

'Performers Prove *Beauty* &

The Return of the Cowgirl Queen

IN SEPTEMBER 1947 the town of Amarillo, Texas, prepared for a rodeo. While rodeo hardly qualified as a novelty in west Texas, this one promised to be different. Photographs of two young women, Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr, filled the pages of the local paper as they promoted the upcoming show—Amarillo's first all-girl rodeo, produced and staffed by women and featuring only female contestants. Binford and Farr's plan to hold such a rodeo signaled a shift in the rodeo world: after two decades of exclusion from the arena as competitors, women were once again gaining competition venues. In defiance of the trend that regarded queens as society belles allowed only cameo roles in the rodeo arena, Binford and Farr set about reinstating the definition of rodeo queen as a champion rider.

The rodeo queen as a woman with ranch skills had a distinguished precedent. In the 1920s a small number of professional cowgirl athletes—the title “Queen” or “Sweetheart of the Rodeo” bestowed upon them by newspapers—gained popularity in the West. Recognizing the ticket-selling potential of their daring acts, rodeo producers hired these women to serve as stunt performers and rodeo contestants. In 1928 nearly one-third of rodeos included contests for women.¹ After 1928, however, the number of contests open to women declined rapidly, and by the early 1940s only a few remained. As female professional riders faded from the limelight, a new type of rodeo queen emerged. These new queens—educated, poised, and from socially prominent families—concentrated their efforts on promoting rodeo, not performing in it. For nearly the next twenty years the socialite queen dominated popular conceptions of rodeo queens.

World War II wrought changes in perceptions about and within women's rodeo, and Binford and Farr represented this new generation of rodeo women. Attractive and educated, they fit the profile of socialite queens—both participated in sponsor contests, a type of rodeo queen contest well known in west Texas—but as members of prominent ranching families they had roping and riding skills. If rodeo producers would not allow them to compete, then they would hold their own rodeo.

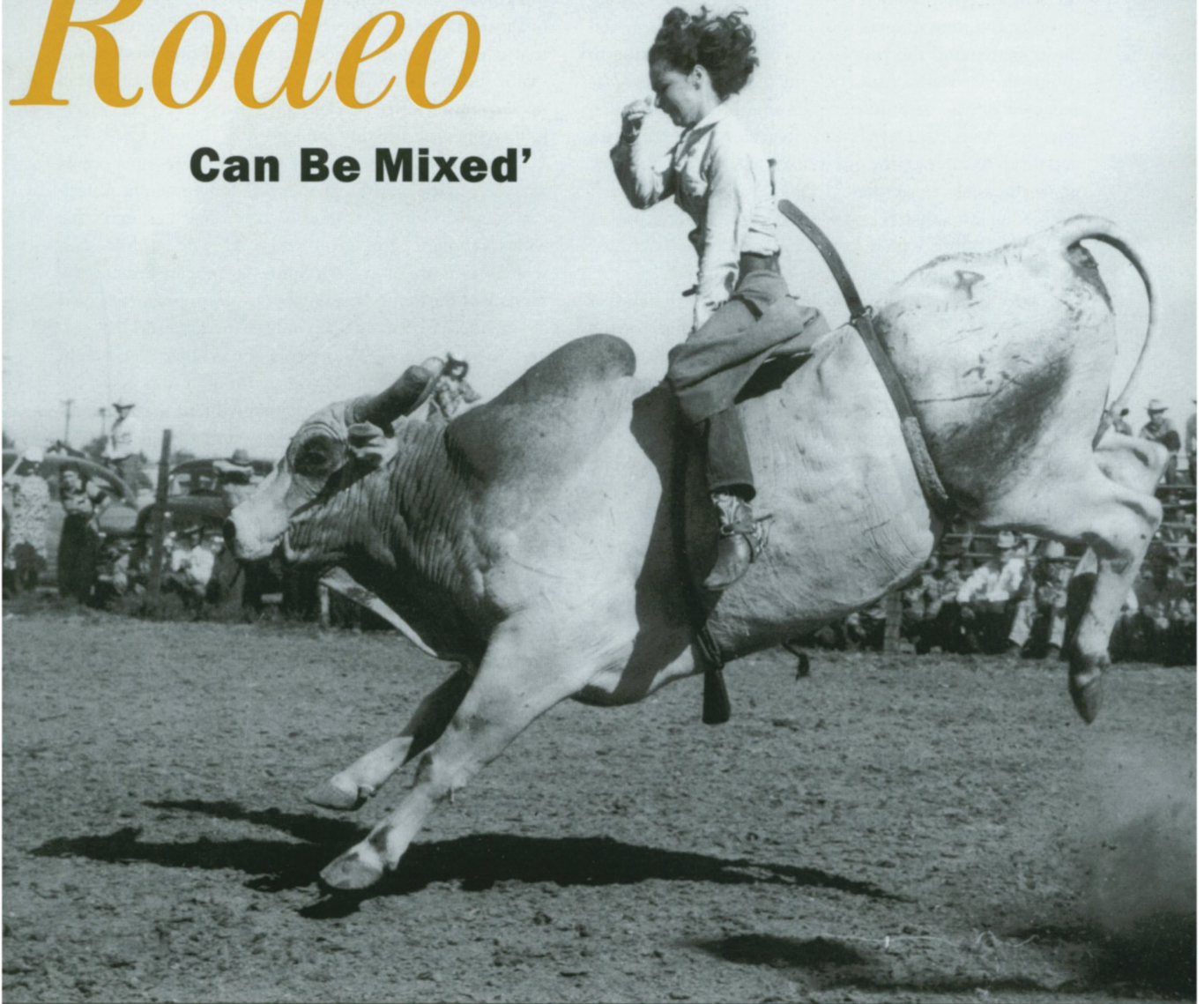
From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas



by Renee M. Laegreid

Rodeo

Can Be Mixed'



In the 1920s newspapers bestowed on professional cowgirl athletes the nickname “Queen” or “Sweetheart of the Rodeo.” By the end of the decade, however, rodeos began excluding women from traditional rodeo events, and a new type of “socialite” rodeo queen emerged. Not until World War II provided opportunity for change did cowgirls such as Rae Beach, shown above in the steer-riding contest at the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo in 1947, again compete in these events.

