

# Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo: 1929-1947\*

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Rodeo cowgirls were among America's pioneer professional athletes, achieving financial success and international acclaim prior to the Golden Age of sport, and long before female professional athletes were widely accepted by the public. Over 450 women enjoyed professional rodeo careers between 1890 and 1943. These cowgirls were featured at many of the biggest, most lucrative rodeos in the United States and abroad, with the top cowgirls' earnings equalling and sometimes surpassing those of the foremost cowboys. Furthermore, unlike most female athletes, cowgirls received overwhelmingly favorable and unbiased treatment from the press.<sup>7</sup>

Rodeo itself developed slowly and did not begin the transition to modern sport until 1929 when the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) was formed.<sup>2</sup> Prior to that time, no central organization or record keeping existed, and every rodeo in America was an independent production, with its own rules, and often its own unique events.<sup>3</sup> Rodeos competed fiercely for contestants and fans, and many producers claimed that theirs was the contest for the Championship of the World. Western rodeos like the Cheyenne Frontier Days and Calgary Stampede were the trend-setters until 1922, when the Madison Square Garden Rodeo

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1. For details about cowgirls during the early period see Mary Lou LeCompte, "Cowgirls at the Crossroads: Women in Professional Rodeo: 1885-1922," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* (December 1989): 27-48.

2. Most descriptions include bureaucratization or organization (local, national, regional, etc.), standardized rules, specialization or role differentiation, and keeping of records as characteristic of modern sport. Rodeo possessed none of these characteristics until the formation of the RAA, which provided bureaucratization, standard rules and records for members, but never reached more than 100 rodeos. The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) finally completed the modernization process in the 1960s. For discussion of modernization see Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 5-10, and Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 4-8; for more details on the bureaucratization and modernization of rodeo see Kristine Frederiksson, *American Rodeo* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), chapters 11-14.

3. The Wild Bunch, an organization of rodeo and Wild West show professionals did exist from 1915-1917. It published a monthly magazine, also called the *Wild Bunch*, which showed that the organization never held business meetings, elected officers, or published rules and regulations.

became the foremost contest, and the one whose mythical "World's Championship" titles were most widely accepted. Rodeos in the West were patterned after Wild West shows, whereas eastern contests like the Madison Square Garden Rodeo were forced to develop their own style, without the Indian events, races, and pageantry found in the western events.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s women's competition in bronc riding, trick riding, or relay racing was included at approximately one third of all rodeos. Cowgirl events were especially popular at the most prestigious contests in the Far West, and at rodeos in major eastern cities. The first rodeo cowgirls had also competed against men at small local rodeos. Even after special cowgirl contests were begun and the sport was more widely publicized, women continued to experience considerable success competing against men in steer roping, trick roping and riding, and Roman Racing, while still enjoying the respect and friendship of the cowboys.<sup>5</sup> One of the first women to successfully defeat men in rodeo was Lucille Mulhall. At the 1912 Calgary Stampede she told reporters that the cowboys treated cowgirls like one of themselves, and liked to see them succeed in public. She also noted that cowboys ". . . admire a girl who can handle a horse well."<sup>6</sup>

Before World War I, a majority of successful rodeo cowgirls like Mulhall were also Wild West show stars, but after the war, when the Wild West shows declined in quality and importance, most became paid contract entertainers who performed as well as competed in rodeos. The decline of the Wild West shows paralleled the rising popularity of western films, and motion picture producers often scouted rodeos for prospective talent. The first major beneficiary was Hoot Gibson, who parlayed his title as All-Around Cowboy at the 1912 Pendleton Roundup into a successful movie career.<sup>7</sup> Early films such as those in which Gibson starred usually depicted remarkably authentic western women, who were self-reliant, athletic, and also sexy. Rodeo stars like Bertha Blancett, Dorothy Morrell, and Mildred Douglas portrayed these roping, riding, robust cowgirls who sometimes captured bandits at gunpoint, or galloped wildly across the plains with the cowboys. In the ensuing years, cowgirls Vera McGinnis, Bonnie Gray, and Mable Strickland also worked in films, and in

4. For a fuller explanation of the impact of the Madison Square Garden Rodeos see LeCompte, "Wild West Frontier Days, Roundups and Stampede?: Rodeo Before there was Rodeo," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 12 (December 1985): 54-67

5. Based on all of the data collected for this study, including but not limited to rodeo programs, prize lists, and day sheets, as well as scrapbooks and memorabilia, photographs, and files on individual cowgirls housed in the archives of the National Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (NRHOF); Prorodeo Hall of Fame and Museum of the American Cowboy, Colorado Springs, Colorado (PRHOF); National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center, Hereford, Texas (CGHOF); and the Glenbow Archives, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (Glenbow); interviews with Mary Ellen Barton, Hereford, Texas, 15 March 1988; Nancy Binford, Hereford, Texas, 15 March 1988; Alice Greenough and Marjorie Greenough, Tucson, Arizona, 19 May 1988; Tad Lucas, Ft. Worth, Texas, 26 February 1988; Dixie Reger Mosley, Hereford, Texas, 15 March 1988, and 17 June 1989; and Isora De Racey Young, Stephenville, Texas, 27 February 1988; *The Billboard*, 1897-1944: *Hoofs and Horns*, 1929-1948; *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, February-March 1917- 1948; *New York Times*, October-November 1922-1948; *Chicago Tribune*, May-November 1922-1947.

6. "Rain and Cold Fail to Keep Eleven Thousand Away From the Second Performance." *Calgary Daily Herald*, 4 September 1912, 6

7. Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 71-77.

1934 helped form the Association of Film Equestriennes, with backing and assistance from the Riding Actors' Association of America.<sup>8</sup>

Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios (MGM), perhaps looking for a female Hoot Gibson, in 1927 commissioned Lambert Brothers Jewelers of New York to produce a \$10,000 silver MGM Trophy to be awarded to the Champion All-Around Cowgirl at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. The trophy was intended to be a “. . . tribute to the charm and courage of western womanhood. . .” Rules stipulated that the trophy would be retired when the same woman won it three years in succession. Today the original MGM Trophy, first won by Florence Hughes (Randolph), is exhibited at the national Rodeo Hall of Fame at Oklahoma City, donated by three-time winner Tad Lucas, who retired it in 1930.<sup>9</sup>

Although engravings clearly state that Lucas retired the original trophy in 1930, *New York Times* in 1932 reported that she also won MGM trophies at Madison Square Garden in 1931 and 1932.<sup>10</sup> More intriguing, it was also reported that Randolph, 1927 winner of the original Madison Square Garden MGM Trophy, also won an MGM Trophy that was awarded to the All-Around Cowgirl at rodeos produced by Fred Beebe in 1931 and 1932.<sup>11</sup> While only one MGM Trophy exists today, it is very possible that there were originally two, or even three of them. Whatever their numbers, the significance of such a valuable award for a female athlete cannot be overlooked, nor can the fact that Hollywood was seriously interested in female rodeo stars.

Like cowgirls of the earlier decades, Tad Lucas and her peers were products of the frontier ranching communities of the American West, where they had grown up working and playing on horseback. Virtually all were Caucasian, and a sizeable minority were either immigrants or first-generation Americans. Since most were from families at the lower end of the economic scale, they had been put to work alongside their siblings as soon as they were able to contribute. Fathers usually assigned tasks on the basis of ability, not gender, and as a result the women mastered most of the skills of the ranching business. Throughout their lives, cowgirls expressed pride in their ability to do “man’s work,” be it shoeing horses, building fences, branding cattle, or driving a rural mail route through the Montana snow storms.<sup>12</sup>

While these independent, assertive, athletic women hardly fit prevailing mainstream ideals of femininity or prospective wives, they must have seemed

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8. Shelly Armitage, “Rawhide Heroines,” in *The American Self*, ed. Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 176-77; “The Corral,” *The Billboard*, 24 November 1934, 39; William Klette, “The Saga of Vera Mac,” *Western Horseman*, January 1969, 75.

9. MGM Trophy, NRHOF: “The Corral,” *The Billboard*, 29 October 1927, 67.

10. “Rodeo Champions Chosen,” *New York Times*, 31 October 1932, 32; “Garden Rodeo,” *Ibid.*, 5 November 1932, 53.

11. “MGM Trophy Reaches Fred Beebe’s Rodeo,” *The Billboard*, 10 September 1932, 35; “The Corral,” *ibid.*, 8 October 1932, 35. Beebe produced the Madison Square Garden rodeo in 1927, but not thereafter. Randolph won the trophies at Beebe’s 1931 and ‘32 rodeos at St. Louis. Many of Randolph’s trophies and memorabilia were destroyed by fire, and Randolph is deceased, so the mystery may never be solved.

12. See note 5 above. For a detailed discussion of the influence of the frontier lifestyle on cowgirls, and their acceptance in their communities see LeCompte, “Champion Cowgirls of Rodeo’s Golden Age,” *Journal of the West* 28 (April 1989): 88-94.

ideal to their peers, for throughout the years, over 90 percent of rodeo cowgirls have been married to rodeo cowboys. When rodeo couples divorced, the cowgirl often married another cowboy within a very short time. Prior to World War II, they were in a distinct minority, as married women rarely worked outside the home.<sup>13</sup> Rodeo couples, along with other contestants, often travelled together and camped out along the “rodeo road,” forming a kind of extended family. Even after housing and transportation improved, they remained a very close-knit, homogeneous group, although somewhat suspicious of outsiders. Since no insurance was available to rodeo contestants, they depended on one another in times of illness or injury, and were to a large extent self-sufficient.<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Greenough described such a life during several summers in the 1930s when she and her husband, bulldogger, “Heavy” Henson and their young son joined a rodeo company which toured Canada by train. Despite sometimes primitive living conditions, it was a wonderful time in her life, partly because everyone got along so well together, with one exception: “One of the cowboys had married a ‘town girl’ and she just never did fit in.”<sup>15</sup>

The presence of the town girl is explained by the fact that while most of the cowgirls were married to rodeo cowboys, the reverse was never true, for in the rodeo community, as on the frontier itself, men far outnumbered women. Of course, those cowboys not married to professional cowgirls had to support their families solely on their winnings. Despite the camaraderie, respect, and admi-



Margie Greenough riding a bronc. Photo courtesy of Margie Greenough Henson.

