

Western Heroines: Real and Fictional Cowgirls

by
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In the mid-1800s when Susan B. Anthony and other feminists were declaring females equal and advocating changes in dress, behavior, and social conditions, Sally Skull was riding the western frontier of Texas clad in white rawhide bloomers, rifle across her saddle, trading horses and freight-loads of cotton and other goods across the Mexican border. She was but one of many "cowgirls"—rawhide heroines who were wranglers, rustlers, ranchers, outlaws on a frontier where necessity dictated emancipation. Today, despite the image of the classic pioneer woman in gingham dress and weathered bonnet, the cowgirl is our only folk heroine to survive the passing of the frontier. Alive in the spectacle of the rodeo and the ranching business, her essence has historical roots in fact and fiction which challenge the stereotype of the pioneer woman.

What is this stereotype? Emerson Hough best describes the image in his characterization of the sunbonneted woman of the Trans-Mississippi West. He calls her "the chief figure of the American West, the figure of the ages." Then he adds:

This major figure is not the long-haired, fringed legging man riding a raw-honed pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon—her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before. There was America. . . There was the seed of America's wealth. There was the great romance of all America—the woman in the sunbonnet; and not, after all, the hero with the rifle across his saddle horn.

Historians and fiction writers concur, for diaries, letters, and reminiscences testify to the admirable perseverance of this homemaker and stories dramatize the pioneer woman's long-suffering. But, despite the accuracy of many of these writings, scholars of the West have tended to see this woman as the only female type who inhabited the frontiers. Hough's description of her as "sad-faced" alludes to her unwillingness to be there in the first

place, and critics like Wallace Stegner have taken her resistance to mean that she neither was suited to the frontier nor, after she lived there, knew what the "real" West was like since she was mostly confined to the home.¹

Even in light of the "sunbonnet myth," this last notion is particularly galling when these women's own diaries and letters often say otherwise. Alice Marriot in her book *Hell on Horses and Women* says:

Never once . . . did I hear a woman acknowledge the truth of the statement that The cow business is . . . hell on horses and women. I have come to the conclusion that that oft-quoted statement originated with a man. . . . Aod, manlike, they said the words and attributed them to woman, without asking women how they really felt.²

Sarah Lippincott, interviewing Greeley, Colorado women in 1873, writes:

The women of Greeley seem to me to have spirit and cheerfulness. Yet I felt . . . they must be discontented, unhappy, rebellious, and I tried to win from them the sorrowful secret. I gave them to understand that I was a friend to the sex, ready at any time, on the shortest notice, to lift up my voice against the wrongs and disabilities of women; that I deeply felt for wives and daughters whom tyrant man had dragged away from choice Gospel and shopping privileges. But the perverse creatures actually declared that they were never so happy and so healthy as they are here, right on the edge of the great American desert.³

Moreover, in addition to the valid argument that homelife in the West surely was a part of the "real" West, cowgirls—women who dealt in some fashion with the cattle frontier—certainly knew this homelife but were at work out of the home as well. The result is numerous accounts, not of "gaunt and sadfaced women" who sat in wagons behind horses, but women who straddled the creatures and changed their lives as a result.

J. Frank Dobie in *The Mustangs* clarifies this last point when he says "no man by taking thought can add to his stature, but by taking a horse he can."⁴ The same was true of cowgirls. Mastery of the horse gave them clout and verve. It also changed their attitude. As Joyce Roach, author of *The Cowgirls* says: "If you spend all your days in a field, behind a plow looking at the rump of a horse, trying hard not to step in something, it affects your attitude. But if you get on that horse, ride him, then the world's a completely different place."⁵ Not only was the horse a natural equalizer, but the cattle frontier as well demanded of women unprecedented roles outside the home. Sometimes a wife was the only "hand" a husband had and she roped, branded, and rode fence along with him; Mrs. Charlie