Three interwoven factors led to the decline of cowgirl athletes in the late 1920s. The first of these was Bonnie McC Carroll's death at the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up. During the saddle bronc event, McC Carroll was thrown from her mount, her foot hung up on a stirrup, and the crowd watched in horror as the horse dragged her around the arena until it could be brought to a stop. When the well-known rider died several days later in the Pendleton hospital, newspapers around the country discussed the tragedy—and the propriety of women competing in rough-stock events. An article in the *Yakima Republic* reflected prevailing attitudes: "Bonnie McC Carroll, rodeo queen, is dead. . . . Here is an instance of human injuries and death that impels the question of whether such a show is worth such a sacrifice."² Pendleton's rodeo board decided to immediately end women's bronc riding, and as one of the country's three largest rodeos, Pendleton's decision set a precedent other rodeos soon followed.

The second factor contributing to the decline of women's participation in rodeo was the formation of the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) in 1929 in response to the need to standardize "events, rules, regulations, judging, refereeing, timing, and arena conditions" for the growing number of competitors. An important part of this standardization included selecting which events would be included in all RAA-sanctioned rodeos. When the list of the four required events came out, it did not include women's bronc riding. The RAA did not prohibit women's bronc riding; local rodeo committees could decide if they wanted to feature the event, and if so, whether it would be a competitive or an exhibition event. But when the RAA later increased the number of required events from four to eight, many rodeos included these new events at the expense of locally popular contests and those for women. Nonetheless, women's bronc riding did not disappear

entirely. RAA rules encouraged rodeo boards to showcase it as an exhibition with professionals riding for the crowds rather than as a competitive event.³

Finally, the 1929 stock market crash and economic hardships created by the Great Depression limited opportunities for women. While established rodeos such as the Pendleton Round-Up and Cheyenne Frontier Days managed to stay solvent during the Depression, smaller rodeos, or those only marginally successful, failed. The result was that while top women riders could still find work at the major rodeos as exhibition riders, the number of overall opportunities for cowgirl athletes, particularly for lesser-known ones, was greatly reduced.⁴

The common debate tying together these three events was the question of the proper role for women in American society. Only a generation and a half earlier, in the 1880s, a major shift in attitudes allowed middle-class women to move out of the domestic sphere. Leaving the sanctity of the home, they entered professions and engaged in activities previously open only to men, a trend that created national alarm. Modernists argued that everyone in society would benefit if women thought and acted for themselves. Traditionalists maintained that marriage and domesticity were central to most women's identity and constituted their most important contribution to society. Even into the 1920s the debate raged over what would become of the country if women, the moral keepers of society, began to act like men. An analysis of newspaper articles suggests that by 1927 the traditionalist view had gained a slight edge. The economic crisis in the late 1920s further encouraged a resurgence of traditional gender roles.⁵

Beginning in 1929, as cowgirl athletes' presence diminished, the importance of rodeo queens as promoters began to expand. These rodeo queens and their courts reigned over the arena as genteel, middle-class versions of the



Detail, R. R. Doubleday, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Professional riders like Mabel Strickland faded from the limelight toward the end of the 1920s as several factors—concerns about safety, the need to standardize rules and events, and the Great Depression—led to a decline in the number of women participating in rodeo.



Safety concerns became paramount with the deaths of female rodeo performers, including Marie Gibson, pictured fifth from left in this lineup of Montana cowgirls photographed in the mid- to late twenties at a Butte, Montana, rodeo. Gibson died in a horse collision at an Idaho Falls rodeo in 1933 after successfully competing in the bronc-riding event.

professional cowgirl athletes. This type of rodeo queen was not new—the first nonprofessional queen appeared at the Pendleton Round-Up in 1910—but the new queen, selected by the rodeo board, had traditionally played only a minor role. Indeed, in 1918, at the height of women’s participation as contestants at the Pendleton Round-Up, the board abolished the rodeo queen entirely, noting, “[T]here will be no appreciable loss as there will be any number of candidates to prove themselves entitled to proclaiming themselves queen of relay riding, bucking bronchoes, or other stunts that come in the life of the range.”⁶ Pendleton Round-Up queens reappeared in 1923, but it was not until the late 1920s that these queens played a more visible part in the Round-Up.

Cheyenne, Wyoming’s Frontier Days celebration adopted the idea of a community rodeo queen in 1931 in response to the declining number of female riders and the economic exigencies of the Depression. The first three Miss Frontier Days queens won their crowns in competi-

tions where townspeople “voted” for their favorite candidate by purchasing rodeo tickets from her. In 1935 Frontier Days board members changed the selection process to the one used at Pendleton and began selecting a Miss Frontier Days from among the daughters of leading families. Like the Pendleton queens, Cheyenne’s Miss Frontier Days devoted her time to traveling and promoting the rodeo, playing only a minor role in the rodeo arena.

