

Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo, 1929-1943

Mary Lou LeCompte

University of Texas

Between 1912 and 1942, over 416 cowgirls participated in American rodeo. Many of these women were featured performers at the most important, lucrative rodeos in the America, and some had earnings equalling or surpassing the top cowboys. However, after 1936 their position began to decline, and by 1943 cowgirl contests had disappeared from major rodeos.

Several explanations have been offered for this development, but none is entirely satisfactory. Rather than a single cause, a series of different factors contributed to the decline. Especially influential were two powerful men, rodeo producer Col. W.T. Johnson, and Hollywood singing cowboy Gene Autry.

Cowgirls' problems really began in 1929 when bronc rider Bonnie McCarroll was killed during the Pendleton Roundup. Despite pleas for action, the newly-formed Rodeo Association of America (RAA) refused to sanction and regulate women's contests. Consequently, cowgirl bronc riding became rare in the West, but gained popularity at big Eastern rodeos which were controlled by powerful non-RAA producers. The most important of these, Johnson, controlled the lucrative Madison Square Garden and Boston Garden rodeos which were the trend-setters. At all his rodeos, Johnson publicized cowgirl extensively, and rewarded them handsomely.

Rodeo cowgirls also starred in western films where they played remarkably authentic, athletic, self-reliant western women. Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios in 1927 commissioned a \$10,000 silver trophy to be awarded to the Champion All Around Cowgirl at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo, as a "tribute to the charm and courage of western womanhood.. ." Such a valuable award for female athlete was unprecedented, and surely significant.

By the mid-1930s, rodeo cowgirls were enjoying tremendous success, purses were at an all time high, and their future looked bright. Unfortunately, some of the top women became complacent, and also obese. While that should not matter, it did. The excess weight diminished not only their box office appeal, but their athletic skills and their popularity.

Rodeo offered little competition for women outside the big time circuit. However, in the 1930s, Texas rodeos began a practice that spread-quickly across the country, the Sponsor Contest, wherein "amateur" cowgirls were invited to ride in parades and decorate the rodeos. In sponsor contests they were judged primarily their beauty and elaborate western riding outfits. Cowgirl calf roping contests also began to spread across the west, and appeared poised to become the cowgirl events of the 1940s.

Cowgirls' world began to crumble in 1936 when cowboys struck Johnson's Boston rodeo for higher prizes and won. Immediately thereafter, Johnson quit the business. The victorious cowboys formed a permanent organization, the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA) now the Prorodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). They forged an agreement with the RAA, whereby Turtle rules were used at all RAA-sanctioned rodeos. The two patriarchies soon controlled much of the business, and showed no concern for women's needs or interests.

Johnson's successors made few changes until 1939 when Sponsor Girls and a lovely female calf roper were invited to perform at Madison Square Garden as a publicity gimmick. Gene Autry, a 1939 spectator at Madison Square Garden, also sang at one performance. The enthusiastic response to his impromptu serenade overshadowed the women, and led producers to invite Autry to star at their

rodeos. In 1940 and 1941, he headlined rodeos at major cities across the country, breaking attendance records everywhere. At Madison Square Garden, sponsor girls performed as he sang “Home on the Range.” Autry dominated rodeo publicity and profoundly influenced the sport.

Significantly, movies in which singing cowboys like Autry starred did not include the competent, roping, riding, cowgirls of yore. Women in his films were mere decorations, played by actresses who could neither rope nor ride. Unfortunately for the real cowgirls of the rodeo, Autry took an immediate liking to the sport, and in mid-1941 formed his own organization. His Flying A Rodeo Company began producing contests in 1942, and by years end, had absorbed the Boston and New York rodeo producers to take control of the big-time circuit.

All rodeos with which Autry was involved were quite similar. They featured few contests, lavish, patriotic production numbers, and no contests for women. Cowgirls were relegated to peripheral roles in parades, square dances, and “Home on the Range.” Like the women in his western films, they went from genuine participants to mere props, whose primary purpose was to make the cowboys look good. This situation remained unchanged for almost twenty years, and cowgirls have never regained the status that they once enjoyed in rodeo.

The loss of Johnson was the greatest blow to professional cowgirls. It seems relatively certain that had Johnson remained in the business, cowgirl calf roping contests would have soon made it to the big-time, and probably have remained an integral part of the rodeo. However, Johnson retired, and Autry became the most influential individual, other than Buffalo Bill, in the history of rodeo. He eliminated all competition, while World War II cutbacks prevented new threats to his domination. Quickly, the sport came to reflect Autry’s ideals, which were very much in tune with their times: relatively few actual contests, elaborate production numbers, strong patriotic themes, glorification of American manhood, and women in their place at “Home on the Range.”