Hart from New Mexico was her husband's only help so when the baby came, she placed him in a tomato box in front of the pommel, and took him along with her to ride fence.⁶ Sometimes women were widowed or abandoned and, as a result, had to rear families and run ranches on their own. An example is Mrs. William Mannix of Avon, Montana whose polio-stricken husband left to her the care of 13 children and a ranch that was the family's sole support. For 15 years Mrs. Mannix drove a stage to supplement their income while she ran the ranch.⁷ The result of these added responsibilities and freedoms was a change in demeanor. Sidesaddles were shucked for western saddles; split skirts or pants replaced long skirts; and many a woman carried a gun for protection. Mrs. E. J. Guerin, widowed at age 15 and forced to work on the river and as a rancher, miner, and bartender, writes:

I would say that from the fact of my being so long thrown among strangers and all along accustomed to depend on myself, I had attained a strength of character, a firmness, and self-reliance, that amounted to almost masculine force. In addition to this, I was impetuous, self-willed—traits induced by the peculiarities of my surroundings, and whose existence will account for much of my subsequent career.⁸

This Mrs. Guerin says in answer to the question of why she wore men's clothing.

Despite these distinguishing and rather fascinating differences between cowgirl and her other frontier sisters, fiction writers have persisted in the "sunbonnet myth," and only in the sub-literary dime novel did these rawhide heroines capture the public's imagination. In the dime novel, what we now see as sensational and even ridiculous characters, plots, and trappings, had historical precedent in the cowgirls' lives. For instance, most dime novels about cowboys and cowgirls celebrated expert horsemanship, excellent marksmanship, and daring characters who were tough, independent, and resourceful. Recurrent characters in these novels about the cattle frontier were the cattle barons or stockmen who violated water rights or individual rights on the open range. Many situations culminated in a fight for justice in some small town courthouse, where the judge and the marshall might be too inept to enforce justice. Justice or revenge were the dominant motives for violence when the hero or heroine used their guns. Many daring deeds were done in the name of love. The heroine even played two roles similar to those she played in real life: the girl "Pard" was the companion to the cowboy, masculine, capable of doing what he did, sharing equally in the danger, but making occasional concessions to femini-

ty. The girl "Sport" was beautiful but wore men's clothes, performed feats with a gun, whip, and knife, often saved the day, but almost never won the hero's romantic attentions.

Test the verisimilitude of the above description with these following examples of real cowgirls. First, Lizzie Williams, unlike many women who drove cattle up the trail, drove her own branded herds up the Chisholm Trail from 1879-1889 despite the fact she was married. Her husband was known for his heavy drinking so when she married him, Lizzie had him sign a contract that allowed her rights to her own property. Before she married Hezekiah Williams, Lizzie had been a school teacher and writer for *Frank Leslie's Magazine*. With these earnings, she bought her own herd. Though she liked silks and diamonds, and was known for her ladylike bearing, sometimes her ranch-rearing showed. Once on a trip to Austin, she saw Major George W. Littlefield, an important cattleman, banker, and gracious Southern gentleman. Lizzie, who had reason not to respect what she thought were some of Littlefield's underhanded ways, said to him, "Hello, you old cattle thief," to which the mannered Major could only smile and bow.⁹

Sally Skull was married three times and divorced as many, but to her was left the rearing of two children. Because she had grown up on a South Texas ranch, she turned to what she knew best: horse trading. But Sally's horse trading took place across the Mexican border where her mastery of Spanish, her reputation with a gun, and her spirited mount Redbuck, were said to have saved her from several scrapes. Reports on Sally vary, but it was generally agreed she was a classic "cusser" and hard-nosed dealer. During the Civil War she ran a freight line to Mexico where she traded cotton and other goods for guns for the Confederates. She was known as a square dealer and more than once ended up in jail for her loyalties to her customers. Most descriptions are of her dressed in rawhide split skirt or men's clothes mounted on Redbuck, equally impressive with a bright Mexican blanket and silver-trimmed saddle.¹⁰ She was bold, aggressive, and to-the-point. One account shows her succinct method for handling a situation. A preacher and his team were stuck in the road so that Sally and a freight-load could not pass. Sally cursed the horses, telling them, among other things, to "get the hell out of there." The horses holted, freed themselves from the mud, and went on down the road. Later, when Sally came upon the same team again stuck in the road, the preacher said, "Lady, will you speak the these horses again?"¹¹