13. As late as 1940, 90% of women were married, but only 15% of married women were in the labor force. See Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond. American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 16-21

14. Ibid.; Marjorie and Alice Greenough interviews; Vera McGinnis. *Rodeo Road: My Life as a Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York: Hastings House, 1974), ch. 4-14.

15. Marjorie Greenough interview.

ration within the group, the men were dominant, and when they finally did organize to improve their economic status, they were concerned solely with themselves, and not with women's needs or interests.

It is also true that women's place in professional rodeo was never as secure as men's, simply because cowboys, but not cowgirls, were essential to the image of the mythical West which was the basis for the popularity of the sport. Women's position was first weakened in 1929, and after 1936 began to decline seriously, so that by 1943 cowgirl contests had virtually disappeared from major rodeos. Whereas between 1929 and 1942, an average of forty-nine women had earned money in professional rodeo competition annually, for the years 1943-1946 winnings were reported for an average of only seven women annually.<sup>16</sup>

Several explanations have been offered for this development, but none is entirely satisfactory." It appears that rather than a single cause, a series of different factors including social change, upheaval within the rodeo profession, the rising power of two patriarchal organizations, Hollywood stars, changing formats in western films, and certain actions and inactions by cowgirls themselves all combined to remove women from the rodeo arena, although two producers played particularly critical roles and brought about lasting change. Even though female barrel racers are often among the top ten money winners in professional rodeo today, cowgirls have yet to attain the position they once enjoyed. This paper will examine the conditions and events which led to the demise of the professional rodeo cowgirls between 1929, when two pivotal events began altering the status of women in professional rodeo, and 1947, the last year cowgirls were not represented by their own organization, the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA).<sup>18</sup>

## I

The first rodeo cowgirls achieved success during the 1890s, when female professional athletes were generally not accepted by the mainstream of society, while their glory years paralleled the so-called Golden Age of American sport in the 1920s and 1930s. Even at that time, the most popular female athletes remained amateur participants in the more acceptable feminine sports like tennis and swimming. As female professionals in a traditionally male sport, cowgirls remained unique, particularly in their popularity, and their generally excellent press coverage.<sup>19</sup>

Although consistently outnumbered by cowboys, there were many more professional cowgirls than has generally been believed. More than 250 women competed in professional rodeo between 1929 and 1947, with the average career

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16. *The Billboard*, 1929-1944: *Hoofs and Horns*, 1929-1946, archives, PRHOF, NRHOF, CGHOF.

17. Mary Lou Remley, "From Sidesaddle to Rodeo," *Journal of the West* (July 1978): 44-52; Joyce Gibson Raoch, *The Cowgirls* (Houston: Cordovan, 1977), 125-27; Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1984), 191 and 225.

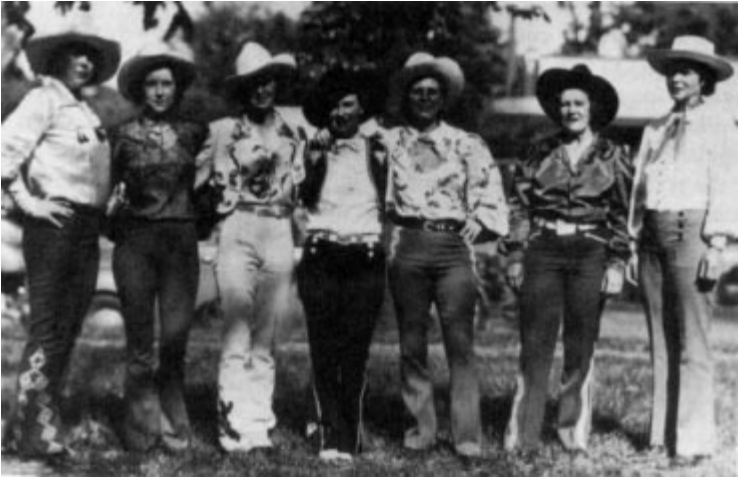
18. Formed in 1948 as the Girl's Rodeo Association (GRA).

19. See LeCompte, "Champion Cowgirls of Rodeo's Golden Age," and "Cowgirls at the Crossroads."

lasting over eight years. More important, among the 132 who remained in the business for three years or longer, the average career lasted fourteen years. These women were obviously dedicated professionals, and most were also all-around athletes. A vast majority of them competed in two or more events, and worked as contract entertainers as well as contestants.<sup>20</sup> Despite their versatility, almost 60 percent competed in bronc riding, which during the 1930s, became both the most profitable and the most controversial cowgirl contest.

The problem was that although most cowgirls rode slick just like the cowboys, some favored an easier but far more dangerous method known as hobble riding, in which the stirrups were tied together beneath the horse. While rodeos rarely made rules specifying which technique cowgirls should use, many major contests awarded bonus points to women who rode slick, and even without special rules, those riders enjoyed an advantage.<sup>21</sup> When Fannie Sperry inquired about the regulations governing the 1912 Calgary Stampede, producer Guy Weadick gave this explanation:

We allow lady contestants in the bucking horse event to hobble their stirrups if they so desire. It is needless for me to say that any lady riding the horse slick and



Group of Cowgirls in 1938: left to right: Grace White, Margie Greenough, Vivian White, Vaughn Krieg, Violet Clement, Alice Adams, Peggy Long. Photo courtesy of National Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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20. Among the women with careers of 3 years or more, 29% competed in 2 events, 41% in 3 or more events, and 75% were performers as well as contestants. Among the women with careers of 2 years or less, only 11% competed in more than one event; and 95% did no performing or contract work. For sources see note 5.

21. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 1 March 1930, 59; "Stampede Closes with Naming of Champions," *Winnipeg Tribune*, 18 August 1913, 5; Liz Stiffler and Tona Blake, "Fannie Sperry-Steele: Montana's Champion Bronc Rider," *Montana Magazine of Western History* 32 (Spring 1982): 51. "Stampede Ended Saturday with Awarding of World's Championships," *Manitoba Free Press*, 18 August 1913, 4-5.

clean will certainly be considered by the judges much better than those who hobble their stirrups.<sup>22</sup>

Sperry won the Calgary championship and, along with other slick riders like Bertha Blancett and Tillie Baldwin, dominated the event. But since few spectators could tell the difference, fans sometimes selected flamboyant hobble riders as their favorites, and expressed their disapproval when slick riders defeated them.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the success of Sperry-Steele and her counterparts, ease of learning apparently prevailed over safety, and by the mid 1930s there were few slick riders left in rodeo. Editorialists maintained that hobble riding required virtually no skill, and hence was not a real contest, an opinion still held by some rodeo veterans today.<sup>24</sup> Although obviously easier than slick, hobble riding was more difficult than most critics admitted. Many women who tried to master it failed to make a living at the event.<sup>25</sup> More important, the very thing which made hobble riding easier to learn, was also responsible for the greater danger. When riders were bucked off, they were often unable to free themselves from the hobbles, and were trampled by their horses. Four notable cowgirls, all experienced, successful bronc riders, died in that way, while no fatal accidents involving cowgirls slick riders have ever been recorded.<sup>26</sup>

The bronc riding controversy reached its zenith in 1929, a year in which several other events including the Depression and formation of the RAA, an organization of contest producers from Western States, combined to alter the position of rodeo cowgirls. The first pivotal event was the tragic death of popular bronc rider Bonnie McCarroll, who was thrown and trampled to death at the prestigious Pendleton Roundup in 1929.<sup>27</sup> McCarroll had begun her career in 1915 as a slick rider, and was still competing slick as late as 1922. When or why she made the change to hobble riding is not known, but it cost her her life.<sup>28</sup> Although McCarroll was not the first cowgirl to die in the arena,<sup>29</sup> her fame and popularity, as well as the prestige of the Pendleton Roundup, focused more attention on her case than had been accorded previous bronc riding fatalities, and the furor did not immediately die down. Along with expressions

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22. Weadick to Sperry, 11 June 1912, letter in the Guy Weadick Papers, file M1278, Glenbow. In bronc riding, judges award 0-100 points to each rider and to each horse. These scores are combined and the rider with the highest total is the winner. In the early days, horses were mounted in the arenas and rides continued until contestants were bucked off or horses were tamed. Today's more humane rules require men to ride for 8 seconds and women for 6.

23. A notable example occurred at the 1913 Winnipeg Stampede, where the bronc riding was won by Fannie Sperry-Steele. See "Blanche McGaughey's Sensation," *Winnipeg Tribune*, 12 August 1913, 3; "Much Dissatisfaction over Women's Bronc Riding Title Won by Fannie Sperry Steele," *Manitoba Free Press*, 18 August 1913, 4; *Winnipeg Tribune*, 18 August 1913, 5.

24. Mosley interviews; *The Billboard*, 1920-1940, inclusive. See for example "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 25 August 1917, 25; 17 March 1923, 77; and 24 November 1927, 29; "Wimmen's Writes," *ibid.*, 4 August 1917, 28 and 2 March 1918, 29; *The Wild Bunch*, October 1917, 6.

25. Greenoughs and Lucas interviews.

26. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 10 August 1929, 54; 19 October 1929, 61; 1 September 1934, 32; 8 September 1934, 36; and 7 October 1933, 31; *Ketch Pen*, Spring 1988, 21.

27. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 5 October 1929, 61; and 19 October 1929, 61.

28. Cover, *The Wild Bunch*, November 1915; "Best Show Ever," *The Billboard*, 7 October 1922; "The Corral," *ibid.*, 5 October 1929, 61; and 19 October 1929, 61; Roach, Cowgirls, 118; and Milt Hinkle, "Cowgirls-Rodeo's Sugar and Spice," *Frontier Times*, October/November 1971, 40.