The same year that Cheyenne opened its Miss Frontier Days contest, the small west Texas town of Stamford introduced its own rodeo queen contest. This contest would have a profound, if completely unintended, impact on women’s rodeo. As at Pendleton, the rodeo board, the town’s chamber of commerce, selected a young woman to represent Stamford at its rodeo, the Texas Cowboy’s Reunion. In regional vernacular, she was called a sponsor. But then they added a twist by inviting sponsors from around the area to compete against each other for the title of rodeo queen. While recalling women’s earlier participation in rodeo, the sponsor contest, as it was known, embraced the larger cultural movement toward more traditional feminine behavior. The contest reshaped the image of a cowgirl queen from one who competed in bronco riding to that of a beautiful socialite who displayed horse skills only marginally associated with ranching. The sponsor contest was an immediate hit and within a short time could be found at rodeos throughout Texas and Oklahoma.⁷

1. Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana, Ill., 1993), 72.

2. *Yakima (Wash.) Republic*, October 3, 1929.

3. Clifford P. Westermeier, *Man, Beast Dust: The Story of Rodeo* (1947; reprint, Lincoln, 1987), 100; LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 96. These required events included bronc riding, steer bulldogging, steer roping, and calf roping. *Ibid.*, 14.

4. LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 101.

5. James R. McGovern, “The American Woman’s Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals,” *Journal of American History*, 55 (September 1968), 333; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore, 1999), 44; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The New Generation of Women,” *Current History*, 18 (August 8, 1923), 731–37; Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 199, 272.

6. *Pendleton (Oreg.) East Oregonian*, September 13, 1918.

7. For a brief background of the sponsor contest at the Texas Cowboy’s Reunion, see Hooper Shelton, *Fifty Years a Living Legend: Texas Cowboy’s Reunion and Old-Timer’s Association* (Stamford, Tex., 1979).

Although based on the tradition established by cowgirl athletes, the sponsor contest maintained a clear distinction between the activities cowhands participated in and those acceptable for women. As with regular rodeo events, the sponsor contest involved three days of competition before the winner was announced on the last day. And, following the pattern of regular rodeo events, the prize fit the rodeo theme: the winning girl took home a beautifully tooled saddle; runners-up received bits, spurs, or other pieces of riding equipment. Unlike regular rodeo events that pitted the skills of the cowgirl against the clock, however, this competition had less to do with ability than appearance. Judges evaluated the young women on who had the best horse, most attractive outfit, and most admirable horsemanship. As one local newspaper explained: "In determining the winner, the girl's personality will count 15 percent; her riding togs and equipment 15 percent and riding ability 30 percent. The mount will also be scored, conformation and appearance counting 10 percent, equipment 10 percent and the animal's performance 20 percent."⁸

At Stamford's Texas Cowboy's Reunion, the sponsor contest was neither strictly a beauty contest nor strictly a riding contest, an ambiguity that left the most important characteristics of a rodeo queen open to interpretation. Although the organizers always insisted that the sponsor girls were top-notch horsewomen, and a number of later contestants did compete in rodeo in the late 1940s, newspaper articles describing the sponsor contest and its participants did not give riding skills top billing—and often left them out entirely. Articles typically featured studio portraits of the young women followed by accounts of family,

8. *Santa Anna (Tex.) Santa Anna*, June 3, 1938. This description is similar to other local newspaper articles published throughout west Texas in the months prior to the Texas Cowboy's Reunion, as can be seen through a comparison of newspaper clippings assembled in the Blue Newspaper Scrapbook, Texas Cowboy Country Museum, Stamford, Texas.

scholastic, and civic accomplishments. The stories emphasized the girls' social position, reinforcing the importance of their amateur status as contestants and adherence to appropriate middle-class feminine behavior.

This shift in rodeo queen criteria did not sit well with women who struggled to continue competing in rodeo.

Isora DeRacy, raised on a ranch near Pecos, Texas, was one of the few women who both served as a rodeo queen and competed in rodeos during the 1930s. DeRacy competed in calf roping, a relatively new event that was replacing the traditional steer-roping.⁹ This switch was haphazard, and as individual rodeos made the change, the decision whether to allow women to compete lacked consistency as well. Organized rodeos—RAA-affiliated rodeos—did not sanction women's calf roping. However, if a particular rodeo offered special "challenge" or "jackpot" roping events outside the purview of the RAA, women could participate. In Texas women who worked cattle as part of their ranch chores found these events offered the greatest opportunity to compete, and DeRacy gained a reputation as a top roper around Pecos even as she vied for the title of rodeo queen.

Evidence that some felt rodeo queen status should be based solely on ranch-related skills can be found in the circa 1938 "Vote for Isora DeRacy" poster. Below a picture of DeRacy astride her horse, rope clearly visible, the poster informed the public, "She is a real cowgirl and can rope and tie a calf in 30 seconds." The anonymous friends who printed and circulated the poster encouraged voters to honor "a girl who can really ride and rope" with the rodeo queen title, and, by implication, vote against the women who had social standing, good

9. According to John O. Baxter, pressure by humane societies to ban steer roping began in the late 1800s and had its earliest success in the Southwest. The event was banned in New Mexico in 1903, Texas in 1905, and Arizona in 1907. John O. Baxter, "Whoopie Ty-Yi-Yo! Cowboy Tournaments, 1885-1905: A Changing Vision of the Southwest" (paper presented at the Western History Association conference, Fort Worth, Texas, October 9, 2003).



