

# Ecorse Welcomes Willy Home

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Willy Crawford rode down the River Road, a narrow dirt road that followed the Detroit River from Detroit to Monroe, Michigan. He stopped when the River Road stopped at his home on Ecorse. Willy's mother and father and brother Sam and sister Carolyn greeted him at the front door.

"Willy, you're finally home!" his Mama said, hugging and kissing him.

His father slapped Willy on the back and Sam shook his hand.

"Welcome home, Willy!" everyone said.

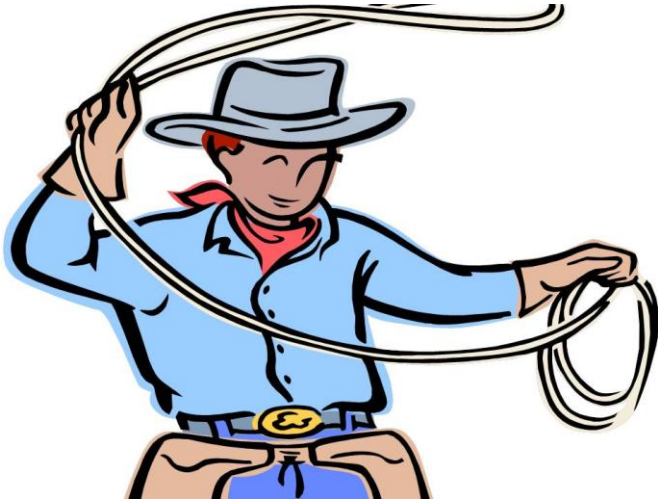
His sister Carolyn scowled at Willy.

"You're only eight years old so you can't do anything but scowl," Willy teased Carolyn. Carolyn scowled harder.

"Why are you wearing that cowboy hat instead of your Yank uniform?" Carolyn asked him.

"Because I'm a cowboy now," Willy said.

"Cowboy! How can you be a cowboy? Cowboys are white."



“Not all cowboys are white,” Willy said. “This cowboy isn’t white! How do you know that in 1866 there are black people in Ecorse?”

“I see them every day,” Sam said. “And our family is black!”

“I see black cowboys every day and I’m black and a cowboy. That makes me a black cowboy,” Willy said.

“If you’re a cowboy, why aren’t you wearing a tall hat and boots and spurs?” Sam asked.

“I’ve got some packed up in my grip. I’ll put them on after supper,” Willy promised.

“Are you home for good, Willy?” Papa asked as they all went into the house and settled around the kitchen table for supper.

“I have something to show you,” Willy said, taking a sheaf of papers out of his grip.

“What is it?” Carolyn asked.

“Why don’t you read what’s on my papers?” Willy asked Sam. “They do teach you to read in Ecorse, don’t they?”

“Yes, we go to the French School down by the Detroit River, the same one you did.” Sam said.

“We even have the same teacher. You remember Mrs. Ouelette, don’t you?”

“She taught me how to read. Now show me what she taught you. Read what it says on this paper,” Willy said.

Carolyn picked up the paper and read, “This is the last will and testament of Willy Crawford.”

Mama gasped. “Willy, why are you making out your will?”

“Because I’m going to take some time off from being a cowboy. I’m going to South Carolina to teach black people how to read.”

“But why are you making out your will?” Sam echoed Mama’s question.

“I’m traveling in dangerous country,” Willy said.

“But the war is over and we helped win our freedom,” his father said. “You fought for freedom. Why would anyone in South Carolina want to hurt you?”

“Tomorrow I’ll put on my cowboy hat and walk down to the school and to the River Side Café. You all come along and you’ll see what I mean.”

Willy slept soundly his first night at home.

The next morning he put on his cowboy hat, spurs, and hung two lariats in his belt loops on his denim trousers. After breakfast he said, “Is everyone ready? Let’s walk down the River Road to the Riverside Café.”

His father laughed. “You talk like it’s dangerous to walk into Ecorse.”

“It isn’t always, just in front of certain people. You don’t know what goes on in some parts of town.”

“Willy Crawford don’t you remember how many folks we helped across the river to Canada? I know about the meanness of folks, white folks included.”

“Papa, white folks here can be just as mean as people in the South.”