29. Cowgirl Bronc riders killed previously included Mrs. Ed Wright in 1917, and Louise Hartwig in 1926.

of sorrow and outrage came many calls for reform. While some supported outright bans of the event, others advocated changing the rules by outlawing hobble riding.<sup>30</sup>

One group that could have provided invaluable assistance was the newly-formed RAA. Unfortunately, that organization consistently ignored pleas that they sanction women's bronc riding and issue rules ensuring the safety of participants. Had they acted, they might well have increased the popularity of the event and also helped prevent several future cowgirl fatalities. They might also have garnered more support from contestants, who felt the RAA was insensitive to their needs.<sup>31</sup>

Although some cowboys expressed doubts, producers of small rodeos were often enthusiastic supporters of the RAA, since membership gave them an advantage in attracting participants, whose entry fees often spelled the difference between financial success and failure. Some cowboys were attracted to RAA rodeos because the organization had developed a complex system of points, based on prize money won at sanctioned rodeos. The cowboy with the



Bonnie McCarroll thrown from Silver in 1915. This photo is often erroneously cited as an illustration of McCarroll's fatal fall in 1929, but it first appeared on the cover of the *Wild Bunch* in November of 1915. Note that Bonnie has no hobbles, and is thrown free and clear of the bronc. Photo courtesy of National Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

30. See for example "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 7 December 1929, 115; 4 January 1930, 59; 18 January 1930, 59; and 25 January 1930, 61; 1 March 1930, 59; 29 March 1930, 97; *Hoofs and Horns*, May 1938, 18.

31. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 7 December 1929, 115; 4 January 1930, 59; 18 January 1930, 59; and 25 January 1930, 61; 1 March 1930, 59; 29 March 1930, 97; *Hoofs and Horns*, May 1938, 18. The reasons for the RAA's opposition to women's contests may never be known, as all of their records have been lost.

most points in his event was designated the official World's Champion at the end of the year, while the individual with the most points overall, collected in more than one event, won the coveted title of All-Around Cowboy.<sup>32</sup> Various trophies and valuable prizes accompanied these titles, so contestants often selected RAA rodeos over independent ones held on the same dates.

The RAA also provided participants with the assurance that all RAA-sanctioned rodeos would be conducted in accordance with published guidelines designed to eliminate undesirable practices and place rodeo on a sporting plane. To be sanctioned, rodeos had to include bronc riding, steer bulldogging, steer roping, and calf roping, conducted according to RAA rules.<sup>33</sup> Although RAA-sanctioned rodeos were required to include only four specific events, the RAA prize structure eventually recognized eight, and many members chose to include all of these, usually at the expense of locally popular contests or events for women.<sup>34</sup> While RAA grew slowly, never having more than one hundred members, and remained controversial through most of its existence, it did standardize rodeo events, and in that regard, its influence spread beyond the membership itself.<sup>35</sup>

With the fallout from the McCarroll accident and the opposition of the RAA, cowgirl bronc riding became increasingly rare in the West during the 1930s, while cowgirl relay racing, a regional phenomenon, maintained its popularity, although it too was quite dangerous. Relay races were independent of rodeo itself. They were held as part of a circuit that also included county fairs, race tracks, and other venues. Relay string owners exerted power since many were wealthy stock contractors on whom rodeos depended for their existence. Consequently, the subject of women's relay races never came up at RAA meetings, and was rarely discussed in the press, like bronc riding.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately for the women who competed in them, relay races were limited to western rodeos which were held outdoors, either at race tracks or specially built arenas such as the one at Cheyenne. They could not be held indoors, and were rarely part of the major eastern circuit which grew increasingly popular in the wake of the Madison Square Garden success. Therefore, cowgirls found themselves in the peculiar position of having few contests other than relay races open to them in the West, and only bronc riding and trick riding at big eastern rodeos that were controlled by powerful independent producers with no interest in or need for joining the RAA.

This situation changed even more in the mid-1930s, when major eastern rodeos began to alter the format of their trick roping and riding events. In order to speed up the proceedings, many changed these events to contract acts, while

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32. "Rule Governing Contests Approved by the Rodeo Association of America," *The Billboard*, 13 April 1929, 57-8; "Rodeo Association of America Issues Certificates of Award Under New Rules," *ibid.*, 6 April 1929, 65; Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 22.

33. Edna L. Shaw, "Rodeo Managers Form Association," *The Billboard*, 16 February 1929, 65.

34. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 22; "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 15 February 1930, 59.

35. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 8 February 1930, 57; "Has the RAA Been a Success?," *ibid.*, 29 March 1930, 13; and many more.

36. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 1929-1942; *Hoofs and Horns*, 1929-1942.

others limited the number of participants by inviting only a few expert practitioners of each. Those select individuals were paid a flat fee for exhibiting their skills, but were also judged, with champions in each event awarded sizeable prizes.<sup>37</sup> Even though the changes affected both cowboy and cowgirl contests, they were much more devastating to women, who had fewer contests.

One result of these developments was that many women who excelled at racing began restricting their activities to the western circuit, while those for whom bronc riding was the premier contest concentrated on the growing number of eastern rodeos. Only a few exceptionally versatile athletes like Tad Lucas competed throughout the country. She began the 1932 season at the Fort Worth rodeo in March, and finished the year in November at Boston Garden. Before she arrived home, Lucas had travelled over nine thousand miles, and won money at Cheyenne, Wyoming; Sheridan, Oregon; Burwell, Nebraska; Chicago, and New York City, successfully participating in relay racing, trick riding, and bronc riding.<sup>38</sup> Others who traversed the continent were Florence Randolph, Ruth Roach, Rose Davis, and Alice Greenough. Many others, including headliners like Paris Williams, Vera McGinnis, and Bonnie Jean Gray, restricted their activities to the West.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, even the most highly skilled women on the western circuit never attained the fame and media attention accorded those who regularly appeared at Madison Square Garden and the other eastern city rodeos. This lowered their earning potential as contract performers, and made it less likely that they would ever again appear on the big-time circuit.

The effective splitting of the country for cowgirl contests had a much more devastating financial impact on some contestants than did the Depression. While the economic crisis did have an effect on rodeo, forcing many marginal operations into bankruptcy and depriving lower-echelon contestants of opportunities, the name stars and contests had few problems.<sup>40</sup> Big-time rodeo, like Hollywood films, thrived during the Depression, providing the public with much-needed escape from the pervasive problems of the times. Despite the economic downturn, prizes at major rodeos continued to increase throughout the thirties, and many contestants' incomes rose as well. Cowgirls were much more fortunate than other working women during this time. Although the number of married women in the work force did rise from 12 to 15 percent during the 1930s, the percent of working married couples was only 11 percent as late as 1940.<sup>41</sup> During the Depression, many employers had rules or at least practices specifying that when both husband and wife worked for the same firm, it was the wife who had to be dismissed if personnel reductions were needed, while others simply refused to hire married women.<sup>42</sup> Since rodeo

37. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 1922-1936; Madison Square Garden programs and prize lists, PRHOF; Lucas interview.

38. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, January through December 1932; Lucas interview.

39. See note 5 above.

40. See Foghorn Clancy, *My Fifty Years in Rodeo* (San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1952), 184-210.

41. Hartman, *the Home Front and Beyond*, 18 and 92.

42. June Sochen, *History: A Woman's View of American History* (New York: Alfred Publishers, 1974), 313.

had no such rules, many cowgirls fared quite well and some couples earned record amounts.

The first big money-winner among cowboys was Bob Crosby, whose 1928 income was \$25,000, much of it probably collected in matched roping contests.<sup>43</sup> By 1935, the average rodeo cowboy earned an estimated \$2,000 per year, compared with \$2,391 for a dentist, and \$1,227 for a teacher. Although exact figures are not available, it appears from the RAA records that the Champion All Around Cowboy won over \$9,000 in prizes and bonuses in 1936.<sup>44</sup> By 1937, the average was \$3,000, with at least thirty top hands earning between \$8,000 and \$15,000.<sup>45</sup>

Far less money was available to women because purses for their events were usually 60 to 70 percent of the purses for equivalent men's contests, and rodeos had only one to three events for women, versus eight to ten for men. Although no one estimated the average income for cowgirls, data collected for this study provide some approximate figures. During the thirties, cowgirls participated in an average of eighteen rodeos annually, competing for purses averaging \$4,000 per rodeo, or \$2,000 per event. The average prize per woman per rodeo was \$270 in 1936, making the average annual earnings around \$4,000 per woman, and \$1,000 less than the average cowboy.<sup>46</sup> Several did make much more. Lucas reported income of \$12,000 in 1935.<sup>47</sup> While some of the money did come from contract work, she was a big winner. Despite her financial success, Lucas was regarded by men and women as the most popular and best loved of all professional cowgirls.<sup>48</sup>

Cowgirls were also able to enhance their incomes through commercial endorsements, something few women athletes then enjoyed. Alice Greenough endorsed a variety of Australian products from saddles to refrigerators when she won the cowgirls "buck jumping" championships in Melbourne in 1934 and 1939. After she captured the 1940 bronc riding title at Madison Square Garden, she received several lucrative offers, including one for cigarettes. Although an adamant non-smoker, Greenough did not hesitate to sign the contract, not only for its financial rewards, but because publication of the ads would help reaffirm and promote her status as the World's Champion.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the success of women like Lucas and Greenough, many cowgirls had far lower earnings than even the average cowboys because of fewer events and lower purses. Of course their situation relative to the men was not unusual, but typical in American society at the time. Women were almost always paid much less than men, even for the same jobs, with the highest paid women in many

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43. *The Billboard*, 12 October 1929, 57.

44. *Hoofs and Horns*, January 1936 through March 1937.

45. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 37 and 46; *Hoofs and Horns*, January 1936 through March 1937.

46. See note 5 above.

47. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 37-39.

