

The Bronc Busters Wore Lipstick

When city women were still riding sidesaddle, some ranch-raised women were riding broncs in rodeos.

By Heather Raftery

The cowgirl marched across the hard earth of the makeshift arena, her boots sending up small puffs of dust as she made her way toward the quivering bronc. One cowboy had him blindfolded, bending the wild horse's ear to hold him still. Even so, the animal moved restlessly, stamping its feet and snorting. Another cowboy held the lead rope tightly as the woman approached. The crowd behind her whooped and hollered, urging her on.

She smiled at the cowboy as he handed her the lead and hooked her leg, helping to lift her up, the leather of her fringed, split riding skirt slapping against the leather of the saddle. She thrust her feet into the stirrups, grasped her wide-brimmed, high-peaked felt hat in one hand and held the lead taunt in front of her. "Let 'im go!" she yelled.

The cowboys fell away, releasing their hold on the horse and removing the blindfold. The cowgirl laughed, the white of her teeth

flashing between ruby-red lips, and she waved her hat above her as the bronc leaped high into the air.

She made history that day, but the history of women riding broncs started long before Bertha Kaepernik Blancett stepped on a C.B. Irwin roan horse at Cheyenne Frontier Days in 1904, earning the title, "Rodeo history's first cowgirl bronc rider."

As far back as the early 1880s, women had been riding wild, half-broke horses on cattle ranches throughout the West. "Most of the girls were raised on ranches and developed their skills as working cowgirls," says

Dee Marvin, author of "The Lady Rode Bucking Horses," a biography about Fannie Sperry Steele. They developed their skills because there were never enough hands to help with all the ranch work. Many women rode alongside their husbands, fathers and brothers—roping, riding the range, doctoring cattle, helping in the roundups, branding and even breaking colts.

The first and second world wars only increased this role. "With the men at war, it was up to the women to keep the ranches going," says Imogene Fyffe, director of the Women's Pro Rodeo Association's roping and roughstock program.

With so many women and girls working in the saddle, if Bertha Blancett hadn't talked the officials into letting her ride, challenging them to show her where in the rule book it denied women to ride bucking horses, someone else surely would have. Soon after she set the example, "stampedes," as rodeos were called then, began advertising lady bronc riding. Western shows, such as the famous Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West Show, offered young women positions to compete as bronc riders in their traveling exhibitions.

Almost all the women also did other events, such as roping, riding bulls, bulldogging, trick riding, trick roping, relay races and Roman races (where they straddled two running horses, one foot on each saddle). Cowgirls regaled audiences across the country and abroad with their horsemanship, and they are generally considered the first professional women athletes in the United States. They were doing what they loved to do and what they were good at. And it paid.

"They were ranch raised and they had to work for everything they got. Riding in rodeos was one of the easiest ways for them to make money," says Chuck Henson of his mother Margie Greenough and his aunt Alice Greenough, who were among the most famous rodeo cowgirls of the later generation of women bronc riders. He says it was better money than they were making working as waitresses in Red Lodge, Mont.

Even as the novelty of women competing in men's events wore off, they still faced some discrimination by those outside of the rodeo community. At a time when most women still rode sidesaddle, they

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ABOVE: Unknown lady bronc riders. OPPOSITE: Dorothy Morrel on Skuball, 1920, Vina, California.



not only rode astride, but they rode dangerous animals. Despite the fact that most of them married (some multiple times) and became mothers, “for a woman to bounce around on a horse in a man’s arena, it was considered unseemly,” says Marvine. “The rumor that all these women were ugly, masculine women wasn’t true. Many of them were quite beautiful.”

And so they were. Photos of Vera McGinnis, Mabel Strickland and Florence Hughes Randolph reveal natural beauty to rival that of the silver-screen actresses of the time. Some of the lady bronc riders

were even asked to play small roles in Hollywood movies. And they had style.