Ann Bassett Willis of Brown's Park, Colorado had to deal from

her childhood with cattle barons. In an argument over water rights in 1910, she finally refused to let the cattlemen in question use her watering hole. An argument ensued and when her foreman, Tom Yarberry, was charged with stealing and butchering a heifer, she also was brought to trial. Donning her prettiest dress, Ann entered the courtroom a lady despite her virtually unchaperoned and tom-boyish youth in the Green River country. During the course of the trial, she exposed her enemy Ora Haley as the real culprit since it was discovered he had enlarged his herd from six thousand recorded on the county's assessor's books to 10,000. John Rolfe Burroughs, historian of Brown's Hole, says:

That Ann Bassett was guilty as sin was beside the point. In her writings, Ann says: "I did everything they ever accused me of, and a whole lot more." Everybody knew it, and very few people in Northwestern Colorado cared. . . . She was a heroine. She looked—and acted—the part. A lone woman, a smallish woman, a woman still young and exceedingly attractive had brought the mighty Haley to a standstill. Holding him up to public obloquy, Ann Bassett had whipped the daylights out of him.¹²

Not all cowgirls' destinies ended so well. Cattle Kate, whose real name was Ella Watson, was hanged with her rustling partner Jim Averill in 1889. Though there was some indication that their rustling was "justified," that is, they robbed from cattlemen who were squeezing out the small stockman, they still died a macabre death. Mari Sandoz writes of it in *The Cattleman*, when she reports that they strangled to death slowly, hung as they were from a short pine tree and that Kate's "skirts were blowing and ballooning in the updraft and slow dying."¹³

In just these four examples, we can see the progenitors of the dime novel heroines. And there is reason to believe there was an even closer affinity: that some of the dime novel heroines were directly patterned after real women. For instance, Rowdy Kate of *Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado; or Rowdy Kate From Right Bower* (1882), announces in a typical Southwestern boast: "I'm a regular old double distilled typhoon, you bet." In the 1870s there was a Rowdy Kate who may have thought of herself as a double-distilled typhoon. She was a dance hall girl, among other things.¹⁴ And in *The Jaguar Queen; or, The Outlaws of the Sierra Madre* (1872), Katrina Hartstein goes about with seven pet jaguars and is the leader of a gang. Annie Sokalski accompanied her soldier-husband to his duty posts in the mid-1860s along with her thirteen hunting dogs which she kept on a leash. She wore a riding habit made of wolfskin and trimmed with wolf tails, spent hours at target practice, and was

as good a rider as many of the calvary.¹⁵ It's possible that author Frederick Whittaker, who himself had served in the army, patterned his heroine after her. The first dime novel to cast this type of heroine, *Bob Woolf, the Border Ruffian; or, The Girl Dead-Shot* (1878), may have been based on the life of Mountain Charlie (Hurricane Nell in the novel), who joined miners at Pike's Peak in 1859 dressed like, and passing for, a man. Mrs. E. J. Guerin published her autobiography in 1861, early enough for the author, Edward Wheeler, to have known of her.¹⁶

Reviewing Erastus Beadle's stable of writers, we see that these authors had the experience and the direction from Beadle to write as authentically as they could about the West. Beadle perceived his publishing venture in the mode of the good story, told by an older, experienced generation to their youngsters, as was done after the opening of the Eastern States and the War of 1812. Among other requirements, he stated: "We require unquestioned originality."¹⁷ This was not difficult for writers like Joseph E. Badger, Prentiss Ingraham, Sam Hall, Mayne Reid, and E. L. Wheeler, who all had lived in the West. And, as Douglas Branch says, "the greatest dime novelists have not been pale young men from Connecticut, but men who had known the frontier."¹⁸