48. Dan Fox, "Tad Lucas," *Hoofs and Horns*, October 1937, 9; Lucas files, CGHOE NRHOF.

49. Greenoughs, interviews and scrapbooks; "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 7 April 1934, 37, and 31 December 1938, 101; *Hoofs and Horns*, December 1940, 12. Buck Jumping was the Australian term for bronc riding.

organizations making less than the lowest paid males.<sup>50</sup> Even today, American women earn only 70 percent of the salaries made by men.<sup>51</sup> The idea of equal prizes for men in women in sport was rarely mentioned until Billie Jean King and her colleagues successfully challenged the tennis establishment in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>52</sup> Two decades later, tennis and rodeo remain the only sports in which the top women professionals have earned more in a single season than their male counterparts.<sup>53</sup>

One man who greatly helped the cowgirls was Texas ranching millionaire Col. W. T. Johnson, who in 1931 took over the Madison Square Garden Rodeo and introduced the first cowboy contest at the Boston Garden, thereby becoming the most powerful man in the sport.<sup>54</sup> Other major producers such as Guy Weadick and Tex Austin had regularly given women top billing and lucrative purses at rodeos in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, but Johnson outdid them all. Photographs of Johnson surrounded by a bevy of cowgirls were usually featured in the advance publicity for his rodeos, and the women themselves were and are loyal supporters. Unlike most other producers, he also financed the medical treatment for women injured at his rodeos, visited them in the hospital, and paid for their transportation home when they were released.<sup>55</sup>

Johnson scouted the country for young talent, and was often responsible for bringing cowgirls onto the big-time circuit, a transition which they could not easily accomplish without sponsorship. The demise of the Wild West shows had eliminated one important avenue by which women had moved into the profession and eventually onto the top competitive circuit. Also, small local rodeos which had once offered women their first competitive opportunities, were less likely to do so in the Depression.

## II

During the early 1930s, only a few independent producers like Johnson vied for the major rodeo sites. Tex Austin, producer of the first Madison Square Garden Rodeo was still active, as was Col. Jim Eskew, whose J. E. Rodeo Company played several larger metropolitan arenas. But there remained hundreds of tiny local rodeos in Texas and the Southwest with neither national affiliation nor professional producers. It was at these small contests that several new activities for cowgirls began. Some held great promise, while others presented a major setback for women.

50. Susan Ware. *Holding Their Own; American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982). 27; Sochen Herstory, 313.

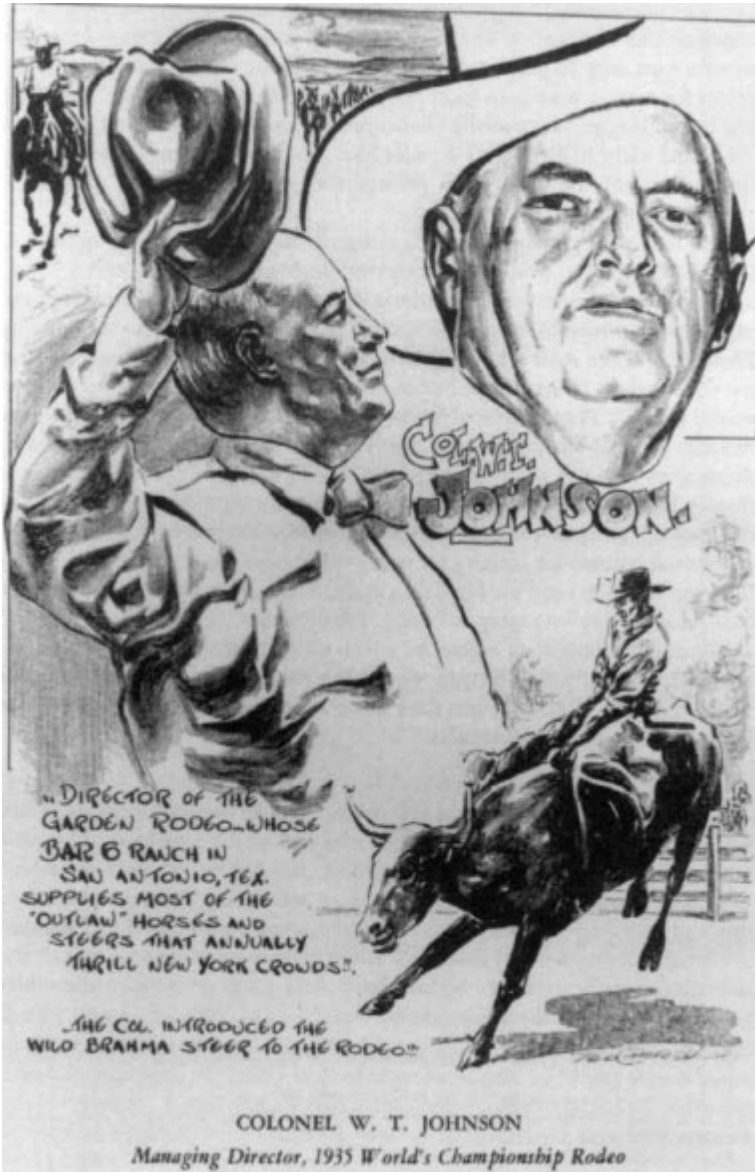
51. *Information Please Almanac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). 54.

52. Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 326-27.

53. *Information Please Almanac* (New York: Vlkii York: Simon and Schuster. 1982), 683; *Prorodeo Sports News*, 19 January 1989, 2. In 1988, four-time world champion barrel racer Charmayne James Rodman finished the National Finals Rodeo with a total of \$130,540, surpassing even the All Around Cowboy, who won \$121,546 competing in two events. In 1978 and 1980 Martina Navratilova was the top money winner in professional tennis, besting Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe by \$45,616 and \$55,017 respectively.

54. *The Billboard*, 29 October 1934, 75.

55. Alice and Marjorie Greenough, Lucas, and Young interviews: Lucille Richards File. CGHOF



Colonel W. T. Johnson, Managing Director, 1935 World's Championship Rodeo. Photo courtesy Prorodeo Hall of Fame, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Cowgirl calf roping contests had the greatest potential. Women had competed in steer roping from the earliest days of rodeo, and Lucille Mulhall, "America's First Cowgirl," won her greatest fame defeating cowboys at steer roping between 1900 and 1917.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, Mable Strickland also became famous as a steer roper, but the event itself, was controversial even for men.<sup>57</sup> As Lawrence observed:

Steer roping calls for a perfect partnership between a contestant and his horse, as the roper aims to tie down a big steer singlehandedly against time. Some states do not allow this event to be held at all because of the rough treatment of steers that it entails, and even some western stockmen who are inured to the work of the range indicated they are critical of the event because many steers are injured and killed during its performance.<sup>58</sup>

When steer roping was banned, calf roping replaced it at most rodeos and women soon joined in, particularly at small local events. Cowgirl calf roping was also popular as a special jackpot or challenge contest in connection with professional rodeos before becoming a regular event at notable contests from Texas to California.<sup>59</sup> These activities soon caught the eye of Col. Johnson, and in 1936 he invited Isora DeRacey (Young) to rope at Madison Square Garden, but she was unable to take advantage of what seemed like the chance of a lifetime. Her employer, the Reeves County Sheriff's Department, would not allow her the time off to go to New York. A young single parent in the depths of the Depression, Isora was unwilling to give up her secure position for an opportunity at the big-time.<sup>60</sup> Even without the New York exposure, women's calf roping continued to grow in popularity, and was introduced at major rodeos in cities like Ft. Worth, Texas by the 1940s.<sup>61</sup> Women had reason to be optimistic that it might soon become a standard event.

Simultaneous with the growth of women's calf roping, Texas rodeos began sponsor contests, in which local businesses and ranches were asked to send "amateur" cowgirls as their representatives or sponsors at the rodeos. These young women rode in parades, decorated the rodeos, and also participated in sponsor contests where they were judged primarily on appearance and elaborate western riding outfits, although a roping or riding competition was also included. A variety of skills were used for that portion of the contest, but the most popular required the women to ride a figure eight pattern around a set of barrels, the forerunner of today's barrel race. Whatever the contest, clothing,

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56. *Calgary Daily Herald*, 26 August 1912, 16; "Woman Champion: She's A Wonder with the Lariat at Steer Roping," *Police Gazette*, 24 June 1905, 6; *Winnipeg Tribune*, 11 August 1913, 5 and 12 August 1913, 1; Manitoba Free Press, 11 August 1913, 10 and 12 August 1913, 1; "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 6 September 1913, 74, and many more.

57. Cleo Mackey, *The Cowboy and Rodeo Evolution* (Dallas: Cleo Mackey Publishing, 1979), 41-44; *Prorodeo Sports News*, December 1989. Although sanctioned by the PRCA, steer roping is not included at their National Finals Rodeo.

58. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 36.

59. *Hoofs, and Horns*, and *The Billboard*, 1935-1940; Jewel Duncan Scrapbook, CGHOF.

60. Young, interview.

61. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 7 December 1940, 42.

pulchritude, and bloodline were much more important than athletic ability in determining the final winner.<sup>62</sup>

Sponsor contests were a major setback to women, representing all the things that female athletes have struggled to overcome, especially the emphasis on beauty and attire rather than athletic skill, and the concept that female athletes are really mere props or decorations, rather than legitimate contestants. At the same time, they presaged the almost Victorian attitudes of the 1940s and 1950s when clothing became more conservative, and women were pressured to become cheerleaders and enthusiastic supporters of male athletes, rather than sports contestants.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of their drawbacks, sponsor contests spread like wildfire across Texas and the Southwest, and had a major impact on the role of women in rodeo.