Each woman dressed distinctively. In the early years, they all wore split riding skirts—long calf-length skirts made to allow a woman to comfortably sit astride a horse. Often handmade of leather, they were embellished with fringe, glass beads, brass studs, the wearer’s initials, and even images of card suits. Later cowgirls tended to wear English-style jodhpur-like pants, which belled out from their hips, then narrowed at their knees and were tucked into their custom-made boots.

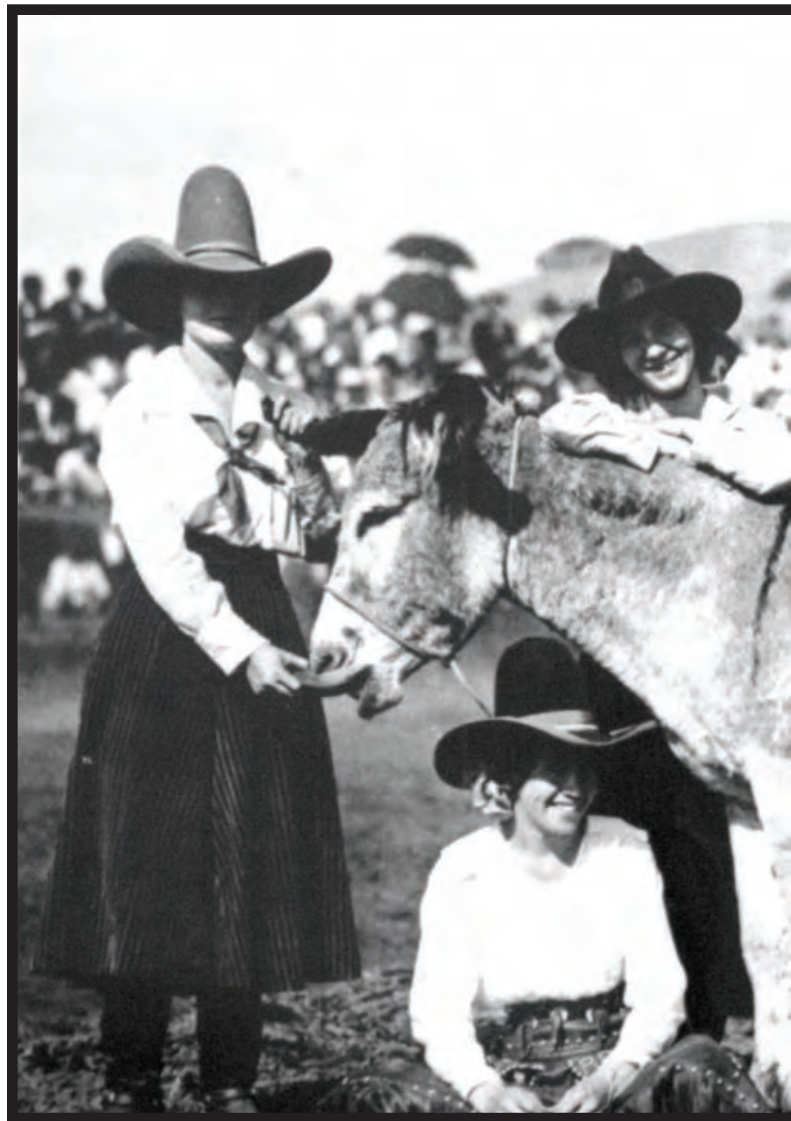
Colorful satin shirts, bright silk scarves, beaded gloves and wide-brimmed hats were common throughout the period.

Two women known best for their interesting fashion sense were Prairie Rose Henderson and Kittie Canutt. Henderson, who competed during the teens and 1920s, wore extravagant outfits of beaded leather, sequins and feathers. Canutt, first wife of famous all-around cowboy Yakima Canutt, sported a diamond in her front tooth, which she would often pawn when she was short on entry-fee money.

The decline of women riding broncs can be attributed to a single tragic accident. At the 1929 Pendleton Roundup, Bonnie McCarroll mounted a horse named Black Cat. Although a number of women rode their stirrups “slick,” most women rode with their stirrups hobbled, or tied together beneath the horse’s belly. This was thought to be safer and offer more stability for the female rider, but in reality, it was far more dangerous. With the stirrups hobbled, it was harder for the rider to kick free when she was being thrown. McCarroll’s stirrups were hobbled.

