

THE HAWKINS' NEGROES GO TO MEXICO

A FOOTNOTE FROM TRADITION

By *Kenneth Wiggins Porter**

The Negro communities of Brackettville, Texas, and Nacimientto, Coahuila, are principally descended from Negro "slaves" of Seminole Indians, who, in 1849-50, accompanied the Seminole Indian Chief Wild Cat and their Negro leader John Horse, or Gopher John, from the Indian Territory to Mexico. They recognize, however, in addition to the descendants of the Seminole "slaves," two other important elements in the early community: individual Negroes—runaway slaves, soldiers, ex-soldiers—Mexicans, and Indians, who affiliated with the Seminole tribe by marriage; and Negroes from the Creek Nation who came to Mexico independently and joined up with Wild Cat and John Horse after their arrival.

Such characteristic Creek names as Bruner, Perryman, Grayson, Kennard, and McCallip, originally derived from their Indian masters, were common in these closely inter-related communities. Other names recognized as Creek are Wilson, Warrior, and Daniel. The "inter-married Seminoles" of Negro descent were usually glad to be recognized by the tribe in general and to think of themselves as Seminole, but the Negroes from the Creek Nation, though now inseparably intermixed with other elements, for a considerable period constituted a definite faction. The last manifestation of this independent spirit, I am told, was over the wording of the sign to be hung above the gate to the "Seminole Cemetary [*sic*]," which one group thought should rather be titled "Seminole-Creek"; they were, however, unsuccessful in putting their view across.

Traditions still survive as to the circumstances and leadership under which one group of Negro slaves from the Creek Nation sought refuge in Mexico, ultimately joining up with the larger Seminole community and accepting the leadership of Wild Cat and John Horse. "When John Horse and Wild Cat came to Mexico," says Sarah Daniels,¹ "they found Tony Warrior already there.

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¹Sarah Daniels, the oldest person in the "Seminole Negro" community, was born about 1851, in San Rodrigo, Coahuila, the daughter of Thomas Factor and Rose Kelly, Negroes from the Seminole Nation. She is the widow of Charles Daniels, "Seminole Negro" scout and the son of the Negro leader, Elijah Daniel of the Creek Nation. She lives in Nacimientto, Coahuila, where I talked to her in 1942 and 1943.

He had been there long enough that he could speak a little Mexican. He joined up with Wild Cat and John Horse.”

“The Warriors went to Mexico with Johnny Wilson and Caro or Kelly (Carolina or Kelina?) Wilson,” says Dolly July.²

“The Wilsons . . .,” says Julia Payne,³ “were not Seminoles, but Creeks.”

The story of how and why the Wilson-Warrior band went to Mexico is a strange one, as told by Dolly and Rena July.⁴ Benjamin and Rebecca Hawkins, Creek Indians, were the parents of three children: Tom, or perhaps Tony, Billy, and Becky. They were the owners of the Negro families named Warrior and Wilson, but the relationship between these masters and their slaves apparently followed the friendly Seminole pattern. Matters were getting so bad with people stealing Negroes and selling them that the Hawkinses decided their slaves were not safe and that they should be sent to Mexico until the situation improved.

Tom offered to take them down and, according to Rena July, Pink and Sam Hawkins, also Creek Indians, went along. The Hawkinses gave their Negroes money and rations and told them that they would keep in touch with them and when it was safe for them to return they'd let them know and they could come back and work their land as before. On the way down they had fights with Indians and whites trying to catch them, and lost some children. After they had settled in Mexico, Tony (*sic*) Hawkins started back to the Nation, but was killed between Brackett and Uvalde for the considerable sum of money he had on him. The Warriors and Wilsons remained in Mexico and eventually encountered and affiliated with the Wild Cat-John Horse Seminole band.

The names and some of the episodes in this tradition bear a resemblance, both so near and so remote as to be exasperating, to some in printed historical sources. Benjamin Hawkins, a Creek

² Dolly July was born May 1, 1870, in Mexico, the daughter of Sergeant John Ward (*nee* Warrior) and Judy Wilson. Her grandfather, Tony Warrior, and her uncle, John Wilson, were in the Wilson-Warrior immigrant party. Her husband's name was, of course, July, but I do not have his given name. She lives in Brackettville, where I conversed with her in 1941 and 1943.

³ Julia Payne was born about 1860, in the Laguna, Coahuila, a daughter of Kitty Johnson, a Negro woman from the Seminole Nation, and Ben Shields, a mulatto settler from South Carolina. She is the widow of Isaac Payne, “Seminole Negro-Indian Scout,” winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1875, and lives in Nacimiento, where I talked with her in 1942 and 1943.

