

Bonnie Gray, The King Tut Cowgirl: Pioneering Stunts and Paving the Way for Women to Stunt
Double in Western Film

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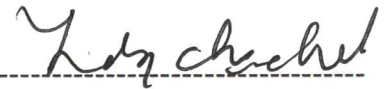
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the life and career of Verna Smith, better known as Bonnie Gray, during the Golden Age of Rodeo and her career defining contributions that challenged social norms. The period lasted from the early 1920s to the 1930s and Gray's career spanned the majority of the time when women competed in male dominated events in rodeo like bronc busting and bull dogging. I argue Gray's contributions to the development of stunts and stunt doubling in films created a new space for rodeo women in the early twentieth century.

Verna Smith, born in 1891 in Iowa, moved with her family to Kettle Falls, Washington early in her childhood. She received a horse as a child and was a gifted rider. She attended college at the University of Idaho and received a degree before returning to Washington. She began teaching music and later married a doctor. After moving several times with her husband, they settled in Burbank, California, and her transformation as Bonnie Gray began. She eventually appeared under her stage name Bonnie Gray and cultivated stunts that would open up other revenue opportunities.

Despite the media attention she garnered and relationships she developed, Gray is only referenced briefly in research in comparison to other rodeo stars of the day like Bonnie McCarroll and Mabel Strickland. This project focuses on the development of Gray as a rodeo star, her career, and the contributions she made to rodeo during the golden age of the sport.

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Dedicated to the women of 1920s rodeo. Because of their determination and grit, women made a place for themselves in the sport that cannot be forgotten.

Introduction

In 2019, I began exploring the impact of women in rodeo, specifically Bonnie Gray. Her personal manuscript collections are housed at the Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. Gray was determined to succeed in many arenas, including rodeo. She consistently and meticulously collected any memorabilia to paste into a scrapbook that highlighted her triumphs. She also wrote about her life from the perspective of her favorite horse, King Tut. Bonnie Gray's personality and life experiences shine through her collections, and her larger-than-life rodeo persona detailed an interesting story of grit, perseverance, and hard work.

It is no small feat to compete in rodeo especially considering many of the contests are extremely dangerous, and often lead to injury and sometimes death. Most famously, the death of rodeo star Bonnie McCarroll in 1929 stunned spectators at the gruesome risk each woman took each time they competed. Despite the inherent risk of the sport, women made a place for themselves as rodeo female athletes during the early twentieth century, including Bonnie Gray. When someone typically thinks of rodeo stars or women competing in rodeo today, what may come to mind is women competing in barrel racing. However, prior to this popular competition for women and the change of rodeo participation for females that would come in the 1930s, women competed in events that men competed in, like bronc busting, bulldogging, and stunts. These women also competed in other contests like relay racing and trick riding that often secured a successful and sustainable income.¹ Some of the most famous women in rodeo like Bonnie McCarroll, Mabel Strickland, and Vera McGinnis, garnered much attention and fame that led to

¹ Mary Lou LeCompte, "Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo: 1929-1947," *Journal of Sport History* 17.3 (December 1990): 318.

successful careers. However other women contributed as equally or as much to rodeo during this period. One such example is Bonnie Gray.

Bonnie Gray challenged traditional societal norms and created a space for herself to compete successfully during the Golden Age of Rodeo during the 1920s and early 1930s that ultimately paved the way for her performances in rodeo leading to stunt doubling in film. Her strong self-advocacy, continual hard work, and determination allowed her to cultivate a space for herself in rodeo, and Gray provided an example of unconventional success for a woman of the 1920s. Women did not receive the same treatment as men in typical professions during the early twentieth century, and Gray was able to develop and maintain a rodeo career for a significant period of time outside of a typical career path.

Professional women of the 1920s often were overlooked for promotions and relegated to a role associated with a “wifely quality” while also not receiving any recognition for the work completed in a position.² Gray’s success in rodeo instead of teaching, culminated in her ability to transfer her skill set to film through stunt doubling. She was innovative in creating and evolving the stunts that led to her appearance in Western films. Despite the success of her rodeo career and impact on stunt doubling and film, not much is known about Bonnie Gray while many other women of the period are well-known and researched.

Gray had a large presence and a flamboyant personality that garnered much attention from newspapers of the day. She was guaranteed to have her picture taken jumping her favorite Palomino horse, King Tut, over her yellow car Sunflower at most appearances. She also often appeared at events completely encircling one of her horses at contracted appearances and rodeos.

² William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 101-1.

Despite how often she appeared in newspapers, rodeos, parades, and contracted events, she is not one of the rodeo stars of the early 1920s that immediately comes to mind. She is briefly referenced in research by other scholars; however, a full analysis of the effect of her career on rodeo has not been completed prior to this thesis.

I argue that Bonnie Gray contributed to rodeo by challenging the gender norms and creating a space for herself and other women to continually innovate stunts and participate in Western film through stunt doubling. She meticulously cultivated relationships while advocating for her success in rodeo well into her retirement. She never gave up telling her story or detailing her contributions to rodeo and film. Gray also maintained that she was the first woman to fully encircle a galloping horse. Additionally, she was the first to jump a horse over a passenger filled car and eventually the fuselage of a plane. These stunts and her ability to stunt double with her horses pioneered an additional way for women to succeed in the American West and are detailed in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The thesis is separated into five chapters focusing on Bonnie Gray and her contributions to rodeo during the 1920s through 1930s. Chapter one, “Women in Rodeo: Historiography of Female Competition in Rodeo during the Golden Age of Rodeo” summarizes the relevant research of women in rodeo during the golden age of the sport. Important work has been completed by scholars on the impact of women in rodeo. However, Bonnie Gray has not been specifically researched, and her contributions to rodeo are described along with the impact of her career throughout the chapters.

Chapter two, “Bonnie is Born: Verna Smith’s Transformation into Bonnie Gray,” describes Verna Smith and her early life before competing in rodeo. The chapter details her childhood, early education, and first marriage to answer the question of how her childhood and

early adult life impact her decision to compete in rodeo. Additionally, the guiding research questions: what attracted her to the sport, how did she begin to train, and how did her first marriage to Harry Grenwald factor into her success act as a framework for the chapter. Gray attended a university, earned a degree, and she returned home to Washington upon graduating. The degree was not unusual at the time as 41 percent of college students were women by 1918. One of the most common professional roles for women during the early 1920s was teaching, and women educators constituted the majority of educational institutions workforce with eight out of ten teachers being women.³ However, Gray did not commit to a life as a teacher as expected. Instead, she would develop the persona of Bonnie Gray and catapult her career into rodeo. This chapter leads up to her first competition and the commitment to presenting herself as Bonnie Gray in a public arena.

Chapter three, “The King Tut Cowgirl and Her Rise to Fame: Bonnie Gray’s Impact and Contributions during the Golden Age of Rodeo,” focuses on Gray’s contributions to the sport of rodeo through stunts and her impact of stunt doubling in film. Innovative and always ready to perform, Gray challenged herself continually to improve her stunts. She performed various stunts to the awe of a rodeo audience, and the most famous stunt of jumping her horse over a car never disappointed a crowd. This stunt, and others, contributed to her success and led to her working in film as a stunt double.

Chapter four, “The \$10,000 Horse: King Tut’s Unpublished Manuscript,” provides an account of Bonnie’s career from her perspective. The unpublished manuscript included much of Gray’s own portrayal of her career as she wrote from the perspective of one of her stunt horses. Gray continually challenged society’s idea of femininity through competition with some of the

³ William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 99, 101.

most skilled female rodeo stars of the day as well as competing alongside of men. This chapter provides details of her accomplishments and successes from her point of view. Not every woman in rodeo made an impact on the sport or maintained a successful career. Gray, despite the inherent challenges of rodeo competition, provided a steady income for herself that allowed her to continuously compete across the nation and world with many of the best rodeo stars both male and female.

Chapter five, “Life After Rodeo,” provides an account of Gray’s life following her successful career. After the collapse of the Golden Age of Rodeo and female competition in the sport, Gray moved on and lived a relatively private life. The space for women in rodeo to compete after 1930 became much smaller, and the organized male associations removed the opportunity for women to compete in most events.⁴ Gray retired like many other women and moved on to other aspects of life. She continued to advocate for herself, and the spotlight of success never dwindled in retirement. Chapter five provides an overview of her retirement and eventual induction as an honoree into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame that memorialized Bonnie’s stardom in the rodeo arena. Her success as a rodeo star influenced the sport during the period and provided an alternative representation of women in 1920s America. Her commitment and dedication continue to inspire, and this thesis seeks to provide an account of Gray’s contributions to rodeo that celebrates her representation as a rodeo woman of the period.

⁴ Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2020), 13.

Chapter One

Women in Rodeo: Historiography of Female Competition during the Golden Age of Rodeo

The beginning of western women's history as a field of study resulted from the development of women's studies during second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Specific research into women competing in the Golden Age of Rodeo appeared decades later through Joyce Gibson Roach's book *The Cowgirls*, published in 1990. The culmination of women's studies programs as an academic field spurred the inclusion of female narratives like Roach's study of cowgirls in the West and later research by scholars. However, the publication of Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller's article "The Gentle Tamers Revisited" in 1980 cemented western women's history as a scholarly approach to women's history in the West. Detailed information on women in rodeo is authored consistently after the 1990s. However, many of these works seek to explore the intersectionality of the competitors. This thesis instead seeks to provide a detailed account of Verna Smith, known as Bonnie Gray in rodeo, to detail the accomplishments and contributions of one of the many female competitors of the early twentieth century. Much of the work available today focus on the overall contributions of women or on the specific contributions of some of the more well-known of the era, such as Lucille Mulhall, Tad Lucas, and most famously Bonnie McCarroll. Themes of western women's history emerged and morphed through several decades beginning with early academic works from the 1950s to the development of the area as a stand-alone field with the inclusion of multicultural narratives and histories, micro-histories, and specific categories like rodeo.⁵

⁵ Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, 2 (1980).

Prior to the appearance of research on women in rodeo, women's studies were often dismissed in western history before 1980. The genre remained a subcategory through the perceived lack of sources.⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner's approach to women in the West also influenced the dismissal of women's contributions. T.A. Larson describes Turner as the person who created the mold for historians to follow for the American West. Ignored in Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the continuation of disregard for the female appeared in following works by others in the field.⁷ Academic research before the institution of western women's history focused on women's suffrage movements, the lack of women settlers, and settlement of the West by pioneering women. These categories developed around sources from white women, and often overlooked contributions by non-white women.