From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas

Women's rodeo experienced a resurgence in the mid-1940s as the first "all-girl" rodeos began providing opportunities to compete. In September 1947 Thena Mae Farr (left) and Nancy Binford, shown above in a publicity photo, planned Amarillo's first rodeo produced and staffed by women and featuring only female contestants.

This circa 1938 poster emphasizes the skills some thought should be required of a rodeo queen.

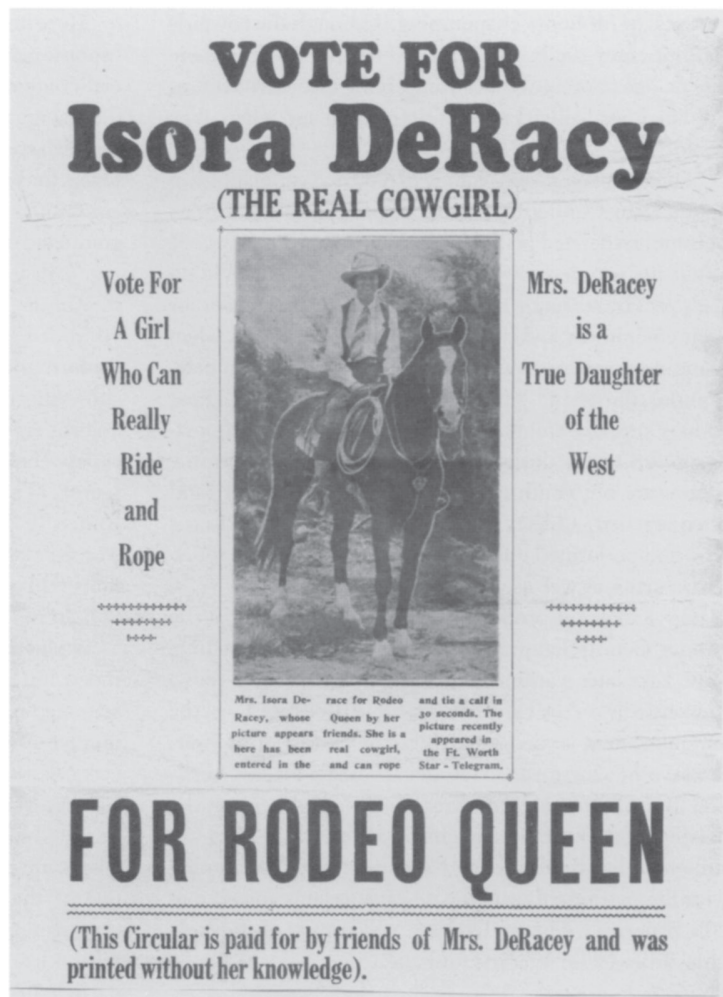
looks, or could sit a horse tolerably well but lacked the skills necessary to place her squarely within the western tradition. Despite DeRacy's example, it was not until the early 1940s that an opportunity emerged for cowgirl athletes to return to rodeo.¹⁰

In a very real sense, World War II both devastated and created a renaissance for cowgirl athletes. As writer and rancher Teresa Jordan notes, professional opportunities for cowgirl athletes, the few women who remained in the sport mostly as exhibition riders, became "a casualty of the war." Rodeo producers, finding it too expensive to continue the tradition of maintaining two strings of broncs—one for the cowboys and one for the cowgirls—cut the women's events. Other rodeo producers stymied women's participation simply by refusing them the opportunity to compete. In 1942 film star Gene Autry established his Flying A Rodeo Company and began producing a series of large rodeos. He soon dominated the east coast rodeo circuit as well as major rodeos in Houston, Los Angeles, Shreveport, and Toronto. Although Autry's rodeos followed RAA-wartime guidelines, as Mary Lou LeCompte notes in her history of professional rodeo performers, "All of Autry's rodeos were very much alike, and . . . none included contests for cowgirls." Instead, Autry hired beautiful young women to perform noncompetitive riding stunts. LeCompte argues that Autry's Flying A Rodeo became the standard for rodeos across the country, ultimately spelling the "final doom" for cowgirl competitors in major rodeos. Indeed, the role of women in Autry's rodeos—and the public's acceptance of that role—illustrates the culmination of traditionalist pressures against women competitors that began in 1929.¹¹

On the other hand, the war provided opportunities for cowgirl athletes as the demise of professional riders created a vacuum amateur riders hurried to fill. Fundamental to this

10. "Vote For Isora DeRacy," Isora DeRacy Honoree File, National Cowgirl Hall of Fame Archives, Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter NCHFA, Fort Worth).

11. Teresa Jordan, "Cowgirls: How the Fairer Sex Succeeded in the Rough World of Rodeo," *True West*, 30 (July 1983), 19–23; LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 137, 135.



shift was the RAA's suspension of its regulations and support of new rodeos that promoted events focusing on local riders' abilities and interests. This allowed women to enter rodeo contests on an ad-hoc basis and to compete in a limited number of traditional events, such as calf roping and cutting. Thus, World War II did not end the tradition of women competing in rodeo. Instead, it changed the dynamics by replacing the few remaining professional riders with a growing number of amateurs.¹²