If real cowgirls were not enough to inspire these dime novel heroines, then another group of cowgirls were: the women of the Wild West shows and the rodeos. Often second generation ranch women, they reenacted their skill with rope, horse, and gun, the necessary activities of the real range women—and, for money. In 1882, the first rodeo with prizes awarded was held in Pecos, Texas, and that same year, William F. Cody was asked to stage a celebration of the fourth of July in North Platte, Nebraska. The Old Glory Blowout, as it was called, featured cowboys in riding and roping events and mock Indian attack on the Deadwood stage. In 1883, the show was renamed Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and in 1885, Phoebe Anne Moses, known as Annie Oakley stole the show. Though "Little Sure Shot" began her career with a gun, in 1886 she ran a horse race against Lillian Smith and by 1887 there were a dozen women in the show performing such events as trick riding, square dancing on horseback and wild horse races. During the heyday of the Wild West show, there were more than 116 imitators of Buffalo Bill's show and most boasted female talent.

One show worth mentioning due to its outstanding local talent was the Colonel Mulhall Show from Oklahoma. Teddy Roosevelt saw them perform in 1889 at a Cowboy Tournament at the Rough

Rider's Reunion in Oklahoma City and there he dubbed the star, thirteen year old Lucille Mulhall, "cowgirl." Though the name had appeared once before in 1887 on a Cheyenne Days rodeo program, the name stuck, and Lucille Mulhall indeed popularized the heroics the rodeo cowgirl was to be known for. As an example of her daring, when her father told her she could have her own herd when she could brand her own cattle, she went out and branded all the strays she could find with her saddle cinch ring. Roosevelt told her she could ride in his inaugural parade if she could rope a wolf and three hours later she returned from the range with the creature dragging behind.¹⁸ During her career she made her name as a roper, a trick rider, and a steer tier. Here is one report by an old cowhand:

They had a big steer tying show, Zack Mulhall and his bunch at our fairgrounds, and his daughter, Lucille. She looked about eighteen and wore a divided skirt. First woman I'd ever seen that wasn't on a side saddle. And she was a fine steer tier. She could rope those steers, drag 'em down and tie 'em just like a man.¹⁹

Early cowgirls like Lucille Mulhall were not only spectacular models for the dime novelists, but the nadir of the dime novel was the Golden Age of the rodeo.²¹ With the end of *Wild West Weekly* in the early 1900s and the girl pard, Arietta Murdock, who almost took over the hero's role, the rodeo became the showplace for the cowgirl's accomplishments. Stars like Tad Lucas and Florence Randolph popularized bronc-riding and trick-riding chiefly for Eastern audiences and on tours to Europe. Gone was even a semblance of motivation—the slick plot of the dime novel—and in its stead was raw action, like Tad Lucas' "suicide drag" which she performed by leaning backwards over her horse's hind quarters so that her head almost touched the ground while the horse raced around the arena.

With this image firmly in mind, it is easy to see why there still remains to be written a viable fictional account of the cowgirl.²² The sensation she added to the dime novel, considered by some critics such as Henry Nash Smith a key to the decline of that literature,²³ and the spectacle she created in the rodeo and Wild West show have divorced her from serious consideration either by our novelists or the public. That is, unlike Erastus Beadle planned, the storytelling which melds generation to generation has been replaced by the mass audience's love of event. Both the rapid-fire action of the later dime novels and the individual events performed in the rodeo cancel out the authenticity of *character* that is an inherent part of the cowgirl's history. It is a bold character, perhaps too bold for our cultural prejudices, as this snippet from a cowboy song—one of the few about

cowgirls—shows:

Now come all you cowboys wherever you ride
Beware of the gal when she swings the rawhide
You'll court her and pet her and off she will go
On the trail anytime there's a bucking bronco.