“I don’t think that’s so, “ Papa said. He led them walking down the River Road.

They had nearly reached the River Side Cafe when suddenly Willy felt a blow on his shoulder. “What do you think you’re doing walking down the middle of the River Road in cowboy gear, boy? Them’s white man’s clothes.”

Willy whirled around. A tall white man with a scraggly brown beard stood in front of him. Willy said, “What if I had walked down the middle of River Road in my soldier uniform? Would you have said anything about that?”

“I would have said the same thing,” the white man answered. “Them’s white man’s clothes”

“There’s no label on them that says they’re just for white men,” Willy said. I earned them with my hard work.”

“Work don’t have to do with anything,” the white man said. “You got born into your clothes.”

Willy pushed Carolyn and Sam and Mama and Papa ahead of him. “You go on ahead. I’ll handle this,” I told him.

“You’ll never handle anything for me,” the white man said, spitting in Willy’s face.

Willy felt his fist clench and swing out toward the white man. Sam and Carolyn and Mama and Papa stopped in their tracks. Sam ran over to the white man and grabbed his arm and hung on. “Leave my brother alone!” Sam shouted.

The white man swung his arm and spun Sam around like a marble.

Willy’s arms moved before he had time to think about them. They took a lariat from his waist and spun it around. He had the white man lassoed and his arms pinned to his sides in no time. It didn’t take much time for a crowd of people to gather either. Most of them laughed at the sight of the white man tied up like a bundle of hay.

“Hey Clem, he sure has you hog tied!” someone yelled.

“Let’s get out of here before there’s trouble,” Papa said, steering Willy and the rest of the family into the crowd.

“Let’s go to the schoolhouse. Mrs. Ouelette will help us,” Mama said.

“We don’t need any help. Willy can take care of us,” Sam said.

“We might be in trouble,” Willy said. “If that crowd turns ugly, we might be in big trouble.”

“It didn’t look ugly to me. Everyone was laughing at the man,” Carolyn said.

“Give them time to think about it,” Willy said.

“Let’s go back. You have to get your rope back,” Sam said.

“Let’s go see Mrs. Ouelette first,” Mama insisted.

They walked the three blocks to the French School tucked in a grove of trees by the Detroit River. Mrs. Ouelette stood in the doorway waiting for them. She shook Papa’s hand and hugged Mama.

Then she hugged Willy and kissed his cheek. “Welcome home. It’s so good to see you,” she said. Then she stood back studying him. “Why aren’t you wearing your uniform?” she asked.

Willy studied Miss Ouelette back. “I’m wearing my uniform. The war is over,” he said. “I earned this uniform out West. I am one of the best black cowboys in Texas.”

Mrs. Ouelettee smiled. “You have to fight to choose your own uniform and I so proud of you!” She hugged him again.

“I have to get back down town,” Willy said.

“Willy, where are you going?” Sam shouted as Willy walked away.

“I’m going to get my rope back,” Willy said.

Mama gasped. “Willy, you can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“It can’t be any more dangerous than a pack of hungry coyotes attacking a calf,” Willy said.

“Wait , Willy! Can I come with you?” Sam hollered.

“Come along,” said Willy.

“I’m coming too,” Carolyn said.

Willy looked at Mama and Papa. “If everyone who wants to come is here, we’d better get started.”

“We’ll follow along,” Papa said. He took Mama’s arm and they followed Willy and Sam and Carolyn back to the center of town. A crowd had gathered around Clem the lassoed man and small boys kept running up to him and pulling on his rope.



“Get out of there!” Willy shouted, running toward the boys. “You don’t pull on the rope of a hogtied man!”

One of the boys stuck out his tongue at Willy. “What do you know? You’re a black man!”

Sam stuck out his tongue at the boy. “Don’t you stick out your tongue at my brother or I’ll punch you!”

Willy took the other lariat out of his belt loops and twirled it. “I am a real Texas cowboy and I know something about cowboying. If you boys will stop fighting long enough, I’ll show you a trick or two.”



Sam put his tongue back in his mouth and so did the other boy. They stared at Willy. Willy twirled his lariat and before the boys could finish blinking it was wrapped around the head and shoulders of Clem, the man that Willy had already lassoed.