Dee Brown's *Gentle Tamers* provided one of the first written representations dedicated to the history of women in the West and filled an opening left vacant by prior research and scholarship of western history.⁸ Published in 1958, the book solidified stereotypical and romantic depictions of western women including the pioneer woman. The author's portrayal of gender presented common misconceptions about women's contributions in the West. Jensen and Miller, in a response to Brown's *Gentle Tamers*, refer to these descriptions through four categories: "gentle tamers, sunbonneted helpmates, hell-raisers, and bad women."⁹ Gentle tamers and sunbonneted helpmates include the women migrating from the East to settle the West with their husbands and fathers. Brown describes them as tenacious and a "quiet force."¹⁰ Hell-raisers and bad women categorized those living outside social norms through rodeo, Wild West shows, and

⁶ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 178.

⁷ T.A. Larson, "Women's Role in the American West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 24, 3 (1974): 4.

⁸ Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 17.

⁹ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 181.

¹⁰ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 17.

stage performances. The author presents an overall view of white western woman but neglects woman of other cultures. The only representation of Indigenous cultures Brown presents contains descriptions of the captivity of prominent white women.¹¹ The Eurocentric view provided by the author of women in the West characterizes females as inconsequential and passive participants.

The newly formed field paved the way for academic research and discussion of women in the West through the inclusion of women's studies programs in scholastic settings. Scholarly approaches to the research of women in the West continued to increase. *Women and the West: A Short Social History*, by William Forrest Sprague and published in 1972, added to the field by detailing a social history of women traveling from the East to the West in stages beginning with the "Colonial Frontier." His work chronicled the lack of "unattached women" and the scarcity of women in the West. Sprague expounds western women as pioneer women, a term usually associated with white females. Additionally, the author associates the main contribution by women as the suffrage movement in the West. Sprague fortified arguments in Brown's work through the perpetuation of traditional and idealized themes in his scholarship.¹²

Julie Roy Jeffrey's work, published in the 1970s, followed a similar framework for prior scholarship. However, the difference in *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880*, by Roy- Jefferey, developed from her admittedly feminist ideology. She "hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from stereotypes and behaviors."¹³ Instead, she concludes women in the West conformed to social stereotypes she considered "constricting and sexist." Jefferey's work supports the experience of the pioneer

¹¹ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 12-14, 19.

¹² William Forster Sprague, *Women and the West: A Short Social History*, 8, 15, 118-9, 150.

¹³ Julie Roy Jefferey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), xv, xvi.

woman who, forced to commit to hard-work and struggle, represented the white gentle tamer and sunbonneted helpmate of Brown's description. The author presents women in the West as "The Rarest Commodity," with the lack of women migrating to the frontier thus reinforcing the theme of minimal female presence. She further braces the idea that the women who migrated worked hard to support their families taking on multiple roles but only contributing as a wife and mother. According to Jeffrey, lack of friendship and feminine associations left much to be desired by women in the West. Jeffrey describes these women creating social changes and contributing to the taming of the West through the "civilizing mission they assumed."¹⁴

Traditional themes continued to appear in publication without challenging the narrative of western women's history until Jensen and Miller's article publication in 1980. The authors opposed the stereotypical portrayal of the pioneer women and legitimized the "subfield" of western women's history. They argued against the lack of female presence in western history. Jensen and Miller challenged scholars to present research in the field utilizing sources including oral histories, diaries, and novels to develop a more accurate history to include multicultural representations and perspectives.¹⁵ From the development of the western women's history as a stand-alone field, scholars researched and provided a more inclusive history of women in the West.

Scholars such as Glenda Riley, Susan Armitage, Margaret Jacobs, Virginia Scharff, Antonia Castañeda and others illuminated the offerings of women in the West through the use of multicultural sources. These scholars often utilized academic journals to provide access to information including *The Magazine of Western History*, *Pacific Historical Review*, and

¹⁴ Jefferey, *Frontier Women*, xvi, 25, 58, 73-4, 109, 203.

¹⁵ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 181.

American Indian Quarterly. Prominent western women's history scholars compiled these pioneering essays in the multicultural approach into anthologies to issue a more complete narrative to oppose Turner's lack of representation and traditional historical thought regarding women's activities in the West.

Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson's contributed volume *The Women's West*, illuminates various oversights in the presentations of prior scholarship. The authors challenge the stereotypes actively portrayed in western women's history to change the perspective of readers. Armitage describes traditional western history as "male-dominated, racist, and romantic," and offers a definitive justification to change the rhetoric and antiquated view of women in the West.¹⁶

Further scholarship arguing for change in the writing of western women's history include Armitage and Jameson's subsequent work *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*. Published in 1997, the work continued to reanalyze traditional stereotypes and depictions of western women representations. This anthology provides insight and illumination on multicultural perspectives. The editors present a more inclusive history through descriptions of borderlands and inhabitants, interracial marriage, gender, and indigenous accounts. They aimed to rewrite the classical narrative of the romanticized woman and to present a history depicting historic actors other than white men.¹⁷

These works and research paved the way for scholarship of rodeo and specifically, women in rodeo. One more recent publication to focus on gender and multicultural perspectives appears through Rebecca Scofield's *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West*,

¹⁶ Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 4, 9.

¹⁷ Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*, 3.

published in 2019. Scofield argues that the people who were marginalized in rodeo and the mythical West made a space for themselves in rodeo. She focuses on the women that competed in during the Golden Age of Rodeo and moves to competitors and representation in the mid to late twentieth century. The research mentions some of the more famous women of the 1920s who were bronc riders like Vera McGinnis and Bonnie McCarroll while providing support of the idea that rodeo gave women a chance to travel extensively and opportunities that would have otherwise been few.¹⁸ Another example of the continued research into the effects of rodeo on identity and gender is Elyssa Ford's *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo*. Ford argues rodeo encompasses how the past is viewed today, and as such, rodeo becomes "a place of cultural performance" with meaning for all who compete, view, and support the sport.¹⁹

Arguing against these bygone era ideas, scholars like Glenda Riley gathered evidence to present readers with changing narratives. In *By Grit & Grace: Eleven Women Who Shaped the American West* editors Glenda Riley and Richard W. Etulain compiled an anthology of western women who provided meaningful contributions. These essays, as researched and written about by various western historians, offer details of women of color and varied backgrounds. They describe the work as a way to "illustrate the variety of women's experiences in the Pioneer West," regardless of "class status, ethnicity, race, marital status, age, or religious belief."²⁰

Research after the 1980s frequently focused on women and the inclusion of multicultural narratives. Scholarship in the late 1980s and early 1990s continued to gain momentum and

¹⁸ Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 3, 17.

¹⁹ Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion*, 3.

²⁰ Glenda Riley and Richard W. Etulain, *By Grit & Grace: Eleven Women Who Shaped the American West* (Golden, Fulcrum Publishing, 1997), xi.

inclusion and changed in the following decades. The turn of the millennium ushered forth a new era to include numerous publications challenging traditional female roles.

Specialized areas of research provided an additional framework for western women's history. Going from a broad topic to smaller topics allowed for an intimate look and critical analysis of the effects of colonial settlement and western migration. Focus on Indigenous women's histories, and representations of women of color appeared consistently in the 2000s with more specialized research. The shift of western women's history contributed to the acceptance of more specific research, like rodeo and the women who participated. One example of research becoming available on these women includes Tracey Hanshew's *Oklahoma Rodeo Women* published in 2020. Hanshew, a scholar of women in rodeo, previously with her studies on Lucille Mulhall, provides a detailed overview of women in rodeo from Oklahoma. She contributes to the genre by laying out the structure of how Mulhall pioneered a space for women to compete and appear in rodeo. The research ends with a description of women's roles in the sport today, and where it could go. She states, "it may be the women who have always supported rodeo who make it come back full circle to once again be the sport that represents the equality and determination that built ranching in the American West."²¹

The paradigm shift in western women's history continues today. Evidence and research by contemporary western scholars provide additional ways to rewrite western history to include all women. The gradual replacement of traditional ideas occurs continually as additional scholarship becomes available. Turner's historical school of thought regarding women in the west as non-contributive remains a stereotype that scholars seek to reform. The new thematic developments through challenging old notions began in the early 1980s after Jensen and Miller's

²¹ Tracey Hanshew, *Oklahoma Rodeo Women*, (Charleston, The History Press, 2020), 29, 92.

ground-breaking argument calling for the inclusion of a multicultural approach to western women's history. Current scholars illuminate the historical narrative of the inequity of power dynamics and set an example for decolonizing western women's history. Additionally, contemporary research provides more specialized studies, including micro-histories, to fully explore the relationships and experiences of all western women and the continued research of women in rodeo contributes to the change in narrative for women in the West.

Prominent research on America's rodeo women during the Golden Age of Rodeo by Renée M. Laegreid provides detailed information of contributions by successful rodeo women. Laegreid argues female competitors created lasting impressions and legacies with one of the earliest inclusions at the 1910 Pendleton Round-Up as a rodeo queen in *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West*. The traditional role representing female participation and the community developed and changed throughout rodeo's continued growth and eventually "cowgirl athletes" dominated the arena.²² The book, published in 2006, displays the development of women competing in rodeo through the model of the rodeo queen at the Pendleton Round-Up in 1910. The presentation of women in rodeo at Pendleton Round-Up slowly changed and women would become competitors by the time rodeo became accepted as a sport.²³ The work, specific to how women made a space for themselves in rodeo through hard work and determination, focuses on the overall contributions of several women and the ways in which this transferred to the sport. Bonnie Gray is mentioned in the work once to describe the separation of female behavior among those that competed in rodeo and had media attention compared to first wave feminism of the early nineteenth century. However, a detailed depiction of her specific

²² Renée M. Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006),40.

²³ Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, I, 8.

contributions remains unavailable. The work instead focused on Gray's representation as a college graduate to support the argument that women in rodeo did not directly challenge the status quo through direct means.²⁴ The work moves on to focus on the effect of women in the sport without further discussion of Gray specifically. Research begins to transition into providing detailed arguments of the contributions of famous women in rodeo. However, scholars focus on the more famous female rodeo contestants, and Gray continues to appear in a broad context.