Women who participated in sponsor contests, like all western women of their day, could indeed ride horseback, despite comments to the contrary.<sup>64</sup> Many could also do cutting, roping, and racing, but these were not necessarily their primary qualifications. The real cowgirl athletes who excelled at such things usually finished far behind the rich and the beautiful in the sponsor contests.<sup>65</sup> Isora Young recalled one event in which the women attempted to rope five calves at each performance. Isora nabbed all fifteen without a miss, but finished a poor second to the lovely daughter of a millionaire rancher, who never did rope a calf during the entire three-days.<sup>66</sup> Other women described the frustration of participating in sponsor contests where judges moved barrels from place to place during the competition, or changed the rules in the midst of the rodeos. Several called these practices crooked.<sup>67</sup> Even when they were conducted fairly, sponsor contests were not contests in the true sense of the word, and presented nothing but frustration to women like Young who wanted a legitimate opportunity to compete.<sup>68</sup> For them, the transition from local rodeos to the big-time seemed an impossible journey, while those who had already made it to the top were enjoying the time of their lives.

By the mid-1930s, cowgirls in the big-time were having unprecedented success, and their future certainly looked bright. In 1935, sixty-four active cowgirls won money at rodeos in fifteen states and in Australia. Purses were at an all-time high, and Johnson's rodeos played Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Dallas, Kansas City, as well as Boston Garden and Madison Square Garden. So lucrative were his rodeos that some cowgirls (and cowboys) opted to spend the remainder of the year performing, competing only in

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62. Hooper Shelton, *Fifty Years a Living Legend* (Stanford: Shelton Press, 1979), 94; Rodeo programs, prize lists and day sheets, PRHOF; Binford, Barton, and Mosley interviews.

63. Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds* (Toronto Women's Press, 1986), 83-6; Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda San Giovanni, *The Sporting Woman* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1983), 34ff; Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 285; William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 199-225.

64. Jordon, Cowgirls, 230-232; Binford, Barton, and Mosley interviews.

65. Binford, Barton, and Mosley interviews, honoree files, CGHOF.

66. Young interview.

67. Young, Binford, Barton, interviews: clipping, "Cowgirls Organize Group Here," (n.p., n.d.) in Binford Scrapbook, CGHOF.

68. Ibid.

Johnson's series of eastern rodeos. There they knew they would be well-treated, and that the relatively short distances between events could net much bigger earnings than the long grind of thousands of miles over several months.<sup>69</sup> The potential risks of this policy never occurred to them. The premier cowgirls seemed secure in their positions, and appeared not to notice when their numbers began dwindling. Some who did notice were unfamiliar with developments at the local level, and believed that there were simply no more "real cowgirls" out there waiting to join the circuit. A few of these professional cowgirls became not only complacent, but obese. While that perhaps should not matter, it did. Not only did these women lose much of their box office appeal, they also sacrificed a great deal of their skills.<sup>70</sup> This combination probably did nothing to enhance their popularity or ensure their continued participation in the sport.

A more immediate problem, however, was that Johnson's favorable treatment of cowgirls did not extend to cowboys. Consequently the men went on strike at the 1936 Boston Garden Rodeo, protesting low prize money and Johnson's poor treatment. After an unsuccessful attempt to continue the rodeo using grooms and stable hands in place of cowboys, Johnson capitulated, and upped the purse so the contest could take place. It was the last rodeo he ever produced. Following the "Boston Massacre," Johnson sold his rodeo company to a group of investors headed by Everett Colburn, and retired to his Texas ranch. The cowgirls had lost their greatest ally.<sup>71</sup>

The cowboys, flush with success after bringing down the most powerful rodeo producer in America, formed a permanent organization, the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA), which is today's Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). The Turtles struggled for many years before gaining the power to regulate the sport. Fortunately, they were able to forge an early agreement with the RAA, whereby Turtle rules would be in effect at all RAA-sanctioned rodeos. Without this agreement, it is doubtful the CTA would have survived its problems. During the early years, more radical elements within the Turtles were responsible for a variety of acts which were detrimental to the organization and to the sport. Particularly disruptive were last minute strikes that caused chaos and financial disasters for rodeo committees. Because of these strikes, many rodeos, including such eminent contests as the Pendleton Roundup, dropped out of the RAA and barred Turtles from entering their contests.<sup>72</sup>

Women were non-voting members of the Turtles, and having elected representatives to the organization, fully expected to benefit from their membership. But the cowboys often refused to act on the cowgirls' behalf, declaring in 1938 that the women were "on their own." Several cowgirls attempted to negotiate

69. "The Corral." *The Billboard*, 21 May 1932, 35.

70. Alice and Marjorie Greenough interviews, photos in the collections of Alice and Marjorie Greenough. PRHOF, CGHOF, and NRHOF.

71. "The Corral." *The Billboard*, 5 December 1936, 42 and 48; Patricia A. Florence, "The Little Turtle That Grew." *Prorodeo Sport News*, 29 October 1986, 3, 43; "Col. W. T. Johnson, Rodeo Producer, Ranchman, Dies." *San Antonio Express News*, 26 September 1943, n.p.

72. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 36-51.

individually with rodeo committees, but were unsuccessful.<sup>73</sup> With the very future of their organization and their sport at stake, it is perhaps not surprising that the Turtles had little interest in women's issues. Unfortunately, the women could do little to alter the situation because they were such a small minority. There had always been fewer women than men in rodeo, but the disparity had increased as the sport grew. Even had all of the cowgirls and all of the cowboys who were married to cowgirls voted as a bloc, they would have been greatly outvoted by single men and those cowboys whose wives did not compete in rodeo. Consequently, even though the cowboys and cowgirls continued to have an excellent rapport with one another, when it came to matters of economic self-interest, the men looked out for themselves.

Cowboys on at least one occasion did threaten to walk out on a rodeo because cowgirl bronc riding competition had been dropped in favor of "Ranch Girls" (sponsor girls). This strike of the 1939 Ft. Worth Rodeo was led by Huey Long, whose wife Peggy was cowgirl bronc riding representative to the CTA. Despite their bold stance, the cowboys called off the strike when management agreed to include a two-woman bronc riding **exhibition** at one performance. Obviously, allowing two cowgirls to give one exhibition did nothing for the other women who were put out of work, or for inclusion of women's contests at future Ft. Worth Rodeos.<sup>74</sup>

Other Turtle actions did even more damage to women's position in the sport. The 1940 strike that closed down the All American Rodeo in Ft. Worth was a notable example. This was a major event that included cowgirl calf roping as well as bronc riding contests, and had attracted a group of the most talented young women in the Southwest. It was intended to be the first in a series of All American rodeos that would have offered the women many contests throughout the season. Instead, the strike caused financial disaster to the promoters. Final winners were never named or paid, and the subsequent All American contests never took place.<sup>75</sup> Although male as well as female contestants lost prize money at Ft. Worth, women were the big losers. Cowboys had many other rodeos in which to compete, whereas the All American series had promised women many new opportunities that never materialized.

Since the Turtles were of little help to the women, why didn't the cowgirls form their own organization? There were several reasons. Women had joined the Turtles fully expecting to benefit from their membership, and many felt that they were helped. Even though the Turtles did little for cowgirls' unique problems, the organization greatly improved conditions for all rodeo contestants. They helped eliminate dishonest promoters, and secured much fairer allocation of prize money. Women like Lucas, and Alice and Marjorie Greenough felt that these and other improvements far outweighed any disadvantages resulting from their non-voting status and the attitude of the Turtles toward women's contests.<sup>76</sup>

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73. *Hoofs and Horns*, May 1938, 12; "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 30 April 1938, 37.

74. Clancy, *Fifty Years*, 221-22.

75. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 23 October 1940, 39; and 7 December 1940, 42.

76. Tad Lucas, Alice and Marjorie Greenough interviews.

More important, it is doubtful if many cowgirls would have been willing to defy their husbands by starting a rival organization. Even though they had enjoyed much greater freedom and autonomy than many women elsewhere, their lives had ultimately been controlled by males. The West, like the rodeo community, was a patriarchy, and most of the cowgirls had been raised under the stern control of their fathers. Although they had been treated as virtual equals with their male siblings, they had also been told by their fathers when and where to work, and when to terminate their education. It was partly to escape those conditions that many joined the rodeo, sometimes running away from home or defying their parents' wishes in order to do so. The rodeo business did give women a much freer and more exciting lifestyle, yet their fate still rested with powerful males: promoters, producers, judges, and rodeo committees. Most of the women married within a year of joining the circuit, thereby often placing another dominant male in control of their lives. While many rodeo marriages were partnerships in the truest sense of the word, others were not. Sometimes that led to divorce, while in many more instances the women simply deferred to the wishes of their husbands, often at the expense of their own careers.<sup>77</sup>

Other factors probably also contributed to the fact that these women did not attempt to form an independent organization. Most had no better than an eighth grade education, and because of their lifestyle never had the opportunity to participate in the kinds of voluntary organizations that trained leaders and sponsored many successful women's groups in other walks of life.<sup>78</sup> The cowgirls who eventually did form the Women's Professional Rodeo Association in 1948 were a very different group: younger, better educated, and single.<sup>79</sup> Yet even the WPRA was unable to return women's contests to the big-time until the 1960s, by which time American women were beginning to make progress in many areas of life.

### III

The Madison Square Garden rodeo remained relatively unchanged during the first two years after Johnson left. Everett Colburn and the other men who replaced him lacked the charisma and imagination of their predecessor, and reporters frequently noted the lack of flair which had been provided by the big Texan. Then in 1939, Colburn decided to bring a group of Texas Sponsor Girls to New York as a publicity gimmick. The women certainly did attract plenty of media attention before the rodeo, but their actual performance, which consisted of riding around several barrels, was a total flop.<sup>80</sup> *The Billboard* described it as

77. See note 5 above.

78. Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in American* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 140-41ff.

79. "Girl's Rodeo Association," *Hoofs and Horns*, May 1948, 24; Binford, Barton. Mosley interviews; "GRA," *Western Horseman*, July 1959, 10-13; Archives, CGHOF.

