

Ride 'em cowgirl!



Lucille Mullhall Library of Congress photo
Lucille Mullhall (1885-1940) was the first woman known to be called “cowgirl.” She and her horse Governor was famous for their tricks.

that could be buttoned together to resemble a skirt, at least from the front.

Not everyone was a fan.

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By Stacy Moore Hi-Desert Star

Evelyn Cameron wanted to ride a spirited horse, but any cayuse worth its hide didn't like the looks of her full Victorian skirts and side saddle.

“It was my unfortunate experience that nearly all the horses I wished to ride were terrified of a woman in a riding habit and when their fears were sufficiently subdued to admit of my approach near enough to mount, they declined to allow me to do so,” Cameron wrote.

The English heiress had moved with her husband to Montana in 1893 looking for adventure, and she wasn't about to give

it up for her skirts.

Cameron sent away for a split skirt outfit from Chicago, paying the princely sum of \$100 for a pair of wide-legged pants



Miss May Lillie Frederick W. Glasie photo
May Lillie, "Champion Girl Horseback Shot of the West," shot
from her horse while riding sidesaddle.

"So great at first was the prejudice against any divided garment in Montana that a warning was given me to abstain from riding on the streets of Miles City lest I might be arrested," Cameron wrote.

The lady turned rancher was one of a bevy of women Lynn Richardson introduced to her crowd at a lecture Thursday at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, where Richardson is supervisor.

Women like Cameron found hard work but also freedom in the West.

Some were Eastern ladies who accompanied their husbands, and found that on the prairie, the expectations for girls and women were a little different.

There was hard work to be done, and everyone had to pitch in.

"All of a sudden, you had women doing things they never had before," Richardson said.

Or as Hallie Crawford Stillwell wrote, "I found out quickly that I was to live like a man, work like a man, and act like a man, and I was not so sure I was not a man when it was all over. The good lord did give me a mind that could not be governed by a man, and I remained a woman."

Stillwell was a Texas sharpshooter and rancher who led a Conestoga wagon convoy in 1910 when she was 13 years old. In later years, she became a justice of the peace.

Stillwell's story of triumph amidst hard work wasn't uncommon out West, Richardson said: "Some consciously went out West, some were drug out, but a lot of them blossomed in this challenge and adventure that awaited them."

New York debutante Josephine Monaghan dressed as a man and headed west, living the rest of her life as cowhand Jo Monaghan. Monaghan became known as a superior bronc buster.

“She was one of these independent spirits,” Richardson said. Nobody knew she was a woman until the day she died in 1904 Iowa. “I’m sure the coroner was like, ‘What!?’” Richardson remarked.

Monaghan probably wasn’t the only woman in trousers out West, Richardson said. “I’m sure some of them found that was the easier way to go.”

Some of the women were so wild, they went outside the law, like Belle Star — the Petticoat Terror of the Plains. “She carried a Colt .45 that she called ‘my baby,’” Richardson shared.

The ranchers and, in rare cases, cattle barons, gave birth to the cowgirls of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the lecturer said.

These women had grown up on ranches knew how to ride, rope and shoot as well as any man.



Annie Oakley poses for a studio portrait with her trusty rifle, taken between 1897 and 1926. Performing in Europe, Oakley once shot the ashes from Kaiser Wilhelm’s cigarette. She later wrote him a letter asking him if she could try again, Lynne Richardson said.



Belle Starr was born Myra Shirley, but she became the Petticoat Terror of the West and Queen of the Oklahoma Outlaws — a crack shot who married a Cherokee outlaw named Sam Starr. This photo was most likely taken in the early 1880s.

“Girls like Lucille Mulhall had

an incredible skill set,” Richardson said. At 10, Mulhall gave a roping demonstration at Madison Square Garden. Will Rogers saw it and named her a cowgirl — the known use of the word.

The cowgirls galloped straight into the heart of traveling Wild West shows and rodeos, and they looked good doing it. Just take a gander at Prairie Rose, a rodeo star who competed in a split skirt showing off a storm of marabou feathers on her bloomers. The outfits had to catch attention, emphasize their wearer’s femininity and take a bronc’s beating.

“These ladies weren’t just queens of the rodeo sitting there looking pretty,” Richardson said. “They were roping cattle and busting broncs.”

There was a cost for all this fun, though. Early rancher Ellen Liddy Watson ran afoul of the

powerful cattlemen's association and hanged, along with her husband, on false charges of cattle rustling. In 1929, one rodeo queen was killed and others were hurt on the circuit, adding fuel to claims women weren't fit for the "rough stock." Even Evelyn Cameron's husband and brother refused to be seen with her in public when she was wearing her scandalous split skirts.

"It took some brash women to break the rules and take the heat for it," Richardson said.

"These women were on the fringes of society, for which we really have to thank them."