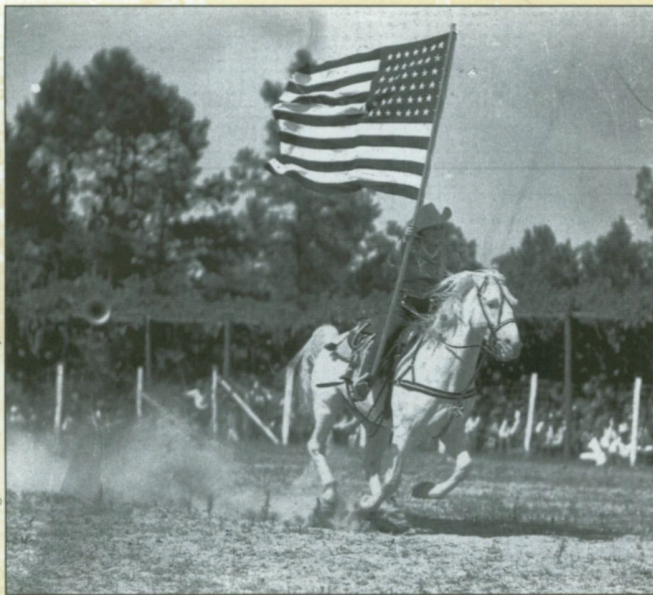
The RAA decision to suspend its regulations followed a logic similar to the one that resulted in the creation of women's baseball leagues, which were set up as a temporary expediency to keep interest in the game alive and stadiums occupied until the men returned from the war. The major difference was that women who participated in rodeo were, as always, independent contestants and competed without the restrictions faced by women who played corporate team sports such as baseball. Cowgirl athletes did not have to undergo mandatory charm lessons, makeup

12. Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station, Tex., 1985), 73–74.

courses, or off-hours chaperoning. Although the cowgirls did not enjoy the financial benefit of sponsorship, there was no one to prevent them from joining in local rodeos, or holding casual all-girl competitions when and where they could.¹³

The war encouraged women to return to competition in another way—under the banner of patriotism—as “rodeo became associated with patriotism—as never before.”¹⁴ While many rodeo cowboys left to fight, women could do their part by staging a rodeo to provide entertainment for their community and the soldiers at home. In 1942, when many western communities called off their rodeo celebrations, the first all-girl rodeos appeared in Texas. These rodeos strongly embraced patriotism and morale boosting. Despite the designation “all-girl” or “all-cowgirl,” these were not youth rodeos. They included older (and often married) athletes like Vaughn Kreig and Tad Lucas who had performed during the heyday of women’s rodeo in the 1920s, as well as young amateur riders.

Fay Kirkwood produced the first all-girl rodeo at the Fannin County Fairgrounds in Bonham, Texas, in June 1942. Like later wartime competitions, Kirkwood’s rodeo drew heavily on the climate of wartime necessity. Even the announcement landed squarely in the middle of the war: the “World’s First All-Girl Rodeo To Begin Friday” headline in the *Bonham Daily Favorite* appeared beneath the headlines “2 Axis Drives Stemmed Momentarily” and “42 Billion Dollar Bill for Army Reaches House.” In keeping with the patriotic theme, the newspaper announced that “the program for the rodeo itself will consist of the cowgirls’ drill a ‘V for Victory’ formation.”¹⁵



Doubleday Collection, 79.026.2619, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Drawing heavily on the climate of wartime necessity and patriotism, Vaughn Kreig (above) produced the Flying V All-Cowgirl Rodeo in September 1942 “with the idea of entertainment for our fighting forces.”

More important to some spectators was the inclusion of “sponsor girls from every town in North Texas” and a “special contest for the sponsor girls and amateur riders.”¹⁶ This language indicates a subtle but important distinction between sponsor girls—the young women selected by their towns for whom this might be the only foray into sponsor contests, and “amateur riders”—the young women who competed regularly in sponsor events throughout the region or in private riding clubs.

Although the Bonham rodeo claimed to be the first all-girl rodeo, it is not surprising that it was not as “all-girl” as Binford and Farr’s rodeo five years later. At Kirkwood’s show fifteen women riders entertained the crowd with an assortment of skills; however, men made up half of the rodeo committee, and one event featured a “Special Guest—The Only Cowboy to take part in the All Girl Rodeo.”¹⁷ In keeping with the way 1940s rodeo defined women’s participation, the rodeo featured mostly exhibition events. Nevertheless, its success encouraged Kirkwood to hold two other rodeos that summer.

No information remains on Kirkwood’s second all-girl rodeo, but for her third rodeo, produced for the servicemen stationed in Wichita Falls, Texas, Kirkwood increased the number of competitive events. She had learned that local cowgirls wanted to compete in bronco riding, bull riding, roping events, and other professional contests, so she included more contests and opened them to any woman who wanted to participate. Mary Ellen “Dude” Barton was one of the amateur riders who took advantage of the opportunity. Reared on the sprawling Matador Ranch, Barton learned to ride and rope at an early age and later participated in numerous sponsor-girl events. Barton’s hometown paper announced: “No one in this section, familiar with Miss Barton’s rope and saddle ability, was surprised when she returned home with about everything Wichita Falls had on its prize list . . . [T]o match her with the average satin and gabardine riding girl left the outcome a ‘forgone conclusion.’”¹⁸

The summer of 1942 was a busy summer for the amateur riders interested in honing their rodeo skills. That year, Vaughn Kreig, arena director for one of Kirkwood’s rodeos, produced an all-girl rodeo, the Flying V All-Cowgirl Rodeo in Paris, Texas. Kreig’s program was more forcefully

13. Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York, 1994), 140–47; Jimmie Hurley, “Girls Rodeo Then and Now,” in *This is Girl’s Rodeo: Official Publication of the Girls Rodeo Association*, ed. Jack Lewis (Capistrano Beach, Calif., 1977), 11.