Tracey Hanshew details one such rise to rodeo stardom in "Rodeo in Oklahoma is Women's Business: How Lucille Mulhall's Fame Created Opportunity in Rodeo." Hanshew argues Mulhall's participation and acceptance in rodeo events carved a space for women to perform in the rodeo arena.²⁵ Hanshew further explores the development of female rodeo careers in *Oklahoma Rodeo Women*. She argues women created rodeo and maintained the sport regardless of the hardships rodeo faced.²⁶ The research of the scholars like Hanshew contributes to further understanding how women impacted the West and opened avenues of income, participation in sport, and alternative perspectives of western lifestyles. However, no account of Bonnie Gray's contributions is available on its own and is instead provided with the details of several of the other famous women of rodeo during the 1920s. This work seeks to build upon the available representation and research of the women of rodeo during the period while also focusing on Gray's life and contributions.

Mary Lou LeCompte also presents research supporting the argument women in competitive rodeo from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s represent female athletes who

²⁴ Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 51.

²⁵ Tracy Hanshew, "Rodeo in Oklahoma is Women's Business: How Lucille Mulhall's Fame Created Opportunity in Rodeo," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 92,3 (Fall 2014): 270-73.

²⁶ Hanshew, *Oklahoma Rodeo Women*, 57.

garnered national media recognition in “Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo, 1929-1947.” The research provides evidence of female entrance in contests identified as male events, and she argues women became recognized as athletes by competing in the sport.²⁷ She also details this history in *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* and argues women in rodeo became athletes prior to the 1970s athletic revolution. This detailed account provides further research of women in the sport of rodeo. LeCompte also mentions Gray in the work in conjunction with Mabel Strickland. These two women often competed against each other and appeared in contests at the same rodeos. LeCompte, in the work, provides brief details about two competitions Gray appeared in at Yankee Stadium and Madison Square Garden. One other mention of Gray is detailed in LeCompte’s book to provide the argument that Gray never had much success because of her restriction to competing in rodeos mostly in the West instead of performing in the Eastern arenas as well. However, she does detail the spectacular wedding to Gray’s second husband, Donald Harris referring to Gray as “highly skilled and flamboyant.” However, she argues this did not impact her ability to become mainstream in rodeo to both East and West audiences of the sport.²⁸

Another scholar, Joyce Gibson Roach, details the lives of many women in the West as cowgirls, including those that participated in rodeo. She argues these women contributed and led the way in “the revolution in the affairs of women which was taking place, unheralded and unnoticed, throughout the United States.”²⁹ This work is another work focused on providing details in broad strokes of women as those who worked on ranches, farms, and trails that eventually became cowgirls who competed in rodeo. She acknowledges the need for detailed

²⁷ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 318.

²⁸ Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), 4, 85-6, 105.

²⁹ Roach, *The Cowgirls*, xvii.

research on the specific women of the Golden Age of Rodeo. Roach states, “While it is not possible to elaborate on the careers of all the women in rodeo, their names do at least merit being called.”³⁰ She names Bonnie Gray as one of those women, and the goal in writing the thesis is to provide an account of Gray’s achievements and details of her outstanding life.

³⁰ Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 95.

Chapter Two

Bonnie is Born: Verna Smith's Transformation into Bonnie Gray

Verna Smith, most famously known as Bonnie Gray, lived and performed under several aliases throughout her life. Her chosen name often blurred the line between private and public life as she became known through professional aliases Bonnie Grey, Jean Gray, Bonnie Gray, Bonnie Harris, and Bonnie Gray Harris. Alternative names associated with Bonnie's personal life include Verna Smith, Verna Grace Smith, Verna Grenwald, Verna Greenwald, and Verna Harris.³¹ The lack of consistency in her name by reporters, public documents, and Bonnie's preference created research complications. The use of multiple names in records appears throughout census documents, marriage certificates, and entertainment reporting. She was once only known to her friends, family, and colleagues as Verna Smith before becoming the charismatic persona Bonnie Gray. Difficulty finding details on Bonnie troubled others as well. Another rodeo star, Reba Perry Blakely, provides details about the many names and challenges in researching information about Bonnie stating, "Small wonder we couldn't learn her background."³² This continues to be an issue in research into Gray's life today. Valuable information pertaining to her early life appears briefly in a manuscript she wrote from the perspective of her favorite horse with the few details about her parents and childhood home and in the scrapbook and items she chose to keep. Detailed records provided by Bonnie are non-existent. However, census records, city directories, and a few articles provide additional context into her life before rodeo stardom.

Born on December 15, 1891, in Grant, Iowa, to parents Frank and Anne Smith, Verna was the second daughter of six children. At the time of the 1900 census, Frank and Anne had five

³¹"Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³²Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

children and Verna was the second oldest. Frank and Anne both were born in Wisconsin in the late 1860s before moving to Iowa.³³ U.S. Census records from 1900 place Verna's birth in Iowa along with all her siblings, the last of which was born in 1901.³⁴ Verna's birth place according to the U.S. Social Security Applications and Claims Index lists Grant, Iowa, as her place of birth in contrast to several articles listing Kettle Falls, Washington, as her birth place.³⁵ She was eight years old at the time of the twelfth census, and the record shows she attended school when the census was taken. Her maternal grandmother, Margaret Gray, also lived in the Smith household during the year 1900 and shows Verna having Scottish heritage as Margaret's' birthplace is recorded as Scotland on the census.³⁶

The Smith's moved to Kettle Falls sometime between the 1900 and 1910 census. All members of the family resided in Washington with Frank as the head of household by the time of the thirteenth census in 1910. The family left Iowa and settled on their ranch near the town and, Verna, eighteen and single at the time of the census, did not have an occupation listed.³⁷ Growing up on the family ranch near the Canadian border along the Columbia River in Washington, she learned to love horses and spent time with her siblings and parents.³⁸ Sometime after moving to Washington, Verna was gifted a horse by her parents, which inspired her to become involved in an equestrian lifestyle.³⁹ Contradictory information appear in articles providing details she received her first horse at age 6 in 1897 in Kettle Falls.⁴⁰ However, at the time of the 1900

³³ 1900 United States Census, Douglas, Montgomery, Iowa, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

³⁴ 1910 United States Census, Douglas, Montgomery, Iowa, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

³⁵ "Social Security Application and Claims Index, 1936-2007," s.v. "Verna Grace Harris", *Ancestry.com*.

³⁶ 1900 United States Census, Douglas, Montgomery, Iowa, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

³⁷ 1910 United States Census, Douglas, Montgomery, Iowa, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

³⁸ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³⁹ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁴⁰ Julie Price, "Horsewoman rubbed elbows with the stars," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

census, the entire Smith family still lived in Iowa.⁴¹ Despite conflicting accounts of the move to Washington and when she received the horse, the common story shows she did receive a horse as a gift that later inspired her love for Western culture. After growing up on her family's ranch, she left Kettle Falls for college at the University of Idaho in Moscow.⁴²

Verna went to school for music with the intention to teach the subject after graduation and ended up challenging traditional gender roles of the 1920s within a few short years after graduation. Higher education for women during this period became more common as women began to enroll in degree programs in the late nineteenth century after generations of being shut out. Common jobs after education included white collar roles such as professional clerical, management, and sales roles according to Nancy Cott.⁴³ Smith's expected teaching occupation after graduation aligned with the social expectations of a woman during the time.

Despite her focus on studying music, her drive to continually challenge herself and others' expectations caused her to enter numerous competitions.⁴⁴ She entered as a competitor in several contests including track and high jump. As a young woman, she showed a proclivity for competitiveness and drive to succeed. The desire to win appeared through her sports activities including at the collegiate level. Her competitive nature developed early in her life as she won the title of "best woman athlete" during her tenure as a student at the university.⁴⁵ She made local newspapers with her athletic skill and record high jump of 5 feet and 3 inches during one of

⁴¹ 1900 United States Census, Douglas, Montgomery, Iowa, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

⁴² "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁴³ Nancy Cott, "The Modern Women of the 1920s, American Style", 83.

⁴⁴ Raquel Cook, "A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives 'em all," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁴⁵ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

the university's track meets for women.⁴⁶ She became the women's tennis champion and captain of the women's basketball team during a time when female athletes were uncommon.⁴⁷

While attending the university, she began to develop lifelong relationships with members of the community, including public officials. For example, she maintained relationships with the postmaster of Moscow, Idaho and Mr. William Borah who later becomes Senator Borah.⁴⁸ The development of relationships with public figures, stars, and politicians began in her university years and continued into her rodeo career. The collection of a network of relationships with well-known people signified success in her career and competition with documentation of many interactions in her scrapbook. A common theme across relationships with Verna Smith remained the interest in her career as Senator Borah asked about her completion of a bachelor's degree and if she still played music after he attended a performance years later at the Calgary Stampede in Alberta. According to Bonnie's recollections, she assured him music provided her with a leisure activity. The same sentiment was noted by a reporter describing her abilities as a woman who is at home not only in high society and rodeo, but also recitals.⁴⁹

Smith graduated with a degree in music with a concentration in piano. After college and before she became a rodeo star, Verna returned to Kettle Falls and began a career as a music instructor. She not only garnered respect and publicity from her time in higher education but also gained success as a teacher. Smith once again made the local newspaper as the instructor for her

⁴⁶ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁴⁷ Cook, "A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives 'em all," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁴⁸ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

⁴⁹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

student's recital at the Kettle Falls Gymnasium. Appearing at the gymnasium on May 4, 1916, Verna played the piano and performed alongside her pupils.⁵⁰

During this period, Verna met and married her first husband Harry Greenwald.⁵¹ Harry was the Health Official for Kettle Falls.⁵² Verna Grace Smith and Dr. Harry Greenwald married on May 29, 1917, in Stevens, Washington after they received the marriage license on May 28, 1917.⁵³ The happy couple were married at the home of her parents by Rev. E.A. Walter. Details of the nuptials appeared in *The Spokesman-Review* describing the reception at the Odd Fellows Hall with attendance by many as Verna was "prominent in music circles in Stevens County, and Harry was well known as a resident of Kettle Falls for 6 years."⁵⁴ Harry, born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1880 was eleven years older than Verna at the time their marriage and the union was the first for both of them.⁵⁵ Harry practiced allopathy as a medical professional.⁵⁶ Allopathy, according to the Meriam Webster dictionary, is the "system of medical practice that emphasizes diagnosing and treating disease and the use of conventional, evidence-based therapeutic measures (such as drugs or surgery)."⁵⁷ Greenwald practiced in several locations with the most time spent in Washington with his licensing in the state registered as early as 1910. He was also registered in Ohio in 1904, Spokane in 1910, Kettle Falls in 1913, San Antonio in 1920, and California in 1920-21.⁵⁸ During the first 2 years of marriage, the *Colville Examiner* continually reported on the activities of Dr. Greenwald and Verna Greenwald indicating the success and

⁵⁰ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁵¹ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

⁵² *Colville Examiner*, (Colville, Washington), August 10, 1918.