80. *New York Times*, October 1939: *Official Program*, Madison Square Garden World's Championship Rodeo (1939), 44; "World's Championship Rodeo. Aided by World Series Joust, Opens Long Run to 11,000 House." *The Billboard*, 14 October 1939, 3, 45.

a letdown and suggested that "the routine does the show more harm than good and it would be wise to shelve it quietly."<sup>81</sup>

The negative press did not seem to deter Colburn, who invited another group of young lovelies, the Ranch Glamor Girls, to appear at Madison Square Garden the following year. They participated in cutting contests instead of riding around barrels, and were somewhat better received by the media, beginning a tradition which lasted for decades.<sup>82</sup> Still, they were not treated like the old-style competitive cowgirls, who were given the same type of press coverage as the cowboys. Glamor Girls and Sponsor Girls were viewed as objects rather than legitimate athletes, leading reporters to make sexist comments: "Best of the new features are the six Ranch Girls, billed as amateur riding daughters of wealthy ranch owners. . . . They're all young and attractive and won't have any trouble scoring."<sup>83</sup>

By 1939, sponsor contests were also included at big Texas events like the Fort Worth Rodeo. Although contests like Musical Chairs on horseback were somewhat inane, the competition was actually legitimate and not based on beauty, costume, and bloodline. However, women who won the Ft. Worth Ranch Girl Contests were not necessarily the ones selected to represent Ft. Worth at New York or Boston, for Sponsor Girls appeared at those rodeos by invitation only, and the women invited were usually the young, the rich, and the lovely. In all of the publicity surrounding these women's eastern appearances, the adjective used most frequently was "rich." For most working class, athletic cowgirls, performing at Madison Square Garden remained an unfulfilled dream.<sup>84</sup>

One cowgirl whose New York dreams did come true in 1939 was calf roper Sydna Yokley, whom Colburn invited to perform along with the Sponsor Girls. Unlike Young, Yokley had no financial worries, for although she was an outstanding roper she was also wealthy and beautiful like the other New York Sponsor Girls. Yokley's performance attracted much more favorable publicity than the Sponsor Girls, capturing the attention of the New York press, and Time Magazine.<sup>85</sup> It seems likely that cowgirl ropers would have been featured at future eastern contests, had not another event changed the course of rodeo history forever.

Hollywood singing cowboy Gene Autrey was a spectator at one performance of the 1939 Madison Square Garden Rodeo, and was asked to sing for the crowd.<sup>86</sup> Although he was the country's top western film star, Autrey was

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81. "World's Championship Rodeo. Aided by World Series Joust," 3, 45.

82. Madison Square Garden Rodeo programs and memorabilia, PRHOF: *New York Times*, 29 September, 6, 7, and 10 October 1940.

83. "13000 at Garden Rodeo Opening Night," *The Billboard*, 19 October 1940, 3, 33.

84. Barton, interview: "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 13 April 1940, 37; *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, February 1940-1945; Madison Square Garden Programs, PRHOF.,

85. "Career Cowboys," *Time*, 16 October 1939, 59; *Hoofs and Horns*, July 1939, 15; copy of a Contract, State of New York, County of New York, September 1939, whereby Madison Square Garden Corporation agrees to pay J. L. Yokley, \$450 for the services of his daughter Sydna to rope calves, exhibition, during 36 rodeo performances from 4 to 29 October. She is to work in the exhibition put on by the other seven Texas Ranch Girls, and ". . . be ready at all times to work on publicity and promotional activities," Sydna Yokley files, CGHOF.

86. Foghorn Clancy, "Madison Square Garden Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, December 1939, 13.

virtually unknown in New York City.<sup>87</sup> The rodeo changed all that, and the enthusiastic response to his impromptu serenade led several producers to invite him to star at their rodeos the following year. In 1940 he headlined shows for Eskew's J. E. Rodeo Company at several cities including Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.<sup>88</sup> The singing cowboy was also featured at Colburn's Madison Square Garden and Boston Garden Rodeos, where Sponsor Girls rode about while he sang "Home on the Range," and put Champion through his routine.<sup>89</sup> Rodeo attendance records were broken at every location where Autry appeared, and the trade papers covered him relentlessly. Suddenly, **he** was the focus of most rodeo articles appearing in *Hoofs and Horns* and *The Billboard*, and all of his publicity was positive. Autry himself benefitted greatly, as attendance at his movies increased after he began appearing at rodeos; meanwhile the popularity of his films brought new fans to the sport.<sup>90</sup> Although Autry was not the first western singer to perform at a rodeo, he was the first to be the featured star and focus of all the publicity. Rodeo was never the same again.<sup>91</sup>

In 1941, Autry starred at four eastern cities with Eskew's company. He also performed at the Madison Square Garden and Boston Garden rodeos where Colburn paid him the highest daily salary ever drawn by a film star for personal appearances. Once again, all of his performances broke attendance records, and he still holds the all-time record for the largest crowd ever drawn to Madison Square Garden for a single event." Producers who could not afford Autry scrambled to sign other Hollywood cowboys, making a big star of Roy Rogers, and reviving the careers of Ken Maynard and Hoot Gibson.<sup>93</sup>

Autry's first film appearance had been a brief singing role in a 1934 Maynard movie, and he made his first feature film the following year. He was also a regular performer on the "National Barn Dance" radio program and his own successful stage shows. In 1939 Autry launched his Melody Ranch radio show, which ran uninterrupted through the early 1950s. Between 1937 and 1942, when military service interrupted his career, he was the number one western entertainer in the country.<sup>94</sup>

87. Alva Johnston, "Tenor on Horseback," *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 September 1939, 18.

88. Maddy, "Eastern Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, June 1940, 9.

89. Rodeo Programs and memorabilia, PRHOF.

90. Maddy, "Eastern Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, June 1940, 9, September 1940, 6 and December 1940, 8; "Garden Rodeo Keeps Pace for First Week," *The Billboard*, 26 October 1940, 41 & 58; "New Attendance Mark is Set at Hub City Rodeo," *ibid.*, 23 October 1940, 39.

91. The duet of Powder River Jack and Miss Kitty Lee had wandered the circuit since the turn of the century singing old time ballads like *Red River Valley*, and in the 1930s Eskew had also paid Tex Ritter \$25 to sing at rodeos, but these performers were merely part of the contract entertainment, not featured stars. *The Billboard*, 1896-1940: Program. 1936 Calgary Stampede. Calgary Stampede and Exhibition Papers. A7-W361-A, Glenbow: "Tana Mac, "Half-Century Queen of the Rodeo," *Quarter Horse Journal*, January 1962, 27; Clancy, *Fifty Years*, 196.

92. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 26 April 1941, 45; "Autry, Eskew Draw 'Em at Washington," *ibid.*, 19 April 1941, 46; "Pittsburgh Rodeo with Autry," *ibid.*, 24 May 1941, 3; Maddy, "Eastern Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, July 1941, 9; August 1941, 8; January 1942, 9; February 1942, 6. Boston and Madison Square Garden Rodeo Programs, PRHOF; Alex Gordon and Ruth Gordon, *The Gene Autry Story* (Los Angeles: Champion Records, 1989), audio-cassette.

93. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 3 May 1941, 45; 10 May 1941, 47; 17 May 1941, 44; 10 October 1941, 40; 11 November 1941, 41; Maddy, "Eastern Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, November 1941, 7; July 1941, 9; August 1941, 8; June 1942, 3, and many more.

94. Douglas B. Green, "Gene Autry," in *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodrigue*,



Margie Greenough, Alice Greenough and Gene Autry, behind the chutes at Madison Square Garden. Photo courtesy of Alice Greenough.

Autry's impact on western film was dramatic. At the time of his debut, the standard formula westerns were losing fans. His personal appeal and the singing cowboy concept brought freshness and a new perspective to the genre.<sup>95</sup> He also changed the basic format of the western considerably. Unlike their predecessors, Autry's films were not set in the mythic nineteenth-century West, but in contemporary America, where a cowboy hero named Gene Autry traveled far and wide to assist ordinary citizens in their triumph over big business, high-handed villains, and special interests. Modern inventions like cars, trucks, recording devices, and even television were central to the plots, setting trends which his many imitators followed closely.<sup>96</sup> One journalist described his films this way:

Those who have not seen a Western in ten or fifteen years are greatly surprised when they take in an Autry film. The old frontier is pretty well settled now. There are more dude ranches than cattle ranches in the new Westerns. Rustlers, horse thieves, desperadoes, half-breeds and greasers are almost extinct; the villains are mainly businessmen. Gene's life is spent not in outshooting bad

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ed. Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (Urbana, Chicago. London: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 145-7.

95. Roy Merlock, "Gene Autry and the Coming of Civilization," in *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film*, ed. Archie P. McDonald (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 89-91.

96. *Ibid.*, 92-6.

hombres but in outwitting capitalists. He is a combination of Sherlock Holmes in a ten-gallon hat, Don Quixote, and Bing Crosby on Horseback.<sup>97</sup>

In his relentless quest for quality and innovation, Autry wrote or commissioned several new songs for each film, increasing their popularity and also influencing the development of country music.<sup>98</sup> In addition to good music, his formula included decent stories, and a little romance played “against the sweep of desert scenery, mountains, and untamed land and an ocean of sky.”<sup>99</sup> Autry himself was something of an anachronism in his own films, but he always emerged a hero, in part because as he himself observed: “There wasn’t a Repo truck or wood-paneled station wagon on the road that my horse Champion couldn’t outrun.”<sup>100</sup>

The new westerns attracted huge crowds, and had a dramatic impact on the public perception of the American West. Clearly it was a very different place than the West popularized by Buffalo Bill Cody and his imitators, not only because of the setting and mechanization, but also the changed status of women. No longer the competent, roping, riding, heroines of yore, women in singing cowboy movies were merely decorations, to be rescued by the heroic cowboys, and then won over by their songs.<sup>101</sup> Although scholars have concluded that **real** cowboys had a deep admiration for women who could manage to be simultaneously feminine and rugged, women in cowboy B epics were usually not too bright, and always helpless. Historian William Savage described such women this way:

Regardless of what she is or how she got that way, the cowboy hero rides to the rescue, she realizes that he is the man for whom she has waited ever since she was old enough to know she ought to wait, and the story ends with the cowboy having the option of kissing her or his horse.<sup>102</sup>

Most of the women in Autry’s films were not only vapid, they were virtually anonymous, and portrayed by actresses who could neither rope nor ride. Roy Rogers did manage to give his female star, wife Dale Evans, an identity, but she too was a far cry from the heroines of the previous era. Champion cowgirl Alice Greenough recalled attempting to teach Evans to ride for an early film, and finding that she had never been on a horse. While acknowledging that Evans did eventually enjoy a successful career in western films, Greenough firmly stated that “she’s no cowgirl!”<sup>103</sup> This would come as a great surprise to the generation of Americans who grew up watching Evans in B westerns, for to them she is and was the quintessential cowgirl. The relentless parade of such helpless heroines altered the public perception of western women, and paved the way for accep-

97. Johnston. “Tenor on Horseback,” 18.

98. Green. “Gene Autry,” 149.

99. Gene Autry with Mickey Herskowitz, *Back in the Saddle Again* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), 39-40.