14. Hurley, “Girls Rodeo Then and Now,” 78.

15. *Bonham (Tex.) Daily Favorite*, June 23, 1942.

16. *Ibid.*

17. “The World’s First All-Cowgirl Rodeo—Official Program, Bonham, Texas, June 26–27–28,” Fay Kirkwood File, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

18. LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 129; “Motley Cowgirl is Rodeo Champ: Mary Ellen Barton Brings Home Many Wichita Honors,” Mary Ellen “Dude” Barton File, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

patriotic than Kirkwood's. The front page of the local newspaper announced that "The All-Cowgirl Rodeo was formed with the idea of entertainment for our fighting forces. With women taking part in all branches of war work, to the front came the cowgirls riding to the strains of martial music, the American flag held high, and the show is on! The Cowgirl's dream a reality. Keep 'Em Flying! Keep 'Em Rolling! Buy War Bonds and Stamps! And On to VICTORY!!"¹⁹

It is interesting to note the phrase "the cowgirl's dream a reality" sandwiched between the patriotic rhetoric. If the dream meant competing in rodeo again, then plenty of women shared it: twenty women participated in the show, half of whom had ridden in Kirkwood's rodeos. While Kreig advertised her rodeo as entertainment for the troops, it was also clearly organized as a vehicle for women to compete in rodeo. In a promotional flyer, she wrote: "This show was organized because the cowgirls riding events have been discontinued in the present day rodeos, and as the girls love the rodeo as a sport, love their horses, and have the rodeo spirit, their thought was to form their own rodeo, where they could demonstrate their ability and skill in riding and roping, as well as the other rodeo events such as Bronc Riding, Bulldogging, Calf Roping, Brahma Bull Riding, Trick Riding, Etc."²⁰

A professional rider until her retirement in 1937, Kreig entered four traditional events: calf roping, bronc riding, bulldogging, and steer riding. Eight out of the nineteen events were contests. True to local customs, the Flying V Rodeo included a sponsor contest, but Kreig made a point of stating that the horsemanship element—a flag race—would be a timed event, an important break from the tradition of the subjectively judged contest.

As the war entered its third year, rodeos around the country enjoyed greater popularity than ever as Americans across the country "smelled victory and saw no need to keep their noses to the grindstone." If cowgirl athletes expected to be welcomed back into the arena as professionals after the war, however, they were in for disappointment. The mood of the country had taken a decidedly conservative turn. While public support for the all-girl rodeos suggested the possibility of expanding, or at least maintaining, wartime inroads, women competitors soon found themselves again excluded from professional rodeo. In 1944 the RAA reverted to prewar policies. It made no concessions for women interested in competing in professional rodeo.²¹

19. "Flying V All Cow Girl Rodeo, Official Souvenir Program, September 3–4–5 Paris, Texas," Vaughn Kreig File, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

20. Ibid.; "Flying V All Girl Rodeo," promotional flyer, 1942, Vaughn Kreig File, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

21. William O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: American's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 393.



From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas

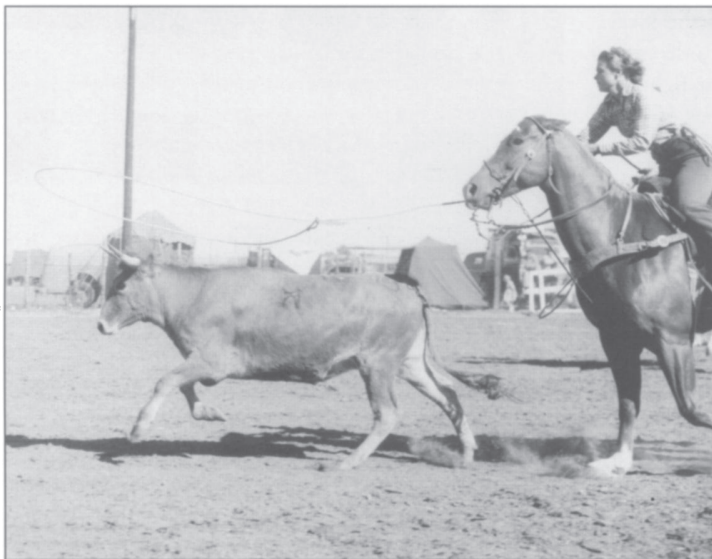
Thena Mae Farr and Nancy Binford (above) helped reshape the meaning of "rodeo queen" into one that emphasized competition based on usable ranch skills.

By 1947 sponsor contests and the occasional jackpot calf-roping were once more the only opportunities open to women. It was in this climate that Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr decided to hold their all-girl rodeo. When they created the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo, they set about reshaping the meaning of "rodeo queen" into one that emphasized competition based on usable skills. As Binford announced, "This is going to be a rodeo, not a social event."²²

In an ironic twist, the sponsor contest, with its duality as both a beauty and riding contest, actually provided the springboard for amateur cowgirl athletes to return to the ring as competitors. For a number of young women from west Texas ranches, the horsemanship element mattered most, and the contests encouraged the development of a community of amateur riders. In two immediate postwar years, 1945 and 1947, ranches sponsored the largest number

22. Newspaper clipping, n.d., Binford Tri-State Rodeo Scrapbook, 1996.010.001, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas



Plenty of women wanted to compete in Binford and Farr's Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo. Binford commented in a 1985 interview, "We had eight ropers out the first day and some of them had never thrown a rope in an arena, and there wasn't a calf missed." Throwing a rope at left is Margaret Montgomery.