⁵³ Washington, U.S Marriage Records, 1854-2013, Washington State Archives, Olympia Washington, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

⁵⁴ *The Spokesman-Review*, (Spokane, Washington), May 31, 1917.

⁵⁵ Washington, U.S Marriage Records, 1854-2013, Washington State Archives, Olympia Washington, digital image s.v. "Verna Smith," *Ancestry.com*.

⁵⁶ Directory of Deceased American Physicians 1804-1909, digital image s.v. "Harry A. Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

⁵⁷ "Allopathy, Meriam-Webster, October 30, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allopathy>.

⁵⁸ Directory of Deceased American Physicians 1804-1909, digital image s.v. "Harry A. Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

notoriety of the couple. For example, the newspaper reported in 1918 on a party Mrs. Harry Greenwald chaperoned while camping on the Colville River.⁵⁹ Again in 1918, the newspaper followed up with details on Mrs. Greenwald entertaining her cousin Mrs. S. Rumsey as a music accompaniment to a singer while being a “charming hostess.”⁶⁰ However, these activities did not last much longer as World War I impacted residents of Kettle Falls, Washington.

The United States entered the conflict of World War I in April 1917.⁶¹ This created an impact on the newly married couple as Harry went on to join the military when his draft card was completed on September 12, 1918. He registered in Stevens County, Washington and lists Verna Greenwald as his spouse.⁶² Verna went on to train as a nurse at Washington Hospital and is reported to have served alongside her husband for 1 ½ years at Camp Lewis.⁶³ Her new role as a nurse remained in the job category deemed acceptable for women, and her challenge to the culture norm would occur after their move to California. A newspaper accounts Verna’s delivery of fifty-two children in Washington as she was the attending nurse whom each child received their first bath from.⁶⁴

Despite the strain of a war on the nation, Verna still found the time to compete. One such competition leveraged her love of animals by entering her beloved Persian cat into the Western Washington Fair in 1919. She won the first-place blue ribbon, and documented the experience with photographs, articles, and the ribbon in her scrapbook. However, other records with

⁵⁹ *Colville Examiner*, (Colville, Washington), August 10, 1918.

⁶⁰ *Colville Examiner*, (Colville, Washington), August 24, 1918.

⁶¹ David Wrobel, *America’s West: A History, 1890-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 83.

⁶² "U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," digital image s.v. "Harry Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

⁶³ Price, “Horsewoman rubbed elbows with the stars,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁶⁴ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

additional information about day-to-day life for the Greenwald's are not readily available in the scrapbook, and the additional information known comes from government records.

Harry's military records show he was enlisted from November 13, 1918, until his discharge on August 1, 1920. He was a 1st Lieutenant in the 1st Infantry stationed at Camp Lewis, Washington and Fort Sam Houston, Texas.⁶⁵ He exited the military three years after their marriage. Verna leveraged her training and experience as a nurse with various reporters and newspapers reporting Verna's training assisted in saving numerous lives during the flu epidemic of 1918.⁶⁶ The newspaper claims she assisted in nursing hundreds of ill Native Americans at Fort Apache, Arizona, during the period of flu. Both Harry and Verna were in Arizona on August 7, 1910, according to the *Colville Examiner*. The newspaper reported Harry's brother passed away and both reunited with the Greenwald family in Ohio to bury his relative.⁶⁷ Her brother soon became a doctor, and she eventually worked alongside him as a nurse for a time.

Harry's enlistment in the military ushered in drastic change for the newly married couple which caused him to be stationed in Texas.⁶⁸ Always up for a challenge, Verna followed Harry, and they eventually ended up in California after his discharge. They resided in Burbank, California, which remained Smith's area of residence throughout the duration of her career and life.⁶⁹ Both of Verna's careers, up to the point of moving to Burbank, matched the career path of most working women of the era. These positions offered low income, and often no chance of marriage according to Hillary Hallet. She argues the "stage offered self-support and social

⁶⁵ *Washington, U.S., Military Records, 1855-1950*, Washington State Archives, Olympia Washington, digital image s.v. "Harry Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

⁶⁶ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁶⁷ *Colville Examiner*, (Colville, Washington), August 7, 1920.

⁶⁸ *Washington, U.S., Military Records, 1855-1950*, Washington State Archives, Olympia Washington, digital image s.v. "Harry Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

⁶⁹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

mobility.”⁷⁰ Despite beating the odds in marrying Harry when the two professions often eliminated marriage as option, Verna pushed forward and began to transform after moving to California. Westerns were on the rise in the early 1910s and actresses such as Mary Pickford portrayed the success of work in film through Western culture representation. Pickford made \$50,000 annually, and performing became one of the largest career paths for women.⁷¹ This potentially appealed to Verna and other women as Southern California became a beacon that showcased cultural extremes through Westerns produced in Hollywood.⁷²

During her marriage to Harry and shortly after the move to Burbank, Verna began competing in rodeo and made her way to Pendleton, Oregon, as a featured rider. The reason for the couple’s move to California is unknown, and the move placed them in a region of California with unique possibilities available that appealed to Verna’s sense of adventure and competition. Burbank, located in Southern California in the San Fernando Valley, is a suburb of Los Angeles, which became known as the media capital of the world due to the short distance to Hollywood and media companies. The proximity to the film making industry greatly benefited her. Whether Verna was drawn to film or rodeo first, research shows she applied herself to both.⁷³ The Greenwald’s moved to Los Angeles in 1920, and then to Burbank in 1922. The land they purchased together would become known as the Bonnie Gray Ranch.⁷⁴ Verna’s initial foray into rodeo did not come with her transformation into Bonnie Gray. Instead, she competed as Verna Greenwald and traveled with ten horses for the Pendleton Round-Up.⁷⁵ The reporter also

⁷⁰ Hillary Hallet, *Go West, Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 47.

⁷¹ Hallet, *Go West, Young Women!*, 52-65.

⁷² Wrobel, *America’s West*, 94.

⁷³ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁷⁴ Price, “Horsewoman rubbed elbows with the stars,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁷⁵ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

describes her competition circuit as ending in December with a winter break to be spent in Los Angeles, California with her spouse, Dr. Harry Greenwald. Additionally, the reporter provides details about Verna's mother Anne Smith joining her in Pendleton. This is the only record of her parents' potential support and approval of her rodeo career. However, one reporter describes the unhappiness and disappointment of her family after she chose to follow the rodeo circuit.⁷⁶ The reporter provided information in the same article regarding Dr. Greenwald's business. Harry was only licensed in California from 1920-21, and his business in stock and bond corresponded with his honorable discharge from the military.⁷⁷

Verna's career in rodeo, strengthened by the emergence of women in Westerns, built upon the careers of earlier rodeo stars. One such rodeo star, Lucille Mulhall, provided an example of an alternative career path for cowgirls. Tracey Hanshew describes Mulhall as "an important example of a woman who could ride astride and maintain her femininity. Her ability to balance participation in a masculine sport with conservative feminine attire made her the paramount example in converting old ways into new opportunities for women across the United States."⁷⁸ Mulhall innovated and cultivated a space for women to become rodeo stars in the early 1900s and within a few short years, these women became nationwide stars with much press coverage and national attention.⁷⁹ Verna would reap the rewards of the women who went ahead of her, setting the stage for to become a rodeo celebrity. By 1926, Verna was going by the name Bonnie

⁷⁶ Cook, "A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives 'em all," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁷⁷ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁷⁸ Hanshew, "Rodeo in Oklahoma is Women's Business," 269.

⁷⁹ Tracey Hanshew, "Rodeo in Oklahoma is Women's Business," 273.

Greenwald in her personal life with this listing at an address in San Fernando from the Burbank City Directory.⁸⁰

Pressure from friends inspired her to become a professional cowgirl due to her constant trick riding practice and mastery of the skill, and the earliest accounting of her stage name Bonnie Gray appears in newspaper clippings as early as 1922. One such example shows her standing next to Bonnie McCarroll, one of the most well-known rodeo stars from the Golden Age of Rodeo, in 1922 from *The New York Times*.⁸¹ By 1922, Verna had transitioned to presenting her public persona as Bonnie Gray and left Verna Greenwald behind. Raquel Cook reported Bonnie became a professional in the sport as early as 1921. She loved the competition, and competitive sports were her calling.⁸²

Little is known about the relationship she shared with her immediate family and remains without much detail. However, she briefly describes the lives of her siblings in an interview in 1925. She lets the reporter know both of her sisters graduated from Cheney Normal School, two of her brothers were businessmen in Spokane, and one brother was attending Washington State College as a junior. The same newspaper also discusses her marital status and as married to a businessman in Los Angeles. She does not mention Harry's name or her sibling's names supporting the idea Verna kept her personal and public life strictly separated.⁸³ Most other details about her personal life remain elusive; especially about any relationships with siblings and parents. However, she reminisces about a visit from her parents at Pendleton Round-Up and refers to her mother lovingly as the "person she loves the most" in her manuscript about King

⁸⁰ *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995*, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie Greenwald," 1926, *Ancestry.com*

⁸¹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁸² Cook, "A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives 'em all," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁸³ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

Tut. She also describes them as gray-haired in Bonnie's recollections as her favorite horse, and she jokingly mentions her father's nickname for her mother- "Annie Bell."⁸⁴ This was in sharp contrast to many other women's rodeo experiences in the early 1920s. Women often came from rodeo families and had the support of parents or spouses along with brief details on their lives. For example, Lucille's father encouraged her natural skill and outwardly promoted her. Her other siblings, born into the lifestyle could also ride. Mulhall became a famous rodeo producer paving the way for women to compete as early as 1917. One such star that also assisted the perpetuation of female rodeo stardom was Florence Randolph who began competing in 1919.⁸⁵ Randolph stayed involved after her marriage to Floyd Randolph and continued to promote and produce rodeos together.⁸⁶ Despite Verna's burgeoning success in rodeo, she maintained a distance between her personal life and public presentation unlike the Mulhall's and Randolph's.

Not only did she utilize contests to challenge herself and others, but she also participated in theatrical presentations. One newspaper reported that "'local girl, Bonnie Gray, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. F.E. Smith,'" used her horsemanship skills to be the double for the actor in "Spook Ranch." This experience helped her develop skills she later used in stunt doubling and for her short foray into acting.⁸⁷ The 1920s saw rapid change for the film industry, and Verna capitalized on this as she became Bonnie Gray. The Hollywood film industry paid well for women to appear and participate, often as stuntwomen. Randolph received several hundred dollars for stunts that took no more than a few minutes and influenced her decision to stay in Hollywood.⁸⁸ Verna, now known as Bonnie, found the money appealing, and in 1924 described one of the reasons for

⁸⁴ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

⁸⁵ Hanshew, *Oklahoma Rodeo Women*, 31-32, 45.