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NOTES

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¹See Stegner's comment that western women writers wrote "from outside not from within" in Robert Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (II, p. 868).

²Alice Marriot, *Hell on Horses and Women* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 10.

³Sarah Lippincott, *New Life in New Lands* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1973), pp. 62-63.

⁴J. Frank Dobie, *The Mustangs* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1952), p. 43.

⁵Interview with Joyce Gibson Roach, May, 1978.

⁶"From Cowboy to Owner and Operator of Vast Domain Marked Life of Charlie Hart," *Clovis News Journal*, Section IV, p. 2, May 29, 1938.

⁷T.J. Tertula, "There Was No Christmas," *True West*, (November-December, 1963), pp. 20-21, 47.

⁸Mrs. E.J. Guerin, *Mountain Charley or The Adventures of Mrs. E.J. Guerin, Who Was Thirteen Years in Male Attire*, edited by Fred Mazzula and William Kostka (New York: Ballentine Books, 1971), pp. 13-14.

⁹Emily Jones Shelton, "Lizzie E. Johnson: A Cattle Queen of Texas," *Southwest Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 50 (January 1947), pp. 351-355.

¹⁰Hobart Huson, *A History of Refugio County* (Woodsboro, Texas: Rooke Foundation, 1955), p. 203.

¹¹"Banquette Home of Gun-Toting Woman," *San Antonio Express*, February 11, 1934.

¹²John Rolfe Burroughs, *Where the Old West Stayed Young* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1962), p. 314.

¹³Mari Sandoz, *The Cattlemen* (New York: Hastings House, 1958), p. 341.

¹⁴Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 129.

¹⁵Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 59-65.

¹⁶Guerin, pp. vii-xi.

¹⁷Albert Johannson, *The House of Beadle and Adams* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), II, p.4.

¹⁸Douglas Branch, *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 181.

¹⁹Louise Cheney. "Lucille Mulhall. Fabulous Cowgirl," *Real West*, Volume 12 (March 1969), pp. 13-15

²⁰Typed interview from a tape recording made by Mody Boatright, December 27, 1952, with Harry Stephens

²¹In the *Wild West Weekly* story "Ted Strong's Wild West Show; or The Making of an Indian Chief," many performers of the Wild West 101 Show are mentioned by name. In "Rawhide Ralph; or The Worst in Texas," author Cornelius Shea alludes in such rodeo stars as Florence Randolph.

²²William M. Hudson in *Andy Adams: Storyteller and Novelist of the Great Plains* says that Adams wrote a novel, *Tom*, after the nickname of the heroine, which details her life and abilities as a cowgirl who can ride, shoot, herd cattle, and wrangle horses like a man. She married the hero, Bob, in the end. Adams never published his novel. Of course, there are other such fictional treatments like O. Henry's "Hearts and Crosses" and Hough's *North of 36*. But these treatments never show the cowgirl to have the grit she historically possessed. Spear Morgan's *Belle Star* is a recent treatment of the over-romanticized outlaw. In it she is ugly, disturbed, suffers toothaches, menstrual pains, and migraines.

²³See *Virgin Land*. Despite Smith's name for these cowgirls, "Amazons," both the dime novel characters and the rodeo stars hardly qualified. Denver Doll, Wild Kate, and Calamity Jane are of "above" medium height. Ted Lucas, Florence Randolph, and Lucille Mulhall each weighed right at 100 pounds. It is likely that the novelists (who also used the term Amazon) wanted their readers to see these women as larger than life. The horse also added to their stature.

As for the change of the genteel heroine to the "Amazon" marking the decline of the dime novel, the historical incidence of the availability of these heroines hardly damaged a genre that already was a product of fierce competition between the several publishing firms.