

... this country knew so well'

Family Focus

Travel

WEEKEND

Tempo

Entertainment

Sports

Section III

SATURDAY, AUGUST 10, 1974

Page 23

Nairobian Wranglers pluck their guitars and sing the legends 'of the black cowboy ...

*He explored both mountains and desert sand,
And became a chief of the Crow tribe.*

"At first we performed for only black people. Then we discovered that there were others either misinformed or uninformed so we broadened our scope," Williams said.

Sunday, at 7:30 p.m., the Wranglers will perform at the Palo Alto Community Theater, 1305 Middlefield Road. The show is called "Nairobian Wranglers and Guests. Country and western guitarist Richard Jakua also will be featured. Additional information may be obtained at the theater box office or from the East Palo Alto Municipal council secretary.

None of the Wranglers is an authentic cowboy although Williams grew up in the midwestern all-black town of Boley, Okla. Historians say the little town got off to a wild and woolly start when its black town marshal was killed by a white horsethief.

The story goes that as the black marshal fell from his horse mortally wounded, he fired off a round killing the bandit. Boley has since survived rather peacefully.

Williams said his grandfather went to Oklahoma while it was still a territory and became sheriff. Williams grew up around a lot of cowboys on a ranch. "But my old man figured that while it wasn't too dad gum exciting — it was a lot safer to be a sharecropper," he explained.

The Wranglers got their start in 1971. Then they had among their members a rather famous old local character who went by the name of Willie "Warhoop" Davis.

Chuckling to himself at the recollection of Warhoop, Williams told about his late friend's "hat collection" rides at the rodeos.

"They'd take the old horse down by the bucking chutes and let him out in the riding area. Afterward if Warhoop thought he'd given them a good ride and the crowd had given the old boy a good hat collection, he'd pull out his 44 and shoot it in the air. They always had a jug of white lightning in a bale of hay and he'd take a snort out of that jug and let out a warhoop."

By LORETTA GREEN

*Songs are sung about mountain men
Who pushed back the frontier.*

*Of hunters, guides and Indians
And trips of pioneers.*

*Where are the tales of the black cowboy,
This country knew so well.
Where are the tales of the black cowboy,
This country knew so well.*

*(From "They Don't Tell."
Copyright by Cecil Williams.)*

The person who hears Cecil Williams' Western drawl might think he had a genuine cowboy in tow. Williams — an East Palo Alto — would probably take a real liking to that.

By trade Williams (no relation to the Rev. Cecil Williams, head of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco) is a cartographer at U.S. Geological Survey in Palo Alto. But he also is a guitar-plunking, horse-riding, tale-telling cowboy enthusiast who seizes any opportunity to talk about "the old boys" of the colorful West.

Williams is one of three members of a musical trio called the Nairobian Wranglers. Curtis Slaughter and Robert McGee of East Palo Alto are the others.

The Wranglers have set themselves a kind of educational goal. "We want to inform the people through lecture and song about the black cowboys and mountain men," Williams explained.

The men visit schools and perform for organizations. They tell stories and sing original songs such as "Legend of the Dusky Demon" — a song about the famous bulldogger, Bill Pickett — or "Black Mountain Man," a ditty about Jim Beckwourth, for whom a town, a mountain and a pass were named in California.

*"Jim Beckwourth was a
Black Mountain Man
A hunter, trapper and a
famous guide.*

A typical Nairobian Wrangler show will start off with the telling of legends about the cowboys and mountain men. It continues with a question and answer session. Much of the Wranglers' knowledge on the subject comes from research they said. Several books have been written on the black cowboy.

"A lot of people aren't aware that Bill Pickett, who was the father of bulldogging was a black man," Williams said.

Bulldogging is a form of steer wrestling where the cowboy wrestles the steer to the ground nose up. Pickett would add his own extra touch by biting the steer on the nose. He died in 1932 and was entered in the Hall of Fame last November.

"When Will Rogers was riding, he was Bill Pickett's helper," Williams noted. "Tom Mix used to help too. But if you ever see the movies, Bill Pickett wasn't even in there. That's why we have to get these songs going."

Warhoop Davis was a founding member of the Wranglers and until his death last year entertained numerous people with his intricate rope tricks and tales of his adventures in the early West.

Curtis Slaughter, originally an esterner, is the Wrangler announcer, percussionist and harmonica player. He said he "went along for the ride" in the beginning because of his fascination with Warhoop and the legends of the black mountain men. "I figured when it got to be too much, I'd jump off," he said.

Slaughter is a graduate of Wayne State University in Detroit and is a psychiatric house counselor at a Belmont Halfway House.