⁸⁶ "Florence Hughes Fenton Randolph," The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, March 2, 2020, <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/collections/awards/rodeo-hall-of-fame/inductees/5068/>

⁸⁷ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁸⁸ Hanshew, *Oklahoma Rodeo Women*, 45.

getting into rodeo was to travel. She needed money for this, and rodeo and film provided a unique opportunity for women skilled enough to perform in the industry.⁸⁹ These films allowed women, who encompassed 75% of the movie audience, an alternative to traditional values and gender representation. Women, instead, could imagine themselves as a Western woman “experimenting with their own self-transformation.”⁹⁰ Mary Lou LeCompte, describes the success of the first western film in 1903 through the film *The Great Train Robbery*. Many companies began filming westerns exclusively and by 1912 Hollywood had produced some of the most memorable western stars in actors like Tom Mix.⁹¹ Bonnie leaned into this as other stars paved the way for roles in the films. Bonnie’s rodeo career and future in film would continue to influence the roles of women in the arena and film as she became one of the women to pioneer stunt doubling for famous actors and actresses.

Bonnie was on her own in Burbank by end of 1929.⁹² Harry Greenwald died on May 19, 1929 at the age of 45 from lobar pneumonia.⁹³ He passed away in Glendale and was buried in Cincinnati, Ohio in the same town as his deceased brother.⁹⁴ Gray, widowed by the age of 38, had to focus on her career. She had alternative career paths to fall back on as a widowed women in 1920s culture; however, she chose to stay the course of her career path and chase rodeo fame. Bonnie never publicly addressed the death of Harry except in interviews well after the end of her rodeo career. She maintained she was widowed despite records of a second marriage that ended

⁸⁹ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁹⁰ Hallet, *Go West, Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood*, 80.

⁹¹ Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 42.

⁹² *The Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, California)*, May 23, 1929, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/385391216/?article=3486b5bc-b20d-4f8f-9a08-addeb18dd87b&focus=0.38829207,0.50931466,0.5090951,0.5399917&xid=3355>.

⁹³ Directory of Deceased American Physicians 1804-1909, digital image s.v. "Harry A. Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

⁹⁴ *U.S., Find a Grave® Index, 1600s-Current*, Lehi, Utah, digital image s.v. “Harry Greenwald,” 1929, *Ancestry.com*

in divorce and a clipping from a newspaper pasted in her scrapbook with the report she showed up at a divorce hearing with Harry wearing her best riding attire.⁹⁵ The 1930 census provides details of her life immediately after her spouse's death. She, at the time of the census, had not remarried. She listed her address as 1020 West Oak Street Burbank, California. It can be inferred that the property is the ranch that would become known as the Bonnie Gray Ranch. She was listed as the sole homeowner on the census with the value of the property \$5000. She gave vital records of her age as 37, with birth year about 1893, with her occupation as "professional rider."⁹⁶ The decision to list her occupation as a rider showed her commitment to rodeo. Arguably, her full transformation into Bonnie Jean Gray is final.

1930 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*

⁹⁵ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

⁹⁶ 1930 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*.

The census record also provides insight into her time as a nurse during the First World War.⁹⁷ It lists her military status as a veteran of the World War supporting the details she provides to reporters about her life before rodeo. Each response is carefully crafted by Bonnie, and no further mention of her childhood, early working period, marriage, or military service appears in any specific detail. Instead, Bonnie maintains a pointed recollection of her career from the time she acquired King Tut to his retirement in the early 1920s. Bonnie carefully constructed her rodeo persona to transform from Verna Smith to Bonnie Gray and crafted a sustainable career and fostered relationships with people across the country in rodeo, film, government, and spectators. Despite her public appearances and numerous photo-ops and public opinions, she remained a relatively private person. What we know about her personal life after her career takes off comes from Bonnie herself through two main documents. One such record is the manuscript from the perspective of her favorite horse King Tut.

She purchased the Palomino from a ranch in Georgia for \$275.00 and returned home to Burbank to train him for rodeo. The discovery of his jumping abilities by escaping his stall and easily clearing it to escape prompted Bonnie and her trainers to prepare King Tut for stunts. Never alone at her ranch, visitors witnessing Tut's escape suggested she jump him over a car. Little did they know she took the sentiment seriously. Ed Wright, rodeo clown, expert horseman, and member of Gray's team, set the equipment for the stunt. The preparation to jump over her car named Sunflower required practice and expertise as well as constant training and riding. To finalize the development of what becomes her most famous stunt, Wright acquired a car and set it in the ground six inches to transition Tut into jumping vehicles instead of fences.⁹⁸ Bonnie's

⁹⁷ 1930 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*.

⁹⁸ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

career is detailed through the manuscript she produced from the perspective of King Tut and through her scrapbook she carefully pasted newspaper clippings, photographs, memorabilia, and memories into. Chapters three and four will explore the intricacies of her fascinating career with an in-depth examination of these valuable details compared to other rodeo stars of the day.

Chapter Three

The King Tut Cowgirl and Her Rise to Fame: Bonnie Gray's Impact and Contributions during the Golden Age of Rodeo

Bonnie Gray, the World's All-Around Champion Horsewoman according to one reporter during the early 1920s, presented a vibrant persona to her rodeo audiences, heads of state, film audiences, and festival goers alike. She competed in rodeo events traditionally reserved for men including bare back bronc riding.⁹⁹ She pioneered stunts, the most famous of which included jumping her golden Palomino King Tut over a passenger filled car, raced in ladies relay races, appeared in parades, and used trick riding to showcase her athleticism and horse training skills.¹⁰⁰ Gray participated during the Golden Age of rodeo that spanned the 1920s through 1930s and successfully challenged stereotypes of female athletes and womanhood.¹⁰¹ Opinionated and never one to remain silent on topics she deemed worthy of response, Gray used her fame to provide rebuttals to calls for the end of rodeo because of animal cruelty.¹⁰² During the years of Gray's competitive streak in rodeo from 1921-1935, women in the sport provided audiences with entertainment while simultaneously challenging traditional notions of the woman athlete. One reporter described female rodeo stating, "They are ambitious to establish woman as good as a man and several of them."¹⁰³ By competing in events reserved for men, competitive rodeo women like Bonnie Gray became successful and often developed sustainable and fulfilling careers on the rodeo circuit despite receiving salaries significantly less than their male

⁹⁹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁰⁰ *The Cody Enterprise* (Cody, Wyoming), August 17, 1927.

¹⁰¹ Michael Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 83, 4 (October 1992): 123.

¹⁰² "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁰³ *The Casper Sunday Tribune* (Casper, Wyoming), July 20, 1924.

counterparts.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Bonnie helped pave the way for women to stunt double for men while also making a space to appear in Westerns as a lead actor with many articles referencing Bonnie's appearance in film as an actress and stunt doubling career.¹⁰⁵

Bonnie Gray performed extensively throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s alongside many of the most well-known rodeo stars, men and women alike. Often pictured with Bonnie McCarroll, Rose Smith, Tad Lucas, Ruth Roach, Mabel Strickland, and her travelling companion and famous rodeo clown Ed Wright, she gained media attention through her daring performances, style, and competitive nature.¹⁰⁶

These women pioneered the space for female participation in rodeo and Bonnie contributed alongside most. Pictured with Bonnie McCarroll and Rose Smith in 1924 in Monte Vista, Colorado, the women prepared to stun audiences with daring feats spectators expected to see men perform.

¹⁰⁴ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 328.

¹⁰⁵ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁰⁶ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.



Magruder Bros., "Rose Smith, Bonnie Gray, Bonnie McCarroll," *Bruce McCarroll Collection of the Bonnie & Frank McCarroll Rodeo Archives*, 1924.

McCarroll, began competing in 1912 after marriage to husband Frank McCarroll. Born Bonnie Treadwell to Idaho ranchers, the cowgirl way of life would not have been unknown. Bonnie McCarroll capitalized on her horse skills as a woman who had grown up riding horses her entire life by competing as a slick bronc rider. McCarroll also provided fans with excitement by competing in trick riding, steer riding, bulldogging, and jumping over cars. Gray was well known for jumping over a passenger filled vehicle and appears to have adapted the stunt with inspiration from McCarroll. She would spend over a decade in competition and died in 1929 after switching to bronc riding with hobbles causing her to be trampled to death when her feet were stuck in her stirrups. After a weeklong battle, McCarroll died and stunned the rodeo community.¹⁰⁷ Her sudden death ultimately contributed to the change of female participation in rodeo in the years after.

Rose Smith, another outstanding rodeo star and champion, also competed in numerous rodeo events. She was married to the famous cowboy, Oklahoma Curly Roberts, and traveled the

¹⁰⁷ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 95-6.

rodeo circuit competing in bronc riding like Bonnie McCarroll. Smith often won purses from events, and LeCompte details the total of Smith's winnings from the Ringling's Madison Square Garden contest in the amount of \$960 with \$600 alone from winning the bronc riding contest. Bonnie Gray also competed during the contest as a trick rider and came in second with Vera McGinnis.

These women were able to make a living at the competition; however, they each received substantially less than their male counterparts with a total purse of \$6,175 to be split among the female winners of the show.¹⁰⁸ Not only were these women defying the traditional idea of femininity as a housewife, these women, also made a career out of the sport despite the pay disparity. Women in the 1920s were expected to marry and adhere to a traditional role of homemaker while men maintained the role as a provider.¹⁰⁹ Often, female rodeo stars married male rodeo competitors contributing to the joint success the marriage provided. However, Gray did not marry a man that competed in rodeo until after the death of her first husband. She supported herself during the majority of her career, and much of Gray's winnings were documented along with her career in a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings, photographs, notes, and rodeo ephemera.¹¹⁰ The compilation highlights important events as determined by Bonnie throughout the active years of her career and many clippings are marked with arrows or circled to draw the viewers' attention to the pieces that pertain to Gray.

Tad Lucas also competed with the famous rodeo women of the 1920s and became one of the well-known competitors like Bonnie McCarroll. Born in 1902 in Nebraska to a family with over twenty children, Lucas began to ride and help with breaking horses before the age of ten.

¹⁰⁸ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 86.

¹⁰⁹ William Chafe, *Paradox of Change*, 107.