⁴ Rena July, born about 1865, is the daughter of Nancy Wilson and a Mexican father. Her grandfather, John Wilson, whose wife was Phyllis Hawkins or Bruner, was one of the immigrants. She is the widow of Jim July and lives in Brackettville, where I talked briefly with her in 1943.

Indian, *was* married to Rebecca McIntosh, also a Creek Indian. His home was in Cass County, near Jefferson, Texas. "It was during the year 1834 that an attempt was made by the Creek Indians to obtain a settlement in Texas . . . the chiefs Apothlayoha (Opothla Yahola) and Ben Hawkins came to Nacogdoches and entered into an agreement to procure the lands lying north of the town . . . report of the project . . . aroused the American settlers, and also the Cherokees . . . Hawkins was killed by the Cherokee," according to one account, by the instigation of Sam Houston. "Hopothla Yahola's son, called Dick Johnson, was killed" at the same time.

Could the Creek-Negro tradition, that Tom or Tony, Sam Hawkins' son, was murdered between Brackett and Uvalde on his way from settling the Wilsons and Warriors in Mexico, simply be a version of his father's death "returning from Mexico with a patent to lands in that country"? Or were both Ben Hawkins *and* his son murdered under such circumstances?

Pink and Sam, the names of the Hawkinses who, according to Rena July, accompanied the Wilsons and Warriors to Mexico, are names which are common in the Hawkins family. Stephen Hawkins, married to Sarah Grierson or Grayson in 1796, had two children, Pinkey and Sam, and owned many Negroes as slaves. Sam, who was Ben's brother, married Jane McIntosh, and one of their children was Pink, born in 1816. Pink settled near Nacogdoches, Texas, but "The Mexican War"—the war for Texan independence?—"was the means of ruining him as the Negroes made their escape across the lines."⁵ Could this "escape" of the Negroes actually be a reminiscence of their deliberate transfer to Mexico, under the circumstances sketched in the traditions preserved and narrated by the Julys?

Perhaps there are readers of *The Chronicles* who can answer, or can give leads toward answering, some of the questions raised in the above paragraph. Whatever the extent of the validity of the tradition preserved by Dolly and Rena July, it stands out in vivid contrast to those told by the descendants of Negroes from the Seminole Nation, who emphasize that their ancestors' flight was to escape enslavement, whereas in the Creek legend their ancestral

⁵ Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "A Creek Pioneer: Notes Concerning 'Aunt Sue' Rogers and Her Family," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXI (September, 1943), No. 3, p. 274; H. Yoakum, *History of Texas* (New York, 1856), 2 Vols., I. p. 328; Thomas S. Woodward, *Woodward's Reminiscence of the Creek or Muskogee Indians* (Montgomery, 1859), in 1939 edition (Tuscaloosa and Birmingham), p. 114; H. F. and E. S. O'Beirne, *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators, and Leading Men* (St. Louis, 1892), pp. 171-72; *Letters of Benjamin Hawkins, 1796-1806*, Collections of Georgia Historical Society (Savannah, 1916), IX, p. 31.

migration is planned by kind and thoughtful "masters" largely in the interests of their "slaves."

Whatever the circumstances of their migration, however, the Wilson-Warrior band, once accepted as military colonists under the leadership of Wild Cat and John Horse, showed themselves worthy to fight at the side of the proud "Seminole Negroes." Vivid memories are still preserved of an Homeric battle, of which the Wilsons apparently bore the brunt, and in which no less than five of the clan—John, Cato, Peter, Adam, Bristow—fell wounded, at least one of them mortally, transfixed by the shafts of the savage foe. When the Negroes of the Seminole community in Mexico moved up to the United States in the early 1870's and were organized into the "Seminole Negro-Indian Scouts" during the first decade of its existence, Ariel, Ben (1 and 2), Bristow, Cuffy, James, Kelina, Peter, and Tony Wilson appeared on the rolls of the organization. The Warriors, less numerous, contributed only John, Bill, and Scott, but the first of these, a sergeant, who had taken the name Ward, was in 1875 a winner, with Isaac Payne and Pompey Factor, of the Congressional Medal of Honor, for rescuing their lieutenant, who was unhorsed in the midst of 25 or 30 hostile Comanche Indians.⁶

⁶ Mrs. O. L. Shipman, *Taming the Big Bend* (n. p., 1926), pp. 58-63.