Following the accident, the *Oregonian* reported, “Bonnie McCarroll, giving an exhibition of bronco riding, was hurled from her mount as it pitched forward, and the animal turned a somersault on her.” McCarroll was taken to the hospital and died days later from head injuries. Although she was not the first casualty in the history of women’s bronc riding, she was a crowd favorite, and following her death, rodeos enforced stricter regulations on women’s events. Some, particularly the Pendleton Roundup, banned them altogether. But women riding broncs never completely disappeared. Many of the women, such as Barbara Inez “Tad” Lucas and the Greenough sisters, rode well into the ’40s and ’50s. In 1948, the Girls Rodeo Association was created, which eventually became what is known today as the Women’s Pro Rodeo Association. The Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association also permits women to compete in the men’s roughstock events.

One by one, the original lady bronc riders retired—injuries, a family, or old age keeping them from competing any longer. Although they left the excitement of the rodeo, it never left them. For example, two months before Fannie Sperry Steele died in a Helena, Mont., nursing home, Dee Marvin visited the 96-year-old for-



mer 1912 World Champion Lady Bronc Rider. Marvin brought with her an audio recording of an interview conducted at a rodeo during Steele’s bronc-riding days.

“The tape started with the roar of the crowds and when she heard that, she sat straight up in her bed and got such a huge smile on her face,” Marvin says. “Fifteen years just melted from her.”

Maybe in her last moments Fannie Sperry Steele again heard the roar of the crowds, the slap of her skirt on the saddle, and the jingle of spurs. Maybe she smelled the dust billowing from pounding hooves, her own sweat mingling with that of the animal beneath her, and the distinctive scent of well-worn leather. Maybe she felt the rise and fall of a bucking horse and the feel of air rushing past, blowing her dark hair back and whipping the tails of her silk scarf about her flushed, smiling face. Maybe she was, once more, World Champion Lady Bronc Rider. ■

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W. S. BOWMAN



The Golden Age of the Cowgirl

By Cheri Coleen Campbell-Raftery

No single item of apparel or tack signifies the rise of the American cowgirl like the split riding skirt. At first, the skirts were made out of necessity by women who had inherited a ranch from their fathers or deceased husbands. They were plain, fitted at the waist, with a row of buttons on one or both sides, and initially were made of the same canvas material men's trousers were sewn from in the age before Levi's were invented. Because no pattern existed, and because most women were seamstresses, their skirts were done in different ways with different materials, but leather soon became the standard.

Even so, the split skirt challenged contemporary gender stereotypes. When rancher Evelyn Cameron wore her split skirt into Miles City, Mont., in 1895, she ran afoul of a law prohibiting women from wearing "divided garments" into town. Nevertheless, split skirts were soon common in the West.

The heyday of the split skirt was between 1890 and 1940, and its use declined sharply after the 1929 death of rodeo rider Bonnie McCarroll. Soon after, the major rodeos began outlawing women's riding events, and the heavy leather split riding skirts were hung up in closets or stored in steamer trunks. Very few of these stylish and functional skirts have survived. Those that have are lovingly preserved in displays that capture an important period in which women traded aprons for riding gear and earned their places alongside men riding in rodeos and working on ranches. ■

Split skirts and many other apparel artifacts of what some call the Golden Age of the Cowgirl are on public display in the traveling collection of Cheri Coleen Campbell-Raftery. Contact her at srcuttinhoss@aol.com.

ABOVE: Bea Kirnan, Rose Smith, Ruth Roach, Mildred Douglas, Mayme Stroud, Bonnie McCarroll and probably Princis Mohawk. OPPOSITE: Bonnie McCarroll getting thrown from Silver in Pendleton, Ore., circa 1911. BELOW: A few pieces of Cheri Campbell-Raftery's extensive collection of lady bronc-rider gear.

PHOTOS COURTESY CHERI RAFTERY