¹¹⁰ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

Gray and Lucas competed in the same rodeos throughout their careers after both became competitors. Lucas entered rodeo in 1922 and became a full-time cowgirl around the same period as Bonnie.¹¹¹ Gray's rodeo stardom began in the 1920s with clippings from the scrapbook providing evidence of championship performances as early as 1921 with one reporter providing details on Gray's career 1924 describing her being in competition for three years. Additionally, through a Ralph Doubleday photograph pasted into the book, evidence is available that provides proof she was in rodeo at least by 1922. She reportedly participated in a trick riding contest at Madison Square Garden the same year. One performance at the venue featured Bonnie Gray, Bonnie McCarroll, and Mayme Stroud.

These women competed for a \$25,000 cash prize after traveling eighty miles in two days from Cheyenne, Wyoming with all their gear and animals providing evidence of these women's commitment to rodeo as the circuit was a constant nine months of travel and hard, dangerous work. Billed as one of the first big rodeos in the East, the women participated in bronc riding, trick riding, and fancy riding. This performance would not be her only foray into the championship contest as the same clipping detailed her rise as a trick rider with a double championship win of the Broadmoor Trophy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, championship trick rider at a contest in Monte Vista, Colorado, and El Paso, Texas. Bonnie continued to travel and earn a living wage as a rodeo contract performer and competitor. She signed a contract with Victor J. Evans, president of The Show of Shows, for travel and transportation from El Paso, Texas to Washington, DC, in the amount of \$400 per week from May 26, 1923-June 9, 1923.¹¹²

Bonnie kept contracts and receipts from performances providing proof she received several hundred dollars per performance, not including any prize money she won for a contested

¹¹¹ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 79.

¹¹² "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

event. Another contract preserved in her compiled scrapbook provides the final amount received of \$300.00, slightly higher than the average of \$270.00 per performance for women on the rodeo circuit at the time. Gray earned over the median even though the dollar amount remained less than a cowboy's average income of \$2,000 annually in the mid-1920s. Some cowboys, like Bob Crosby, earned over \$28,000 annually surpassing any maximum yearly earning of a female contestant.¹¹³

Bonnie and many rodeo women maintained a challenge to social norms through their representation of success and contest winnings. Gray could afford to decline an impressive offer for one of her horses providing further evidence she curated a consistent pay day ensuring entry, travel, and participation in rodeo events. Her scrapbook contains newspaper clippings describing the story of Gray turning down \$10,000 to purchase King Tut, presumably through financial stability and loyalty. Gray declined the sale and the additional income the purchase provided. The refusal, excitedly described by a journalist, provided another way for Bonnie to appear in the headlines and attract attention.¹¹⁴ Bonnie made a substantial income and maintained independence despite the ongoing idealization of women as homemakers during a time when women often had to choose between marriage and career success.

Gray pioneered the trick of jumping a horse over a passenger filled car with her favorite horse, King Tut that garnered much attention and assisted in providing a space for women to showcase horsemanship and athletic skill outside of rodeo such as contracted events and film. She exhibited several tricks and skilled maneuvers many attempted to try after she successfully developed them including training her horse to jump successfully over vehicles. Most known for

¹¹³ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 327-8.

¹¹⁴ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

her stunts with King Tut, Bonnie performed the stunt at many events after the first performance became a recognized success. She would jump her horse over a car filled with passengers to shock and awe rodeo and contracted event attendees, and it was photographed or reported on at most events she performed at. Bonnie often utilized her personal vehicle for this trick and many newspapers published images of the event.¹¹⁵ The dangerous performance jeopardized the safety of the rider, horse, and volunteer participants. This example of athleticism by Bonnie and horse appeared as one the most recognizable images of Bonnie Gray in newspapers. Gray, well-known for her exemplary performance with the stunt, even attracted attention on her wedding day to fellow rodeo competitor Donald Harris by completing it in her wedding dress. She increased the danger of this stunt by modifying it to jump King Tut over a plane to awe spectators and admirers. She jumped Tut over the fuselage of a plane to dedicate the new air terminal built at Glendale, California in 1929.¹¹⁶

Rodeo women, including Bonnie, offered a crack in the façade of clearly defined gender roles between men and women of the 1920s.¹¹⁷ One such way was in Bonnie's purchase and training of her favorite horse, King Tut. She easily afforded to purchase him out of her success in rodeo, and King Tut arguably increased her ability to continue to push the innovation of stunts and performance. Records of this were maintained by Gray from a pointed recollection of her career from the time she acquired King Tut to his retirement which includes details on stunt creation that begins with the famous horse. She purchased the Palomino from a ranch in Georgia for \$275.00 and returned home to Burbank to train him for rodeo. The discovery of his jumping abilities by escaping his stall and easily clearing it to escape prompted Bonnie and her trainers to

¹¹⁵ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹¹⁶ *The Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), March 10, 1929.

¹¹⁷ William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 108-9.

prepare King Tut for stunts. Never alone at her ranch, visitors witnessing Tut's escape suggested she jump him over a car. Little did they know she took the sentiment seriously. Ed Wright, a member of Gray's team, set the equipment for the stunt. The preparation to jump over her personal vehicle required consistent training and patience by Bonnie and Ed. The time invested into the stunt paid off as Gray and Tut would perform the stunt soon after she purchased him.¹¹⁸

The first performance of the stunt in front of a rodeo crowd happened at Cheyenne Frontier Days. Bonnie and Tut led the opening parade beginning at the state capitol building. Then, with much anticipation, they jumped over a passenger filled car to the applause of the crowd.¹¹⁹ During the event, Bonnie also trick rides on her horse Domino by standing up on his back and circling the horse. She also competed in the relay race with her horse Ginger and rode Timbuck during the bare back bronc riding event.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹¹⁹ Ralph R. Doubleday, "[Bonnie Gray jumping 'King Tut' over auto], *Ralph R. Doubleday Rodeo Photographs*, 1935.

¹²⁰ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.



Ralph R. Doubleday, “[Bonnie Gray jumping “King Tut” over auto], *Ralph R. Doubleday Rodeo Photographs*, 1935.

Trick riding, one of Gray’s events, allowed Bonnie to present herself as a rodeo star and accomplished athlete. This activity required specialized equipment, dependable horses, and extreme athleticism. To excel in a trick riding competition, Gray and other trick riders needed to perform while at a steady gait or full gallop and utilize their bodies as part of the performance.¹²¹ Often, riders stood on horseback, encircled the horse, or performed gymnastic moves on a saddle in what Richard C. Rattenbury describes as “real showmanship.”¹²² Performing any trick riding act required extreme athleticism and concentration. Bonnie excelled at this and performed the trick riding act of encircling a horse while at full speed for the first time by a woman as reported by a journalist in *The Evening Star* in 1923.¹²³ Gray also became known for fully encircling a

¹²¹ Richard C. Rattenbury, *Arena Legacy: The Heritage of American Rodeo* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 48.

¹²² Rattenbury, *Arena Legacy*, 48.

¹²³ “Big Shrine Rodeo Soon Will Open,” *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), May 28, 1923.

galloping horse, Bonnie performed the trick as part of her appearances. One such performance was captured by Doubleday and titled “Bonnie Gray The Only Girl To Go Under Her Horse While At Full Speed, El Paso, Round-Up” provides a view into what audiences anticipated when watching Bonnie perform. Attentive fans would see Bonnie astride her galloping horse and go around the horse in a full circle starting from a sitting position in the saddle. She would go under the horse’s stomach and come up on the other side. She often would ride her horse Spot for this trick. Spot, previously owned by Harry Walters, the original pioneer of the stunt, sold Spot to Bonnie, and was reported to have taught Gray the stunt leading to Bonnie becoming the first women to completely circle a horse while riding.¹²⁴ In addition to competing in the dangerous events of trick riding and performing invented stunts, relay races allowed women to compete against each other. Gray performed this difficult task involving racing over tracks the length of a mile and changing horses and gear at predestined stops in order to win the overall race.¹²⁵

Noted as “A Duo of Expert Horsewomen,” Bonnie often appeared with one of the most well-known women rodeo competitors of the Golden Age of Rodeo, Bonnie McCarroll. A photograph of both women clipped from *The New York Times* and added to the impressive pages of accomplishments in the scrapbook provides insight into her career as an “expert trick rider” while McCarroll gained fame as a an “expert broncho buster.”¹²⁶ Bonnie and other rodeo stars competing in the events repeatedly drew in crowds over 10,000. One report determined 14,000 attended the Salt Lake Frontier Show where “Daintly dressed women to who the suggestion of a bull fight might be repulsive rose and cheered the hurtling steer wrestlers and ropers.”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹²⁵ Rattenbury, *Arena Legacy*, 50.

¹²⁶ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹²⁷ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

Bonnie continually offered another example of female success by competing alongside the most talented women and men in rodeo. Newspapers often provided headlines describing female rodeo competitor's as different from ideal women of the 1920s. Another instance of this is a photograph titled "Where women are Cowboys."¹²⁸ She continually challenged the paradigm of female life during her career while maintaining status as a fan favorite at many events from the "Rio Grande to the Pacific."¹²⁹ Gray, during this period, travelled without her husband to many rodeo events instead of working in the professions she was trained in. This vastly contrasted the expectations of society for married women, and William Chafe describes stated, "The women who did pursue a career in a male-dominated field traveled a largely uncharted course and violated the most deeply held conceptions of her proper role."¹³⁰ Gray's determination to compete in rodeo despite being married and trained in the traditionally female professions of teaching and nursing directly opposed 1920s gender norms.

¹²⁸ "Photo Standalone 6—No Title," *New York Times* (New York, New York), April 10, 1927.

¹²⁹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹³⁰ William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 109.



