



## **Britton Johnson**

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Painting of Britton Johnson by Lee Herring,  
on loan to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

# Britton Johnson

**Christy Claridy**

The Texas Ranger Museum and Hall of Fame has received on loan a striking painting by Lee Herring, Official Texas State Artist for 2007. The work depicts the ferocious fight between Britton “Britt” Johnson and Kiowa warriors in 1871. While much has been written and speculated about his life, there is very little verifiable data about Johnson, and much of the information available today is based on oral history. These stories were passed down from Johnson’s contemporaries, who noted with respect his unwavering determination to find his family and his courageous stand against Kiowa warriors that resulted in his hard-fought and gruesome death.

Britt Johnson is alleged to have been born a slave under either Moses Johnson or his son Alan Johnson around 1840, although Britt’s name does not appear in the 1850 or 1860 slave censuses. In 1850, a Moses Johnson from Tennessee was living in Navarro County, Texas, and by 1860, a Moses Johnson from Tennessee was living in Young County, Texas. According to this census, Moses Johnson’s household includes a thirty-year-old black male (which, if this is Britt Johnson, does not support an 1840 birth date), a twenty-year-old mulatto female, a fourteen-year-old black



female, a three-year-old mulatto male, and a one-year-old mulatto male.<sup>1</sup> A J. A. Johnson from Tennessee (possibly Alan Johnson) appears on both the 1850 Navarro County census and the 1860 Young County census. He owned two slaves in 1850: one twelve-year-old black female and one fourteen-year-old mulatto male, both approximately the assumed ages of Britton Johnson and his wife Mary. In fact, some sources assert Johnson was born in 1835, not 1840.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1860 Young County census does not list J. A. Johnson as a slaveholder in the slave census even though he is included in the general census, it appears that he did not own any slaves at that time. Regardless of status, Britt Johnson became a celebrated hero of the American West for his extraordinary solo expeditions into the heart of the formidable Comancheria (Land of the Comanches) in search of his captured family and friends.

The saga of Britt Johnson began in 1864 when Johnson was likely living in Young County, Texas. As stated previously, there is much conjecture surrounding his life. If Johnson remained a slave, he had a great amount of freedom and worked as a foreman on the Johnson Ranch while tending his own cattle herd. Perhaps he was not a slave and was working for a widow named Elizabeth Fitzpatrick on her ranch. What is known for certain is that on October 13, 1864, Britt Johnson was away from home when Fitzpatrick's house, where Britt's wife and children were either visiting or living, was attacked by Comanche and Kiowa warriors during what came to be known as the Elm Creek Raid. Seven people were captured during the combined assault,<sup>3</sup> including Johnson's wife Mary and their two children, and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, her son, and her two granddaughters. Johnson's eldest son and Fitzpatrick's daughter were killed during the attack, and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick's son was subsequently killed while the captives were on the trail. Regrettably, neither the names and genders of the Johnson children nor the number of children in the family before or after the attack can be verified.

According to some sources, Mary Johnson was pregnant at the time of her capture. Indeed, there is a Depression-era Works Project Administration oral history interview with a gentleman named John Johnson, who asserts that he is the son of Britton and Mary Johnson<sup>4</sup> and was born in December 1864 while his mother was in captivity. He claims he was ransomed shortly after the rest of the captives were returned, but he remained in captivity eight years before being returned to his mother. There are a few inconsistencies with this story, though. Mr. Johnson says the date of the attack was in 1863, not 1864. He also says Mrs. Fitzpatrick's daughters, not granddaughters, were taken captive. He claims that he was not in the original ransom because his father did not know of his existence. However, if he was born in December 1864, Britt Johnson would certainly have known his wife was pregnant by the time of her capture in October 1864. By giving the date as 1863 and giving his date of birth as December 1864, John Johnson seems to imply that Mary Johnson gave birth to him over a year after she was taken captive, which would explain why Britt Johnson would not have known of his existence. There is also no real reason given for why he had to wait eight years before he was returned to his family. There are numerous holes in this short narrative, all of which begin with or are ultimately centered on the erroneous 1863 date of the attack.

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1 1860 Federal Census, Slave Schedule, Young County, Texas.

2 1850 Federal Census, Slave Schedule, Navarro County, Texas.

3 *War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 41, chap. 53, pt. 1:884-886.

4 La Vere, David, *Life Among Texas Indians: The WPA Narratives* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) 68.



In spite of the speculation and ambiguous history surrounding Britton Johnson, he has remained a much written-about figure of the American West. After his family was captured in the Elm Creek Raid, Johnson traveled into Comancheria five or more times in an attempt to ransom the captives. His remarkable and awe-inspiring solo quests into an area feared and avoided by so many made his actions legendary. He traveled to forts situated throughout the frontier, visited reservations, and went to Comanche and Kiowa camps looking for his friends and family. Johnson never abandoned the search and never missed an opportunity to inquire about the Elm Creek captives. Some sources opine he even lived with a band of Comanches in an attempt to win their trust and get his family returned by either ransom or escape. It is not certain whether or not this is true. It is conceivable he at least met with Comanche leaders during his expeditions into their homelands, and it is also logical that those meetings were fraught with resentment and tension on both sides—a very dangerous atmosphere. Sources assert that a Comanche chief named Asa-Havey, who was interested in pursuing peace negotiations with the government, assisted Johnson in his efforts to find his family and worked in conjunction with Johnson for their successful recovery.<sup>5</sup> The manner in which the captives were recovered (negotiation, deceit, or likely a combination of both) very possibly created a reputation for Britt Johnson among the Kiowa and Comanches that aroused the necessity for revenge.

After his family was restored to him in June 1865, Johnson moved to Parker County, Texas, where he owned and operated a freighting business. In November 1871, he and two men in his employ were transporting supplies through the sparsely populated plains near Graham in Young County when they were attacked by Kiowa warriors. Observers in the distance noted Johnson's two employees were killed almost immediately, leaving Britt alone to fight the advancing warriors. He killed his horse and used its body for cover as he made his desperate, lone stand. Ultimately, however, Johnson was killed. He did not succumb easily though. Passersby who discovered the grotesquely mutilated remains of the three men found nearly two hundred shells surrounding the body of Britt Johnson.<sup>6</sup> Against insurmountable odds, he obviously had fought furiously and aggressively for his life.

Britt Johnson's courageous perseverance and bitterly contested death have endured as testaments to the fearless character attributed to heroes of the American West. His tenacity has even been recognized and memorialized by the Hollywood movie industry. The lead characters in the classic novel *The Searchers* by Alan Le May were based on the celebrated actions of Britton, who relentlessly searched for his family through an unknown and unwelcoming region in spite of the danger to himself. The book was later adapted into a movie of the same name starring John Wayne, and it has been hailed as one of the best westerns ever filmed. Johnson's legacy endures into the 21st century as his heroism continues to inspire novels, articles, and now paintings.

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5 Nye, W.S., *Carbine and Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937) 46.

6 McClellan, Michael E. Britton Johnson, (Handbook of Texas Online, accessed April 2011).



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