With the memory of wartime all-girl rodeos still fresh, Binford and Farr began planning their rodeo. Binford recalled approaching the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce about holding an all-girl rodeo: "[T]hey said if we thought it was possible, that they would let us put on an all-girl rodeo and see if it would be successful during the [tri]-state fair." Once they had the

chamber of commerce's approval, Binford and Farr began contacting riders. When asked in a 1985 interview if she worried that there would not be enough women to compete, Binford replied: "Oh no—we had asked many girls just to be sure that we would have enough to produce the rodeo. We had eight ropers out the first day and some of them had never thrown a rope in an arena, and there wasn't a calf missed. They were real excited about it, and it turned out real well."²³

If gaining the support of the cowgirl community was one task, promoting the rodeo was another. To achieve success, this rodeo, like all rodeos, needed paying spectators. It was important to both Binford and Farr that their contest offer traditional rodeo events to their community of riders, but without alienating the public by raising fears that women were adopting masculine roles. In the conservative climate that emerged after World War II, masculine and feminine behaviors were usually defined in opposition to one another, with men depicted as strong and aggressive, women as weak and passive. As Beth Bailey notes, "[D]espite the powerful ideology of the happy homemaker, women continued to encroach into the male sphere," and social critics expressed concern that women were robbing men of their masculinity. This issue was of particular concern for women seeking to reestablish their presence in the rodeo arena. As one newspaper reported, "The rodeo will feature all of the 'rough and ready' events familiar to rodeo fans, except girls will be in the saddle."²⁵

of women in the history of the Texas Cowboy's Reunion sponsor contest: 33 of the 129 women entered, or 25 percent, came from ranches. The number may, in fact, have been slightly higher since small towns quite likely sponsored young women who lived on nearby ranches.²³

From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas



In promoting the Tri-State rodeo, organizers emphasized femininity and domesticity, reassuring their audience that traditional gender distinctions remained intact even as women competed in a traditionally male sport. Here rodeo competitor Jackie Worthington poses in boots and ruffles.

23. This was the case with Mary Jane "Dude" Barton who was alternately sponsored by her home ranch and hometown.

24. Nancy Binford interview, Hereford, Texas, 1985, pp. 70, 71, transcript SR20, BBC Cowgirl Interview File, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

25. Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, 1988), 104-5; "Balloon Parade to Open Fair" newspaper clipping, n.d., Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

Photos, interviews, and newspaper articles depicted the cowgirl athletes as western women in the truest sense—they roped calves, rode bucking broncs, some even rode bulls. According to the reports, however, they accomplished these feats looking like ladies. The papers not only described the women’s appearance, but also their personal lives, after-rodeo hobbies, and family. One paper reported that “after a day in the arena, [cowgirls] went home to cook dinner for the family, work a little needlepoint, or maybe on a Friday night, get dressed up for a night on the town [with their husbands].”²⁶

Binford, apparently aware of the perceived contradiction between womanly behavior and rodeo, explained in one of her many interviews: “Look at little Jeanette Campbell. She got married, and now has a baby boy. She’ll be here for this show. There are others, too.” Reporters also alerted readers as to which cowgirls were still in the marriage market, noting, as one interviewer did, that Binford was not only an accomplished rider, but “by the way—she is good-lookin’ and single, guys.” This emphasis on femininity and domesticity quite likely helped to reassure readers that traditional gender distinctions and heterosexuality remained intact even as the women competed in the traditionally male sport. This was especially important for a contest that advertised women would participate in “all the events that made up the best of male rodeos.” By showing that the cowgirl athletes conformed to the most important feminine behaviors, Binford assured the public that the cowgirl athletes were, indeed, feminine women.²⁷

While designed to allow women to compete in traditional rodeo events, the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo maintained the tradition of the sponsor contest. Using their position as producers, however, Binford and Farr changed a few of the rules, eliminating the cowgirl costume portion of the contest and ending the practice of having a panel of male judges evaluate how the women rode around the barrels. Instead, the contest was timed, and the woman with the fastest time won.

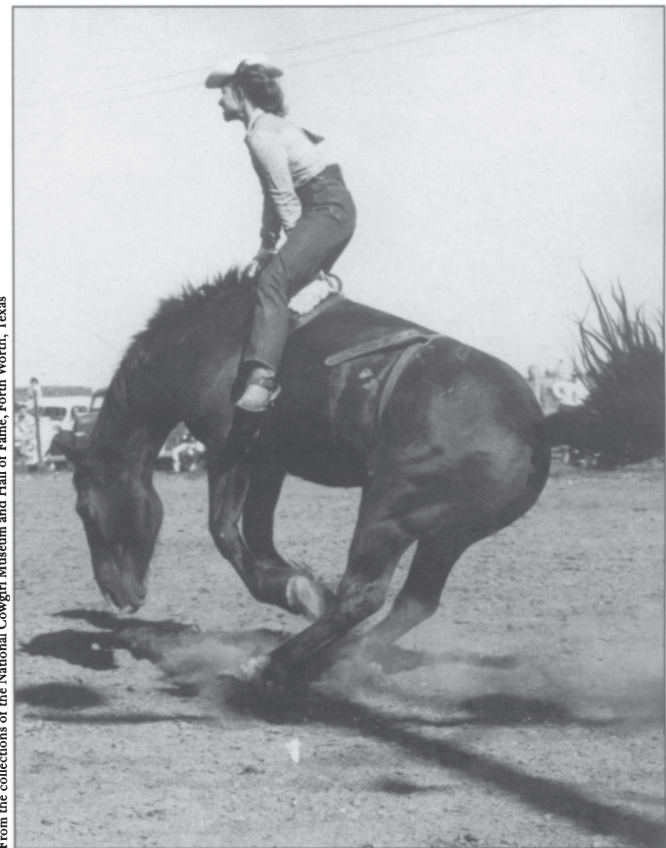
The Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo was more of an all-girl rodeo than any other to date. With the exception of the announcer, all contestants, judges, promoters, and staff supporters were women.²⁸ And the rodeo was a huge success. Standing-room-only crowds cheered cowgirls as they competed in bareback riding, calf roping, the sponsor con-