“Two Bonnie Westerners, Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

King Tut and Bonnie appeared at numerous events during the rodeo season starting in early spring into the fall. However, they not only appeared at competitive events but at events for veterans, children, and on at least one occasion, a state prison.¹³¹ Appearing in Rawlins, Wyoming, Bonnie recounts her experience performing at the prison at the request of the warden and in meeting Bill Carlisle. Carlisle, according to Bonnie, served a sentence for robbing multiple trains. Despite being sentenced to life, Bonnie took up the cause for his release.¹³² Bonnie lined up public appearances at schools and performed at building dedications and parades. She also utilized her time to give to causes important to her. For example, she appeared with Ed Wright at a rodeo held in New York to benefit Mrs. William Randolph Hearst’s milk fund.¹³³

¹³¹“Manuscript,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹³²“Manuscript,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹³³“Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

Bonnie followed the rodeo circuit during the season and wintered at her home in Burbank, California to rest due to the taxing nature of constantly competing and travelling. The end of the season allowed all rodeo stars and their animals to recover as not only did it take multiple people to support a company, but it also took a sizeable amount of gear to sustain the horses, stars, and ranch hands that assisted in the care of the animals and gear. Each company often provided their own tents, furnishings, and kitchen equipment.¹³⁴ The season end of rodeo allowed for the everyone to recover from the challenging work. Additionally, the period created a time for any injuries to heal. Rodeo competition, with inherently dangerous events, caused many injuries and Bonnie was not immune. Rebecca Scofield describes the dangers and states, “Lacerated skin, shattered bones, and excruciating deaths often resulted from riding broncs, wrestling steers, and racing horses.”¹³⁵

One example occurred when Mable Strickland’s horse ran into Gray’s mount causing Bonnie to lose her seat.¹³⁶ Strickland, injured in 1927, received a bloody hand from participation in a roping contest.¹³⁷ Harry Walters also was reported as having a painful injury when he was kicked in the face by a horse while assisting Lorena Trickey change mounts. Another more serious example of injury comes from a several reporter’s accounts from articles in Bonnie’s memory book. According to these resources, Bonnie was unconscious for 18 days with a fractured skull because of riding in a relay race. A steer jumped in front of her horse and the horse tripped and flipped over multiple times. The injury occurred in 1926 in Riverside, California as part of a Memorial Day show. Gray experienced this only five years after the start

¹³⁴ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹³⁵ Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 29.

¹³⁶ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹³⁷ Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 176.

of her career and made the decision to continue. However, the experience also injured her knees, and she was unable to perform the stunt of travelling under a horse's stomach for some time.

Bonnie took up the role as a manager of the show for the Pikes Peak rodeo in Colorado alongside her rodeo partner and teammate, Ed Wright when she was unable to compete after her injury.¹³⁸ Gray filled a role typically reserved for men and offered another way in which women could continue to participate in rodeo. This role strengthened Bonnie's place in the sport during her time away from competition. The position also contrasted the expectations and experiences of women in the workplace of the early twentieth century as women were often ignored for promotions or increases in position.¹³⁹ Bonnie, unable to compete, made a way for herself to stay involved in a career she loved while also representing a women as a rodeo manager.

The danger of the sport and associated stunts made it possible for those with the immense skill and talent required to appear in film as stunt doubles. Burbank's proximity to Los Angeles and the hub for film making allowed Bonnie to naturally fit into the Western genre of film and developed relationships with Western movie stars Will Rogers, Tom Mix, Leo Carrillo, William S. Hart and Ken Maynard. According to Bonnie, she personally knew Will Rogers, and would often practice her stunts on his front lawn.¹⁴⁰ Famous Hollywood stars like Rogers, Mix, Carillo, Hart, and Maynard appeared in massively popular films and many westerns that popularized the depiction of the cowboy. Bonnie's proximity to the location of the film making industry and her talent for stunts led to her ability to easily perform in place of an actor not familiar with the stunts. Many women during this period, like Mable Strickland and Vera McGinnis were able to capitalize like Bonnie on the increased need for cowgirls in Hollywood.¹⁴¹ LeCompte details on

¹³⁸ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹³⁹ William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 101.

¹⁴⁰ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁴¹ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 102.

the formation of the Association of Film Equestriennes, directed by Strickland and McGinnis, because of the success of the business. However, this was a short-lived period for rodeo women in film as the changing view of participation of women in rodeo appeared radically different in 1940 than the early 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴²

Bonnie's foray into film allowed her to receive considerable status as a performer by providing her horse King Tut and herself to stunt double for Rogers, Mix, and Maynard. Participation in western film allowed for the development of lifelong relationships and secured her the position of first women stunt double in the genre as well as performing in leading roles. She reportedly appeared with King Tut as he had "ridden many miles of filming stories."¹⁴³ Additionally, she was known by the media as a stunt double for women that had attained celebrity status in film as "daring equestriennes" even though they were not familiar with riding.¹⁴⁴ She also became a leading lady in films like *Flying Lariats* where she performed alongside one of the most well-known actors, Wally Wales.¹⁴⁵

According to Bonnie's memories as Tut, he also made friends with Roger's horse Soapsuds, Mix's horse Tony, and Hart's horse Fritz. They both acted as stunt doubles. Tut often appeared in films as a famous horse, and to accomplish the effect of looking like another horse, he was expertly painted to imitate the actor's steed. For a period of time after King Tut and the car stunt became famous, Bonnie remained in Burbank and continually worked on films as a double for leading actresses while Tut worked in film alongside her as the horse double. Despite staying close to home, rodeo called Gray, and she joined the seasonal trek to famous rodeos and

¹⁴² LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 102.

¹⁴³ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁴⁴ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁴⁵ "Flying Lariats, Full Cast and Crew," IMDb, October 12, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021880/fullcredits/?ref_=ttpl_ql_1.

festivals. She also accepted offers to perform abroad, and this led to a brief interim with Tut in Burbank and Bonnie in Europe.¹⁴⁶

Bonnie chose to travel to Europe as one of three options presented to her during her career. She ultimately chose to visit Wembley Stadium in London, and then travelled to Berlin, and Paris before returning home. Traveling out of the country was not uncommon for Bonnie who had previously made appearances in Mexico via El Paso, Texas. However, performing without King Tut did not often happen. The event that swayed her decision to leave Tut in the United States developed after learning some of the Miller Brothers horses from the 101 Ranch had to be quarantined and left in Europe after contracting an illness. In her opinion, King Tut was too valuable to potentially lose. However, according to Bonnie's recollections, her welcome was somewhat underappreciated as pre-publicity advertised King Tut appearances, and Bonnie neglected to notify the event coordinators and arrived for performances without him. The second of three options included a trip to Central America at the behest of Mr. Hati, who produced and filmed tricks and stunts by Tut and Bonnie at her Burbank ranch. This included another long journey, and Bonnie opted for choice three-a trip to Calgary Stampede. The trip included another long-distance trip but became easily accessible and included stops along the way and after the performance.¹⁴⁷

Gray's career surpassed many male and female competitors as she diversified her work by appearing in contracted events for bronco busting and fancy riding for \$250, touring her King Tut and car jumping stunt for the *Cleveland Six* magazine in 1925, making appearances at various county fairs, riding bulls in Mexico, and entering into a contract that paid \$400 a week

¹⁴⁶ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁴⁷ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

with feed and transportation for her horses and team.¹⁴⁸ She also appeared at state fairs with Ed Wright, and would stay the entirety of the fair to perform.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, Gray made appearances with Santa Claus at events for children, spoke at a veterinary conference, participated in equestrian shows and Wild West Shows. Gray also intentionally wrote to editors of newspapers with opinion letters and sent in numerous poems. This effectively kept Bonnie's name in the media as she was always associated with rodeo. She also leaned on her connections and continuous competition to meet heads of state, celebrities, and network. One such visit reported on involved her visit to the White House to meet a president.¹⁵⁰ Accounts of entertaining two presidents, President Harding and later President Coolidge, and Madame Heinke, who became a famous opera singer, several governors, the Prince of Wales, and various government officials bolstered Gray's career and celebrity.¹⁵¹ She utilized her position to continue to develop her rodeo career while providing entertainment for a global audience. Competitive in all areas, Gray utilized her prior public performing experience to put on a grand show everywhere she competed and performed. Competing against versatile and talented women, Gray sustained a career spanning several decades with the pinnacle of her career between mid-1920s and early 1930s. After the death of famed rodeo star Bonnie McCarroll in 1929, space for women in rodeo declined.¹⁵² Gray continued a career after the loss and shut out of competitive events for women despite the restrictions.¹⁵³ Through performances for veteran's and school events, Bonnie carried her declining career into the Depression Era. Despite the ever-changing acceptance of women in

¹⁴⁸ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁴⁹ *The Cody Enterprise*, (Cody, Wyoming), August 17, 1927.

¹⁵⁰ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁵¹ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁵² LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 324.

¹⁵³ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

rodeo, Gray made her most impactful contributions to the sport through stunt doubling and pioneering stunts to perform many of which are detailed in her unpublished manuscript.

Chapter Four

The \$10,000 Horse: King Tut's Unpublished Manuscript

Bonnie Gray reveled in the spotlight of her career by tracking her accomplishments and wins in a scrapbook throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵⁴ The most prominent way Gray's perspectives on rodeo and competition disseminated to the public through newspaper interviews with local reporters or sporadic appearances at events after her rodeo career ended.¹⁵⁵ She retired from rodeo in 1935 and focused two years of her life to writing her memories of rodeo contests, interactions, and successes from the perspective of her favorite horse, King Tut also known as the high school horse and the \$10,000 horse because she would not sell him to anyone, even for \$10,000.¹⁵⁶ This became Tut's most common nickname once the story appeared in newspapers. This chapter examines the unpublished manuscript Gray wrote from King Tut's perspective. Written years after her career, the manuscript details Gray's accomplishments during the Golden Age of Rodeo. Despite never being published, the document provides access into the world of rodeo from the viewpoint of a successful female rodeo star. The manuscript begins with the preface and statement,

This is the life story of King Tut-a golden Palomino horse of great beauty and achievement. With his remarkable performance, his name traveled far and wide as he entertained thousands at the great Fairs and Rodeos of the country and people of distinction from the Presidents of the United States, to the Disabled Veterans, and to the children of the Orphanage.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁵⁵ "Bonnie Gray is Our Best Know Rider," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁵⁶ "Correspondence," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁵⁷ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

Through the words of King Tut, as written by Bonnie Gray, the preface of the manuscript lays the groundwork for her voice throughout. She recalls the by gone era when woman competed openly with men in the arena and challenged themselves in what Mary Lou LeCompte describes as some of “America’s pioneer professional athletes.”¹⁵⁸ Gray and many famous female competitors including Mabel Strickland, Tad Lucas, and Rose Smith participated in bronc riding, relay racing, and trick riding throughout the 1920s and 1930s¹⁵⁹. Many of these women moved onto film as successful actors, including Bonnie.¹⁶⁰ The manuscript details these accomplishments after Gray imagines King Tut’s life as a young colt in chapter one “Where Am I Going?” and continues with the training and development of Bonnie’s arguably most famous stunt of jumping King Tut over a passenger filled car in chapter three “I’m Old Enough To Go To School”.¹⁶¹

In the early chapters, she rarely reflects on her childhood or life before rodeo. Instead, she focuses on the details of her career. Her career spanned almost fifteen years, and she used talent and skill to perform dangerous stunts. What we do know often comes from newspaper clippings included in her scrapbook, various comments she provides to reporters, brief details of social events in Washington newspapers, and government documents such as censuses and city directories. Growing up on a ranch along the Columbia River in Washington, Gray learned to love horses and spent time with her siblings and parents. She began her early career as a music teacher before marrying and becoming a nurse. Her brother became a doctor and she eventually collaborated with him as a nurse for a time. Trained as a nurse during her time at Camp Lewis,

¹⁵⁸ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 318.