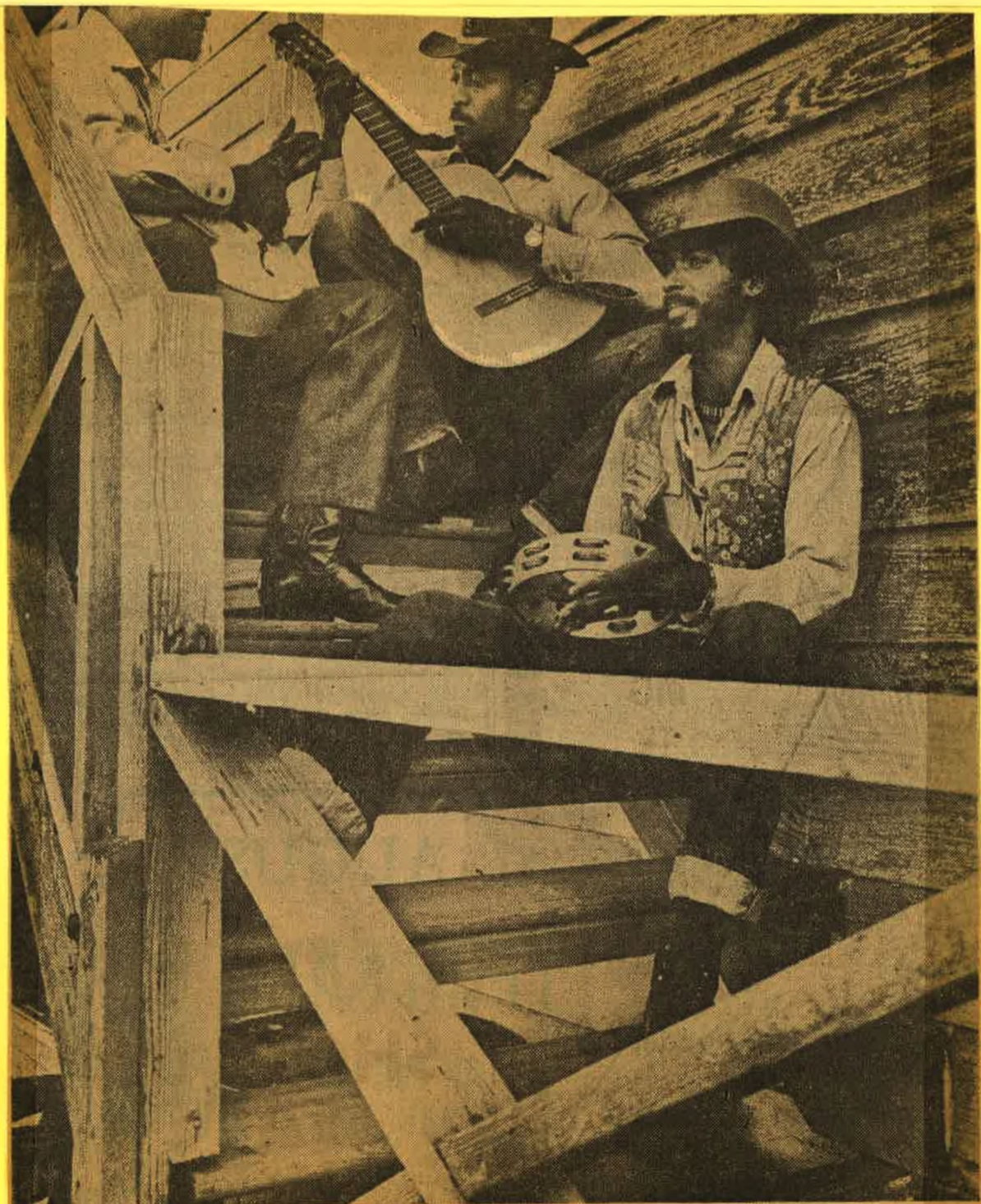
Robert McGee, the third Wrangler and owner of McGee's Barber Shop on Pulgas Avenue in East Palo Alto, plays an old-fashioned guitar. He recalled how it all got started.

"We used to hunt together," he said. "Then I started plunking on my old guitar and Williams got himself one. Then we discovered that Warhoop knew how to play." And that was the start of the Wranglers.

When they play for schools, Williams says probably the most common reaction is disbelief. "Kids didn't know that there was such a thing as black cowboys."



A cartographer, a barber and a psychiatric house counselor or three cow pokes on the old prairie? From left to right, Cecil Williams, Robert McGee and Curtis Slaughter who make up the Nairobiian Wranglers.



"I'll tell you a story of a black cowboy . . . Bill Pickett was his name." Robert McGee, left, and Cecil Williams pick their guitars as Curtis Slaughter sets the rhythm.