“Get me out of these ropes!” Clem bellowed.

Willy ran over to Clem and one at a time, twirled the two ropes up the boy and over his head.

The crowd cheered.

“Best rope twirling I’ve seen in a time,” a man with black whiskers said.

Clem dusted himself off. Then he doubled his fists and charged after Willy.

“Willy, watch out!” Sam yelled. “He’s coming after you!”

Willy turned around twirling a rope in each hand. Muttering, Clem turned away. The people in the crowd laughed so hard that Sam swore their laughter created waves on the Detroit River.

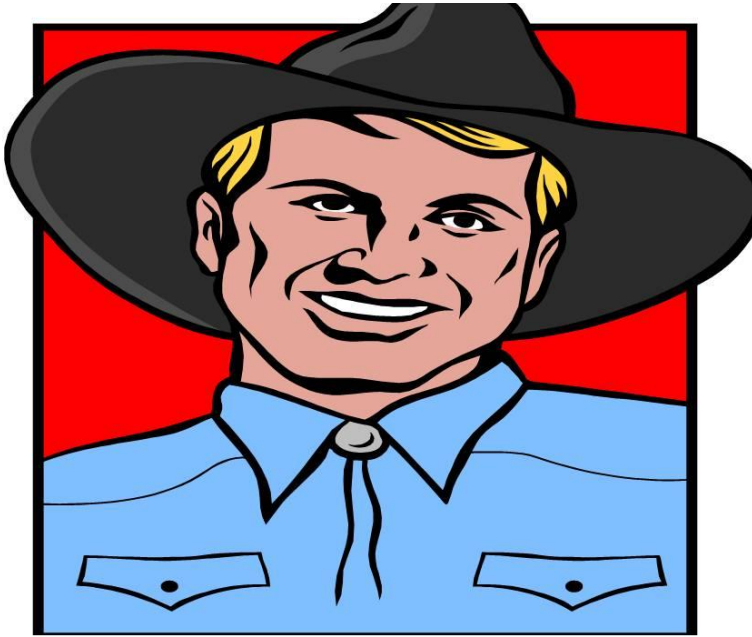
“Look at the waves!” Sam said, pointing at the River.

Sam and Carolyn and Mama and Papa and Willy laughed all of the way back to their house.

“I’m so happy I could twirl my lariat and laugh all of the way back to Texas,” Willy said.

That’s what he did.

## Black Cowboys For A Fact



Although Willy and his family are fictional characters, some black families had settled in Ecorse before the Civil War. The historical record shows that several black soldiers in Michigan Civil War regiments listed Ecorse as their home town.

The history of Black Cowboys begins in Gambia and other African countries. Over the centuries, natives developed and perfected skills in controlling and herding animals. At the same time these skilled natives were called herders and not cowboys, but they performed the work of cowboys. When the slave trade came to Africa, slave owners who were ranchers and farmers sought out and bought skilled slave herders. When they were brought to America, these skilled slaves worked cattle in the tall grass, pine barrens, and marshes of South Carolina and other sections of the Lower South on what were then called cattle plantations. A few rode horses, but most of them used dogs, bullwhips and salt to manage cattle.

As cattle farmers moved westward with their herds and slaves, many slaves escaped into Mexico and traded skills with the Mexican cowboys or Vaqueros. Some of the best Texas cowboys came from this group.

Before the migration to Texas, many Black Cowboys were runaways from plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. They joined the Seminole Indian Nation and worked the savannahs of southern Florida. Later some of this group migrated to Oklahoma with Seminoles and later to Mexico. Probably the largest group of Black Cowboys could be found in the grass prairies, groves of trees, wooded creeks and bayous below Houston, Texas, and stretching east to Louisiana.

After the Civil War, thousands of Black Cowboys worked on ranches throughout south and west Texas and they rode the cattle trails north. Of the approximately 35,000 cowboys that worked the ranches and rode the trails, between 5,000 and 9,000 were black. They participated in almost all of the northward trail drives and they performed every job except trail boss. The historical record says that on some trail drives entire crews were black except for the trail boss.

Most of the black cowboys were known only by their first name or nickname, and many historians, writers, and filmmakers have ignored the important contributions they made to American history.

