henry Harris is bound to occur in conversations about the history of ranching in the area. These stories form an unwritten history of a most unique Nevada character. Almost all of the stories about Henry Harris deal with horses, because Henry was an expert in handling, breaking, shoeing, and doctoring horses.

A typical Henry Harris story concerns an incident during the fall roundup on Sparks-Harrell range late in the 1890's. The hard winter of 1889 and 1890 had ruined the firm of Sparks-Tinnin and John Sparks had formed a new firm with the Jasper Harrell family from California. Henry was in charge of the roundup, which was finding far too few steers branded with the Winecup and Shoesole brands of Sparks. One morning the young horse wrangler was having a hard time with his horse. Twice the horse bucked off the boy

before Henry jumped from his bedroll, pulled on his boots, and rode the horse in his red, long-handled underwear.

As the years passed, Henry Harris became well-known in northern Nevada and south central Idaho as a foreman; to the vaqueros, a mayordomo. There were other non-Spanish mayordomos, but Henry Harris went a step beyond and



Henry Harris. (Photograph courtesy of North Eastern Nevada Museum, Elko, Nevada.)

became known as an amansadore—the man who can handle horses. Few, if any other non-Spanish, achieved this status. To be an amansadore required continued demonstration of one's prowess with horses. As Henry grew older, there were always younger cowboys who doubted his skill and who created situations in which to challenge him.

One of these challenges involved a range horse called Ben, who was a great bucking horse. Cowboys did not care for Ben because he bucked with both hind legs off the ground in a pile-driving motion that tore bronc riders' kidneys. As each rider was piled, the legend grew that Ben was the horse that "could never be rode."

One summer, Ben drifted into the high country along upper Goose Creek, and Harrell cowboys corralled him. Sly comments were let slip, and wagers made that maybe Ben was the horse that Henry Harris could not ride. Henry refused to acknowledge the bait. In the pole corral where Ben was kept, there was a juniper post lean-to with a manger.

One day, when a good crowd of cowboys lined the fence discussing Ben, Henry slipped through the fence and quietly walked up to Ben; he grabbed a manehold and mounted bareback. Ben did not flex a muscle as he continued to eat meadow hay from the manger under the shed roof. After giving Ben a couple friendly pats on the rump, Henry dismounted and slipped back through the corral bars. If Ben had bucked, Henry would have been smashed through the roof of the lean-to. Henry probably gambled that the sheer audacity of his actions would confuse Ben's will to buck.

In 1901, John Sparks sold his ranching interest in northeastern Nevada to concentrate on his Alamo stock farm at Reno, before he was elected governor in 1902. Henry continued to work for Jasper and N.J. Harrell until 1908 when the ranches passed to the Vineyard Land and Livestock Company. Henry had a misunderstanding with Thomas Beason, the Vineyard superintendent in 1913, and spent the next 19 years with Louis Harrell, a nephew of Jasper Harrell.

A part of being foreman on a large Nevada ranch was hiring boys and making cowboys of them—sometimes that included the bosses' sons.

Newton and Andy Harrell grew up on their father's ranches where Henry Harris was foreman. As a small boy, Newton rode on a roundup with Henry. The foreman assigned Newton a single old cow, and told him to drive the cow to the end of a patch of willows, and wait for him to gather the cows on the other side of the creek. Newton drove the cow directly to the herd. When Henry arrived with a couple dozen cows, he gave young Newton a tongue-lashing. According to Henry, one cowboy would drive one cow, but two cowboys could drive a hundred cows. If you are going to be a cowboy, you must learn the etiquette!

Besides being an expert with horses, Henry learned to use the long, plaited lariats of the California vaqueros. A roping demonstration he participated in is still talked about in Elko County.

Tap Duncan, the other Sparks-Harrell foreman, and Henry were roping horses in the corrals at San Jacinto, Nevada. Both men were experts with rawhide ropes. The horses were forced through an open gate, one at a time, and the two foremen took turns roping them by the front feet and throwing them to the ground. Each toss was perfect, and as the day wore on, the cowboys could not help but admire the skill of their bosses, and began to offer wagers on who would miss first. Somehow, these two top ropers got out of phase, and both caught the same horse from opposite sides, flipped it over, and broke its neck. The two sheepish foremen were greeted with howls of laughter from the cowboys.

Henry never married. With boyish curiosity, the Harrell brothers asked him why he did not have a wife. He passed off the question with a reference to the large number of black girls running around the sagebrush from which he could choose a bride. Henry's brother, Leige, had followed him to Nevada. Leige married Indian Mike's daughter, Lizard.

Indian Mike, of High Rock Canyon massacre fame, was a Bannock who had never gone to the reservation, preferring a free-roaming existence with his family band in northeastern Nevada. Lizard's marriage to Leige Harris helped to bring the band under the protection of Henry, the powerful Sparks-Harrell foreman. They still had to be careful. John Sparks got very mad if the band killed mule deer bucks he had earmarked for his annual hunting parties composed of bankers, judges, and politically powerful men from throughout the West.

In his middle age, Henry Harris was a respected figure in the livestock industry. Henry was invited to Boise, Idaho, along with several other distinguished pioneer cattlemen to testify in a Federal court suit to apportion the waters of the interstate streams along the Idaho-Nevada border. After the first day of testimony, the group had to go three bars before they found a bartender who would serve Henry. The men were terribly embarrassed when Henry was refused, and equally relieved when the third bartender poured him a drink. The relief was shortlived, however, because after Henry emptied his glass, the bartender pointedly smashed the glass. The bartender was probably lucky Henry was not in his own territory with a crew of cowboys. During the Diamond Field Jack murder trials in the mid-1890's, Henry had participated in a barroom fight during a trial recess. In this fight, he proved very proficient at cracking sheepherders' heads.

Toward the end of his employment by Louis Harrell, Henry was riding a big sorrel horse in the Cottonwood Field along Salmon Falls Creek. The crew was working cattle by the procedures inherited from the Spanish ranchos. Some of the men held the herd in a loose circle while the foreman sorted dry cows from cows with calves. Henry was concentrating on the cutting operation, when suddenly the sorrel started to buck. He lost a stirrup and was quickly pitched over the sorrel's head to the ground. The cowboys stared in shocked disbelief. No one had ever seen Henry Harris bucked from a horse. One stunned cowboy recovered sufficiently to ride and catch the sorrel, but no one spoke as Henry remounted.

In late March, there are still snowdrifts under the rimrocks that enclose Salmon Falls Creek above San Jacinto, Nevada. The cottonwoods have not yet started to burst their buds, and the aspen stand naked in little patches on the hillsides. The north wind can be very bitter during March in northeastern Nevada.

In March 1937, Henry Harris became ill with pneumonia. Employees of the Utah Construction Company took him to the hospital in Twin Falls, Idaho, and there he died on April 3, 1937. Twin Falls is built on the site of Sparks-Tinnin spring rodeo grounds where Henry had participated in the annual roundups. He is buried under a simple stone that is inscribed "Pioneer Cowboy." Each Memorial Day, Newton and Andy Harrell go out to the little remnants of sagebrush/grasslands that exist among the irrigated fields of the Snake River Valley and pick wildflowers to put on Henry Harris' grave.