This cowboy's story deserves a place in history

By Bud Kennedy
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News flash for everyone now fascinated with the history of White Settlement:

You overlooked one early settler.

He saw the Alamo after the fall and Virginia after the Confederate surrender. Until his death at 111, he carried a dime given to him by Sam Houston.

One more thing.

He was a black American freed from slavery.

Of all the stories that have turned up while White Settlement voters were reaffirming their city's name, the most interesting must be the tale of John Hickman, who loyally served a Confederate officer during the Civil War and came back to Texas to ride as a cowboy on the great cattle drives.

Hickman retold his stories in 1930 as a special guest at the State Fair of Texas. He had lived in the then-rural White Settlement community since 1895.

In newspaper interviews across 20 years, he told of coming to Texas at 11 as a slave owned by a member of the Jim Bowie family and going into the Alamo after the 1836 battle to retrieve Bowie's body. Later, another family member won Hickman in a horse-race bet, and he wound up at the scene of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, Va.

At some point after the Civil War, according to sparse accounts in other local histories, he worked for the Farmer brothers, whose cabins west of Fort Worth amid American Indian tribes were part of what was then called "the white settlement."

I have not checked out Hickman's Alamo or Civil War stories in other sources.

But a city librarian found a 1941 interview with one old cowboy who called Hickman "the best rider I ever met."

When he died in 1931, the United Daughters of the Confederacy draped his casket with a Confederate flag and helped pay for his burial in a White Settlement cemetery. His body has since been moved to Oakwood Cemetery in Fort Worth.

Some news clippings called Hickman the first slave brought to Texas. Since Hickman said he came in 1831, and Southerners already had been coming here for 10 years, that seems unlikely.

But whether fact or fiction -- or both -- Hickman's stories were convincing enough to win him a spotlight role at the 1930 State Fair as a guest in The Dallas Morning News' "Little Alamo" exhibit.

I found the 1930 News features on Hickman when I tried to look up early stories about White Settlement. If the Star-Telegram ever interviewed him, I haven't found the story.

In fanciful language, The News described Hickman, then 110, as a local man who could relate "tales of early Texas" and said that he was "identified with all the stirring events of Texas history."

"From the tumbledown shack that has been his home for more than 30 years on the White Settlement road 10 miles from Fort Worth, his undimmed eyes watch the heavens fill with argosies of the air, and not 10 miles from there he witnessed the effects of his last brush with Indians," The News reported.
"More than 90 years ago, he blazed a trail from Alabama to San Augustine [Texas]. ... The Alamo, Goliad and the conventions in which Texas planned for its freedom are all fresh in his memory. He boasts that he brought from Alabama the first bushel of corn brought to Texas and the first demi-john of real whiskey."

In an interview, Hickman claimed to have met Alamo survivor Susanna Dickinson when he was sent from Gonzales to recover Bowie's body in San Antonio.

"I found him and I would have brung him out," The News quoted Hickman as saying, but the body had been burned. He said he took a gold star, a half-moon pin and a scarf back to Bowie family members.

In a 1911 interview in the Fort Worth Record, Hickman called it "an awful sight in there."

Hickman also told the State Fair crowd that he shined Sam Houston's boots before the general led the Texas Revolution. He said Houston gave him a 10-cent piece for his 15th birthday.

He said he thought he would lose it after the Civil War when a Union officer searched him on his way back to Texas from the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

The Union soldier "woulda kept it," Hickman said, "if I hadn't rustled up a silver dollar and bought it back."

Did I mention that he fought American Indians on the frontier and herded cattle for rancher John Chisum?

According to The News, he also rode on cattle drives with Billy the Kid.

When an old Fort Worth cowboy named Dave Burns was interviewed in 1941 for an unpublished city history, he said Hickman "could do anything on a hoss that any other man could do, and then some more. Also ride wild steers."

In the 1930 interviews, The News quoted Hickman saying that he lived to be 110 because "I have always worked lots and eat lots. I don't drink no more. ... I quit when I was about 75."

When Hickman died the next year, The News featured him again in an obituary.

Now, I know what you're thinking.

I have no idea how many of John Hickman's tales are true.

And I have no idea whether his memory was still reliable at age 110.

But he sounds like a heckuva cowboy.

With a heckuva story that should be kept alive today in the history of White Settlement.