

Community mourns loss of 'cowboy' icon

By Penny Webb

Webster's dictionary describes an icon as an image or pictorial representation of an object. That would be just what Marion Willis was. He was the iconic picture of the original cowboy, the last of his kind. Born with boots, spurs, and a dusty old hat, he was a cowboy throughout his heart and soul. He was even called "Cowboy" by his friends and acquaintances.

Mr. Willis only strayed away from being a true grit wrangler twice in his 83 years. Uncle Sam found Marion breaking horses in Arizona and mandated that he join the Marines during World War II. After that he worked sixteen years for the U.S. Postal services in Houston where he won many awards. He went back to his cowboy ways and managed the North Houston Auction Barn for many years. In 1974 he told them he was going to

retire from being a cowboy and the Auction Barn threw a lavish catered party for him, even giving him a saddle, cash money and a beautiful oil painting of himself. Most of us know that Mr. Willis never retired. He kept right on cowboying. In 1994 the Houston County Chamber of Commerce awarded him "Top Hand of The Year".

Upon his "retirement", Mr. Willis spent most of his mornings visiting and greeting folks at the Grapeland Farm and Ranch Supply, formerly known as the Grapeland Co-Op. He once told his daughter Lynette Isget that the reason he went every morning was because he was working on his resume, hoping that the Co-Op would give him a good recommendation so that one day he could be a Wal-Mart Greeter.

"We are really going to miss him around here, we

liked to see him everyday" said Mitchell Huff, longtime manager of the Co-Op and now manager of Grapeland Farm and Ranch. "He was here just about everyday drinking coffee and telling stories from 8:30 to 10:00." Huff and the staff reflected

on how Mr. Willis and the coffee drinking gang would tell stories of days gone by and sometimes just plan ol' horse tales. One of the stories that came to mind during the reflection was about



Courtesy Photo

Willis

See icon, Page A7

Continued from page A1

Mr. Jack Spence, another member of the coffee drinking gang, who grew up with Marion, even went to school a year early because Marion went to school and he followed. Marion would tell the story of how Jack would follow him to school, because he had no one to play with, and stand at the door of the school every day, until one day the teacher let him join the class.

"He had stories, lots of stories about anything and everything, because he did it all" claimed Marion's nephew Gerald Willis. Gerald also had this to say about his uncle "He was a real cowboy, and did

everything the the original cowboy way. He didn't know or care about new technology. He spent his life riding horses, training horses, and cowboying.

He was also a good father figure to a lot of kids in Grapeland. Those kids wanted to grow up and be like him, a cowboy. He took them under his wing, he spent time with them, he taught them cowboy skills and life skills. He was always good to his family. Those are the things I will remember most about him."

Those are things we will all remember about him. As the sun sets on the life of Marion Willis, we know he will live on in our memories, forever riding horses, and telling stories, with a twinkle in his eye.

Couple