100. *Ibid.*, 52.

101. Armitage, “Rawhide Heroines,” 177; William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 84, 98-100.

102. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero*, 84, 98-9.

103. Alice Greenough interview.

tance of different women in rodeo, which increasingly mirrored the West of Autry's films.

Of course, such a radical change did not take place in a vacuum, but was influenced by changing attitudes of American society. Just as westerns wrestled with contemporary social issues, they depicted and also reenforced prevailing ideals of women, whose place was securely tied to the domestic sphere. American women of the 1930s were advised to limit their aspirations to husband, family, and domesticity, and were strongly discouraged from working outside the home, especially if they were married.<sup>104</sup> In the mid-1930s, home, husband, and beauty were still believed to be women's primary goals. It was widely suggested that by leaving home, working women had weakened the moral fiber of the nation, and created a crisis of spirit. Not surprisingly, a 1936 Gallup poll showed that four of five Americans, and 75 percent of women believed that married women should not work outside the home if their husbands were employed.<sup>105</sup>

Such attitudes, already evident in society and in western film, were bound to have an impact on western sport, and soon women like Dale Evans did replace the real cowgirls of the rodeo. Another reason for this change was that big-time rodeo was no longer designed for the ranching culture which spawned it, but for sophisticated audiences in eastern cities. Even though real western women had changed very little, rodeo had lost touch with its roots. The evolution became a revolution in 1941, when Gene Autry decided to add rodeo to his growing entertainment empire and began purchasing stock and organizing a production company.<sup>106</sup> He entered the business at a difficult time, as World War II soon brought dramatic changes to every aspect of American life.

By the time Autry purchased his company, RAA and Turtle officials were expressing concern that rodeo might be a victim of the war. In 1941, 28 percent of rodeos connected with fairs were cancelled, and by 1942 rodeos on the west coast from Canada to the Mexican border, and inland as far as New Mexico were also called off for security reasons.<sup>107</sup> Despite assurances that eastern rodeos would be allowed to continue, several including Pittsburgh and Cleveland were forced to cancel their announced contests in 1943.<sup>108</sup> To keep the sport alive, RAA officials encouraged producers and local committees to stress patriotic themes, and to pitch their advertisements only to local areas because of gasoline and tire rationing. With over one hundred members in the military, Turtles eased eligibility requirements so local cowboys could replace the absent professionals. Other gestures included donating rodeo proceeds to war relief, giving war bonds as prizes, and organizing rodeos for military personnel.<sup>109</sup>

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104. Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 14ff.

105. Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 171-186.

106. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 24 May 1941, 46 "Autry to Launch Streamlined Rodeo," *ibid.*, 21 June 1941, 47.

107. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 65-78.

108. *Hoofs and Horns*, April 1943, 3.

109. *Ibid.*, *The Billboard*, 1941-1944.

Also in response to the situation, two Texas women, rodeo cowgirl Vaughn Krieg and equestrienne and promoter Fay Kirkwood, each decided to launch all-girl rodeos that stressed strong patriotic themes. These 1942 contests were organized to provide professional cowgirls with employment by entertaining military personnel and the general public. Despite record crowds and an excellent press, their plans for expansion and national tours were thwarted by financial constraints, travel restrictions, and various other problems.<sup>110</sup> To a large extent, both ventures were victims of the war, as were many other rodeos throughout the country. The major exception was Gene Autry's Flying A Rodeo Company, which also made its debut in 1942. Unlike the all-girl rodeos, it had the fame, fortune, prime locations, and formula to become a major success story.

The Flying A Rodeo premiered at Houston in February of 1942, and became the prototype of all the rodeos that followed. As promised, it was very streamlined, and included only five cowboy contests. While in keeping with the aforementioned suggestions of the RAA, it was also a lavish, Hollywood-style show, with parades and production numbers employing special effects like black light and fluorescent costumes, the relegation of women to parade riders and square dance participants, and a patriotic emphasis. In the thrilling finale, riders representing heroes like George Washington, Davy Crockett, and Teddy Roosevelt created a "Cavalcade of the Men who Made America," riding in on beautiful horses while their eulogies were read over the loudspeaker. When the last arrived, a huge American Flag was lowered, and all the rodeo participants rode in to form a huge V for Victory around the heroes.<sup>111</sup> The response was overwhelmingly favorable, as it would be for future Flying A productions.

To launch his company, Autry had outbid Eskew for all of the big rodeos the J. E. Company had previously produced. This virtually ruined Eskew, who was thereafter a minor player in the rodeo game.<sup>112</sup> Autry used these eastern locations for a series of Flying A Rodeo Stampedes on successive dates in April and May. Sanctioned by the RAA, all were held indoors in large cities that were a short distance from one another.<sup>113</sup> This arrangement ensured that contestants would not have far to travel between rodeos and that sizeable audiences would be available in the immediate vicinity, in line with the RAA proposals to limit travel.

Purses at the Flying A Rodeos ranged from \$5,000 to \$9,000, with an added incentive for individuals who competed in all of them. Bonus money ranging from \$250 to \$750 was paid to the contestant with the highest total earnings for the series in each of the five events.<sup>114</sup> This format was the prototype for the

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110. *Bonham* [Texas] *Daily Favorite*, 26 May-29 June 1942; *Paris* [Texas] *News*, 2-9 September 1942; Jane Pattie, "Fay Kirkwood." *Sidesaddle* (1988), 60-64; Official Program, Vaughn Krieg's Flying V All Cow-Girl Rodeo, NRHOF; Vaughn Krieg Scrapbook. CGHOF: Clippings in scrapbooks of Dixie Mosley, Amarillo, Texas and Mary Ellen Barton, Flomot, Texas.

111. "Autry's Houston Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, April 1942, 11.

112. Clancy, *Fifty Years*, 238.

113. Advertisements for Flying A Rodeos, *Hoofs and Horns*, 1942, see for example April, page 11.

114. *Ibid.*

prizes awarded today to top winners at rodeo series sponsored by companies like Dodge Truck and Coors Beer.

In addition to performing in his own productions, Autry also signed to star for Colburn's Lightening C Rodeo Company at Madison Square Garden and Boston Garden. He did not take his patriotic themes lightly, but joined the armed forces himself, sending Roy Rogers to fill his engagements at Boston and New York. Autry then appeared at Madison Square Garden wearing his military uniform, and was greeted with a thunderous ovation.<sup>115</sup> Even with his military obligations, he remained actively involved in his business. In September of 1942, "The Greatest Announcement in Rodeo History," proclaimed that Flying A Ranch and Lightening C Ranch rodeos were combined to form "Gene Autry's World Championship Rodeo Company, Madison Square Garden, New York, and Boston Garden, Boston, Everett Colburn, Manager and Arena Director."<sup>116</sup> Now head of the largest and most powerful company in the history of the sport, Autry also produced the New York and Boston rodeos. He apparently accomplished this feat by buying out one of Colburn's partners.<sup>117</sup>

Having already eliminated Eskew from competition, Autry enjoyed a virtual monopoly over big-time rodeo. At Boston and New York, Ranch Glamor Girls rode while Rogers sang "Home on the Range," just as they had done with Autry the previous year. But in 1942, for the first time, no cowgirl bronc riding competition was included at either Boston Garden or Madison Square Garden, a permanent change with a lasting and devastating impact on women.<sup>118</sup> By year's end it was obvious that whether produced by the Flying A or Lightening C, all rodeos with which Autry was involved were very much alike, and that none included contests for cowgirls."

In 1943, the picture was completed as the "Cavalcade of Men who Made America" became part of the Madison Square Garden Rodeo.<sup>120</sup> Unlike the Wild West shows and early rodeos that had attracted fans by evoking images of a romantic West that never was, Autry's contests provided popular escape fare that reflected domestic values which were being rapidly eroded. Although a majority of Americans continued to support the belief that women should remain at home, in reality they were joining the work force in record numbers, often in positions once reserved exclusively for men. At a time when the epitome of masculinity was the soldier defending his country, this left some civilian males in a demoralizing situation. Not only were they excluded from the battlefield heroics, with so many females taking wartime factory jobs, "many

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115. Tex Sherman, "Out of the Chutes," *Ranch Romances*, 15 January, 1943, 37; *The Billboard*, 12 September 1942, 39.

116. *Hoofs and Horns*, September 1942, 15.

117. *Hoofs and Horns*, July-December 1942.

118. Rodeo programs, PRHOF: Eddie O'Brien, "Rodeo Chat," *Hoofs and Horns*, December 1942, 6; "Roy Rogers as Star of NYGarden Rodeo Now Official News," *The Billboard*, 12 September 1942, 3; "Buffalo Rodeo Draws Below Expectations," *The Billboard*, 5 December 1942, 39.

119. Rodeo Programs, PRHOF; "Autry's Houston Rodeo," *Hoofs and Horns*, April 1942, 11; Advertisements for Flying A Rodeos, *Hoofs and Horns*, 1942.