test, cutting, team tying, saddle bronc riding, steer riding, and an exhibition bulldogging performance. Perhaps most gratifying, though, was the fact that newspapers bestowed the “rodeo queen” title on champion riders. At the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo, there were no teas, luncheons, or formal dances. As Binford had promised, it was a rodeo, not a social event.

*[I]t was a rodeo,
not a social
event.*



Encouraged by this success, twenty-three contestants met immediately afterward and organized the Girls Rodeo Association, or GRA, to “standardize rodeo rules applying to girl contestants, and to eliminate unfair practices.” A singularly important decision concerned the sponsor contest: the association stated that it “intended to bar cowgirl sponsor contests from Rodeo Cowboy Association- and Girls Rodeo Association-approved rodeos except where it is made a timed event.” In 1942 Vaughn Kreig’s Flying V Rodeo had taken a lonely stand against the sponsor contest’s subjectivity by insisting on timing the riding event. The GRA enforced the practice, turning the sponsor contest into a strictly athletic contest. This change was crucial in enabling women to spring back into serious competition.



From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas

By creating a venue for women to compete on their own terms, Binford and Farr helped reinstate the champion rider as rodeo queen. Above Maurine Harlan tops a bucking bronc at the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo.

26. “Balloon Parade to Open Fair” newspaper clipping.

27. “Performers Prove Beauty and Rodeo Can Be Mixed” newspaper clipping, n.d., Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth; Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia, 1994), 234; “All Girl Rodeo Set for Fair” newspaper clipping, n.d., Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

28. LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 168.



With this objective evaluation of horsemanship, the sponsor contest became what is known today as barrel racing, a highly competitive, lucrative, and popular event in professional rodeo.²⁹

29. "Cowgirls Organize Rodeo Group Here" newspaper clipping, n.d., Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

30. LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 157; 1949 Girls Rodeo Association Handbook, copy in Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth.

The GRA also dropped the costume-judging portion of the sponsor contest. Recognizing the importance of maintaining a feminine image, however, the organization's bylaws stated that participants in GRA-sanctioned contests "had to ride in the opening parades and always be

31. "The Tactless Texan" clipping, 1948, *Quarter Horse Journal*, Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, NCHFA, Fort Worth; "Girls Set to Open Rodeo" clipping, 1949, *ibid.*; "All Girl Rodeo a 'He-Man' Show" clipping, September 1948, *ibid.*



From the collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas

The success of the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo inspired contestants to organize the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) to standardize rules and eliminate unfair practices. Changes included the transformation of the sponsor contest into a timed event—today’s barrel racing. In this Tri-State photograph, Blanch Altizer and Betty Dusek go after a steer in the team-roping competition.

Binford and Farr accomplished their goal: the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo brought their community of amateur cowgirl athletes together to compete in traditional rodeo events, and it reinstated the champion rider rodeo queen. Yet the public did not embrace this redefined image of rodeo queen. Despite their efforts to prove to audiences that the cowgirls were regular women using their homegrown skills to compete in the arena, cowgirl athletes rode beyond the pale of acceptable feminine behavior. Press reports, while generally positive, revealed concerns over an invasion of, as one paper put it, “[o]ne of the last strongholds of a man’s world.” A *Quarter Horse Journal* article, reporting on preparations for Binford and Farr’s second all-girl rodeo in Amarillo, noted: “The female frolic had its inception in Amarillo last fall when a group of girls, most of them reared on ranches in New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma and had learned as youngsters the real ups and downs of the cattle business, decided to sponsor a rodeo of their own for a little fun and diversion.” Women’s return to rodeo appeared acceptable only as long as it remained “a diversion,” an amateur show separate from men in the all-girl format.³¹

Still, the importance of Binford and Farr’s efforts cannot be overlooked. They created a venue for women to compete on their own terms and outside of wartime necessity. By producing an all-girl rodeo and assuring spectators the competitors were still feminine, Binford and Farr emphasized that competitors were not social oddities, but women who participated in society as wives, mothers, and daughters. Beginning in the 1950s the number of community-sponsored queens who also competed in rodeo slowly grew—the 1954 Miss Frontier Days Margaret Hirsig participated in amateur rodeo, as did 1955 Pendleton Round-Up queen Kathryn Wyss. Although cowgirl athletes did not immediately displace the community-sponsored rodeo queen, all-girl rodeos opened the door for women to chose which roles they wanted—cowgirl athlete, rodeo queen, or both. These roles, held in dynamic opposition for nearly twenty years, slowly reconciled, proving “beauty and rodeo can be mixed.”³²

dressed in colorful attire when they appear in the arena.” The concern with image extended to concepts of correct feminine behavior as well. The 1949 rule book stipulated that members who swore in the arena, drank publicly on the rodeo grounds, or behaved in an otherwise unladylike manner would be sanctioned.³⁰

32. “Performers Prove Beauty and Rodeo Can Be Mixed” newspaper clipping.

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