120. Program, PRHOF.

suffered additional ignominy of doing work that even women could do."<sup>121</sup> In contrast, Autry's shows symbolized more traditional values and accepted, though stereotyped, gender roles.

The rodeos not only emphasized patriotism, they left all of the heroics to the cowboys; women's limited activities reflected a male perspective that stressed "feminine" traits.<sup>122</sup> Although the cowgirls in Autry's productions rode quite well, they remained passive, gentle, and ultimately dependent on the cowboys for their success, just like the women in his films. *Sponsor Girls*, unlike the old-time cowgirls, presented no real threat to the cowboy heroes. They did nothing which replicated "man's work," nor did they attempt to conquer or subdue unruly beasts. Because of their youth, and the continued emphasis on their amateurism, *Sponsor Girls* did not appear to be working women. Rather they reinforced the stereotype that woman's place was in the home, whether in the city or on the range.

This formula became the national standard and spelled the final doom for cowgirl competition in major rodeos as Autry controlled them all. By 1946, he produced not only the eastern circuit, but the Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Shreveport, and Toronto contests as well.<sup>123</sup> Since his rodeos were the models which other contests followed, cowgirls soon had few places to compete. Although no statements from Autry concerning the role of women in his productions have been found, his actions spoke loudly enough.<sup>124</sup> The last time that Autry participated in a rodeo where professional cowgirls competed was Boston Garden in 1941. Thereafter, all rodeos with which he was involved as producer or performer relegated women to peripheral roles in parades, square dances, and "Home on the Range." Like the women in his western films, rodeo cowgirls had gone from genuine participants to mere props, whose primary purpose was to make the cowboys look good. The situation remained unchanged for over twenty years, and had a lasting impact on female participation in the sport. Cowgirls had for many years been far ahead of other American female athletes, but by the end of World War II that was no longer the case.

Between 1937 and 1941, the average number of active professional cowgirls had been forty-nine, with thirty-one winning money each year. Cowgirl contests were held at rodeos in at least eleven states, as well as three Canadian provinces and several cities in Australia.<sup>125</sup> The figures for 1942, after Autry formed his company and the cutbacks intensified, appear at first glance to be

121. Hartman, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 63.

122. Similar things happened in film. See for example Sandra Kay Schackel, "Women in Western Films: The Civilizer, the Saloon Keeper, and their Sisters," in *Shooting Stars*, 197.

123. "The Corral," *The Billboard*, 1941-1945; *Hoofs and Horns*, 1941-1946. The Women's relay race at Cheyenne did continue until 1946, but this was an anomaly, as relay races were not included on the big-time Eastern circuit.

124. According to archivist Kevin Mulroy, Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, the Autry archive is "massive in scale, unprocessed and not accessible," and will remain unavailable to researchers for some time to come. (Mulroy, letter to LeCompte, 28 March 1990).

125. *The Billboard*, and *Hoofs and Horns*, 1937-1942; *Archives*, CGHOF, PRHOF, NRHOF.

similar to the previous years, as twenty-eight women won money in rodeos that year. However, the figures are deceiving, as twenty-seven won their prizes in Texas or Florida, competing in all-girl rodeos or local flag or barrel races. The one exception was Danetta Burns of Alamosa, Colorado, who won the Denver Post Relay Race at Cheyenne Frontier Days.<sup>126</sup> Contract work was also in short supply and grew more difficult to obtain in the years that followed.

Consequently, all aspects of female participation decreased significantly between 1943 and 1946. An average of just twelve women per year were active in professional rodeo, and their roles consisted primarily of serving as contract performers or timekeepers for Gene Autry's company. Others competed elsewhere, but rodeos which included women's contests were far apart, and few had the same events, so that it was no longer possible for cowgirls to earn a living from contest winnings.<sup>127</sup>

Naturally, most of the former cowgirl stars had to make radical changes in their lives. Even before they learned that their events had been dropped from the programs at New York and Boston, many of them had participated in the all-cowgirl rodeos held in Texas in the summer of 1942, but no long-term employment resulted from these ventures. Consequently, many went to work in totally new fields, often in war-related industries. A few were able to continue in the rodeo business. Tad Lucas and newcomer Nancy Bragg became featured trick riders for many of the Gene Autry Rodeos of the 1940s, with Lucas serving as an official timer at the contests. Peggy Long also became a rodeo official, while Alice Greenough and her lifelong friend, cowboy Joe Orr, retired from competition to form the Greenough-Orr Rodeo Company. They produced rodeos in the Northwest through the 1950s, with Alice handling the bookkeeping and contracting and also giving bronc riding exhibitions at all of the rodeos.<sup>128</sup>

Like Greenough, most veteran cowgirls adapted to the changing conditions, but many still longed to compete. When the WPRA was formed in 1948 and began its series of all-girl rodeos, several of the Madison Square Garden veterans joined the organization and resumed their careers, at least part time. Bronc riders Lucyle Richards (Cowley) and Vivian White, the last cowgirl to win the Madison Square Garden contest, both won WPRA World's Championships, White in 1949 and Richards in 1951. Experienced competitors like White and Lucas also served on the WPRA Board of Directors, giving the fledgling organization the benefits of their years of experience and consummate professionalism.<sup>129</sup> None of these pioneers remained active long enough to enjoy cowgirls' return to the big-time, but their contributions helped make that dream a reality for others.

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126. *Ibid.*; Milt Riske, *Cheyenne Frontier Days* (Cheyenne: Frontier Printing, 1984), 215.

127. *The Billboard*, and *Hoofs and Horn*, 1943-45: Archives, CGHOF, PRHOF, NRHOF.

128. Tad Lucas interview: Alice Greenough interview and scrapbooks, *Hoofs and Horns*, 1940-1950: *The Billboard*, 1940-1944.

129. "Rodeo Winners Named," *New York Times*, 27 October 1941, 21; WPRA/PWRA *Official Reference Guide* (Blanchard: Women's Professional Rodeo Association, 1990), 72; White and Richards files, CGHOF: Richards also competed as Lucyle Roberts.

IV

Cowgirls lost their place in the rodeo spotlight for many reasons, including the McCarroll accident, and the patriarchal control of the RAA-CTA, but Johnson and Autry played the critical roles. The departure of Johnson was a major blow, since he believed that women belonged in professional rodeo and made every effort to keep them in the spotlight. Had Johnson remained in the business, cowgirl calf roping would have soon become a part of his rodeos, either in addition to or in place of cowgirl bronc riding. In fact Johnson's successors did take note of the growing popularity of roping, inviting Yokley to perform at Madison Square Garden in 1939. It seems reasonable to surmise that had Autry not intervened and totally remodeled the sport, cowgirl calf roping would have become **the** women's contest during the 1940s and probably have remained an integral part of rodeo.

It is interesting to speculate exactly what Autry's role might have been had Johnson remained active in the field, since both were determined to be the best in the business. But Johnson did retire, and Autry ultimately became the most influential single individual, other than Buffalo Bill himself, in the history of rodeo. He eliminated all his competition, and the cutbacks caused by World War II prevented any new threats to his domination. Once in control, Autry radically altered the sport to reflect his ideas and ideals, which were very much in tune with their times: relatively few actual contests, elaborate production numbers, strong patriotic themes, and women in their place.

Although women were Autry's most immediate victims, everybody was a loser in the end. From his first featured appearance at a rodeo, Autry was the star, not the athletes. Soon rodeos large and small were booking cowboy singers and movie stars, reviving the careers of former greats, and giving opportunities to young hopefuls. By 1947, producers found that they could not stage successful rodeos in major cities without cowboy movie stars as the headliners.<sup>130</sup> When singing cowboys rode into the Hollywood sunset, western singers and finally country singers, took their places. Still today, rodeo advertisements feature entertainment by singers like Willie Nelson, George Strait, and the Judds, not the contests between top cowboys. Surely rodeo is the only professional sport in the world in which the athletes are not the stars.

On the other hand, Autry's popularity, professionalism, and financial security were major factors enabling rodeo to survive the war. He brought in new fans at a critical time, and kept their interest through his myriad of other entertainment projects. He also provided the innovative leadership which had been lacking since Johnson's departure. Once in control, Autry maintained his hegemony for many years. In 1952, Guy Weadick, creator of the Calgary Stampede and one of the major rodeo producers of the pre-war era observed, "western rodeos should be organized on a historic instead of a Hollywood theme"<sup>131</sup>

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130. Clancy, *Fifty Years*, 261.

131. Unidentified clipping, Guy Weadick clipping file MI278, File 35, Glenbow.

Autry was still very much in control when the cowboys began modernizing in 1945, first by changing the name from the Cowboys Turtle Association to the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA). The organization then established its first permanent headquarters at Ft. Worth, and appointed Earl Lindsey as the first full-time employee. He served the RCA as business manager, public relations director, and the cowboys' representative in negotiations with rodeo Committees. It is probably no coincidence that Lindsey came to the RCA from the Gene Autry Organization.<sup>132</sup>

Even bigger changes occurred in 1959, when the Madison Square Garden contest ended its run, and the RCA created its own championship event, the National Finals Rodeo (NFR). Since that time, the cowboys themselves have assumed almost total control over their sport, and turned the NFR into America's premier rodeo, the place where the World's Champions really earn their crowns, no singers perform, and the contestants are undisputed stars.

Although the PRCA now controls the sport, Autry's influence is still evident in the standard practice of having western singers as the featured stars at most rodeos. While women have returned to the big-time and the big money, they have never achieved the status they once enjoyed, and are not permitted to rope or ride bucking stock in PRCA rodeos.<sup>133</sup> Instead cowgirls are restricted to barrel racing, the "gender-appropriate" offspring of the event Sponsor girls once shared with Gene Autry's "Home on the Range."

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132. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, 80-2.

133. Women are allowed to compete in team roping in PRCA rodeos, but must team with a cowboy.