¹⁵⁹ “Correspondence,” Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁶⁰ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 320.

¹⁶¹ “Manuscript,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

Washington during World War I, she put her skills to use until she began a path to rodeo fame.¹⁶² She briefly married a doctor; however, they only spent twelve years married as her husband passed away in 1929.

The relationship she shared with immediate family remains without much detail in the manuscript; however, she reminisces about a visit from her parents at Pendleton Round-Up and refers to her mother lovingly as the “person she loves the most.”¹⁶³ The valuable information pertaining to her early life appears briefly in the manuscript with the few details about her parents and the entirety of the document signifies Gray’s perceived success as a rodeo star. The desire to focus on her career only instead of providing additional details about her life may stem from other rodeo stars writing books and telling the story of their successes during the Golden Age of Rodeo. For example, Vera McGinnis had her autobiography *Rodeo Road: My Life As a Pioneer Cowgirl* by Hastings House Publishing in 1974. Bonnie consistently tried to have her manuscript “Tut’s Tale or My Golden Years” published and never was successful. The publisher remained unnamed in letters and a fierce battle ensued to recoup the photographs included in the submission of the manuscript to the publisher. Ultimately, Gray received the photographs and manuscript but never finalized the publication of her book.¹⁶⁴

She distances herself from her private life in the manuscript and instead focuses on her memories of the success of her career with the purchase of King Tut up to his retirement after the marriage to her second husband Donald Harris. She bought the Palomino while traveling in Georgia and returned to her ranch to train him for stunts.¹⁶⁵ Tut easily cleared a fence and it was

¹⁶² “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁶³ “Manuscript,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁶⁴ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

¹⁶⁵ “Manuscript,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

witnessed by those who commented on his ability to Bonnie inspiring the purchase of the equipment for the Tut's most best known stunt, jumping over a passenger filled car.

The first performance of the stunt in front of a rodeo crowd happened at Cheyenne Frontier Days. Bonnie and Tut led the opening parade beginning at the state capitol building. Then, with much anticipation, they jump over a passenger filled car to the applause of the crowd.¹⁶⁶ During the event, Bonnie also trick rides on her horse Domino by standing up on his back and circling the horse. Gray, pioneered the trick of circling a horse at a full gallop and continued to perform dangerous stunts and competitions.¹⁶⁷ However, the determination that Gray, performed the stunt of circling a horse a full gallop remains contested as others claim Mable Strickland or Tad Lucas completed it first.¹⁶⁸ However, this can be disputed because of the multiple reports of her successful attempts as the first women to complete the stunt. She also competed in the relay race with her horse Ginger and rode Timbuck during the bare back bronc riding event.¹⁶⁹ Bonnie utilized all of her horses and travelled with at least 10 at a time to each event to ensure she had a mount for every contest she would potentially compete in. Each horse had a specialty. For example, Tut was used for car jumping, Timbuck was for bronc busting, and Black Beauty and Domino were trick and relay racers. Several of these horses appear in the manuscript; however, others like King Solomon, Hammer, Sunny Jim, Tulsa, and Spot were not written about.¹⁷⁰

King Tut and Bonnie appeared at numerous events during the rodeo season starting in early spring into the fall. However, they not only appeared at competitive events any event that

¹⁶⁶ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁶⁷ "Gray," National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Accessed 01 February 2021, <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/finding-aids/gray/>.

¹⁶⁸ "Rodeo Historical Society Nomination," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁶⁹ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁷⁰ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

would pay well.¹⁷¹ Bonnie often utilized events that held high media presence to bring Tut and other horses to perform. Often, these were highlights reported on, and the horses appeared in the newspapers as often as she did. One such event was in a half mile running race where she competed with her horse Toby Gray. She placed second in the event and Toby's name appeared along with hers in the announcement.¹⁷²

In addition to her interesting encounters and meetings with people along the way, Bonnie gained attention from her acquisition of unique pets that answered only to her. She owned a dog named Spud Taters. He died from a gunshot and was replaced by Snookie the German Schnauzer. Jack the coyote, Bobby Kildare the lynx, and Teddy the bear also made appearances. She had two goldfish named Neptune and Diana that resided in the horse water trough, two cats, and Snobby the raccoon who had a wagon and toys to play with on the ranch. These animals seemed to act as a surrogate family in addition to her ranch hands and rodeo team as she writes about each animal in the manuscript through the eyes of King Tut.¹⁷³

Many times, Jack, Spud Taters, Bobby Kildare, and Snookie traveled to different rodeo arenas and events with the group. This caused quite a stir in the rodeo community and people who met these pets often inquired about them. An instance of inquiry led to a bet surrounding Jack and if he would follow King Tut and Bonnie up a mountain and return. A slice of watermelon was on the line for the bet. Jack ended up running away, Bonnie became distraught after returning to the barn without him. He eventually returned, and Bonnie won the bet.¹⁷⁴ One assumes she enjoyed the animal company and attention they caused and led to the question: Did

¹⁷¹ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁷² "Rodeo Winners in Yesterday's Events," *The Rawlins Republican* (Rawlins, WY), Sept. 13, 1923.

¹⁷³ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁷⁴ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

Bonnie use the spectacle of these animals to gain more recognition? This potentially is the case as the euthanizing of one of her horses was written about in *The New York Times*. Duke, one of her bronco horses in the care of Al Salinas, was kicked by another of her bucking horses, Kiddie. Bonnie had left the two horses with Salinas after performing at Madison Square Garden and left them with Al while she went West to compete. The veterinarian responsible for caring for Duke made the determination that Duke needed to be shot as a form of euthanasia. The event made the newspaper as Bonnie was upset at the lack of care for her horses.¹⁷⁵

Late fall and winter signaled the return home to Burbank and a rest period for the horses and rodeo team. Despite traveling continuously for weeks on end, the vacation was short lived. Bonnie lined up public appearances at schools and performed at building dedications and parades. Bonnie also utilized the downtime to work in the film industry. With Burbank so close to Los Angeles and the hub for film making, Bonnie naturally fit into the western genre of film and developed relationships with Western movie stars while in Burbank and continually worked on films as a double for leading actresses while Tut worked in film alongside her. She reportedly collaborated often with these actors, and she stated in an interview with Zita Ginsburg in 1972 of *The Daily Review* in Burbank, “I was always the one the bad guys got shot up over.”¹⁷⁶

The manuscript continues with appearances and accounts of entertaining famous celebrities, heads of state, and anyone she deemed well-known. She also recounted briefly the reaction King Tut must have felt as the introductions were made to her soon to be husband. Never mentioned by name, Mr. Harris, appears in the manuscript as the culmination of Tut’s and Bonnie’s careers.

¹⁷⁵ “Trick Bronco Shot,” *The New York Times*, (New York, New York), November 6, 1923.

¹⁷⁶ “Rodeo Historical Society Nomination,” Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

Tut's eminent retirement from rodeo and performances takes place after the wedding of Harris and Gray. Bonnie, not one to give into societal fashion, wears a white satin dress with yellow trim, a yellow hat, and boots. Her groom rides his horse and she atop Tut, is married by a minister astride a horse. At the end of the ceremony, Tut returns home and Bonnie tells him he no longer needs to work. He performed his last show.¹⁷⁷ The manuscript ends with the wedding and retirement and seemingly Bonnie's career as well as Tut's.

Bonnie's career including her travels, competition appearances, and overall success as a rodeo star showcases the achievements of women in the sport during the 1920s and early 1930s. Building on the celebrity of Lucille Mulhall from the first decade of the twentieth century, women in the sport gained recognition in competition and contests.¹⁷⁸ This success by female contestants prior to Bonnie's career enabled her to create a persona and foundation for sustained achievement. LeCompte provides data for the typical female rodeo contestant during the time Bonnie competed as \$270.00.¹⁷⁹ She purchased Tut for \$275.00, and she utilized him in some of her most famous performances. Arguably, her purchase of Tut benefited her and the rodeo company and provides support of the argument that she indeed maintained enough income through rodeo to provide for her lifestyle beyond the average rodeo contestant.

Additionally, these women contributed to the development and acceptance as female athletes. Roach described the initial performances in rodeo as a novelty in the beginning, but the contestants gained support and status in rodeo as participation in male events like bronco busting became popular.¹⁸⁰ Successful careers became viable with more women competing in events and

¹⁷⁷ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁷⁸ Hanshew, "Rodeo in Oklahoma is Women's Business," 268.

¹⁷⁹ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 328.

¹⁸⁰ Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 111.

making appearances at rodeos across the country. These women, including Bonnie, contributed to the concept of a female athlete during a time when women fought the pre-conceived and stereotypical ideas of a woman. As LeCompte stated, “Overall, cowgirls got the kind of coverage many female athletes could only dream of until recently.”¹⁸¹ Despite receiving this media attention, she describes the coverage as varied for women in different sports. Rodeo women received recognition and praise for determination in the contests or support and descriptions of courageous acts if injury occurred. She notes that this information contained gender bias; however, the support contributed to recognizing these contestants as athletes.¹⁸² Bonnie’s success in rodeo not only depended on her appearance as a cowgirl athlete but also as a woman challenging the idea of societal norms of the 1920s. She helped pave the way for female success in the sport and in film. According to Bonnie’s recollections as King Tut, she worked hard to build a successful rodeo persona that she, her peers, and her family could all be proud of. From Bonnie’s point of view, her rodeo career was a success, and this is evident in the interviews she continued to provide with local newspapers throughout the 1950s-1970s.¹⁸³

What we know about her personal life often comes from Bonnie herself through the manuscript and from the barrier of the perspective of King Tut. Some of this information is available through her correspondence with friends and former rodeo colleagues including a Mr. Clarence that she continually remained in contact with.¹⁸⁴ She also provides details of other rodeo stars from the 1920s and 1930s through these correspondences. She consistently remained in contact with Rose Smith and Ed Wright while Clarence wrote to her of the Greenough sisters. Her rise to rodeo fame occurred within the early 1920s and exposed her carefully crafted life to

¹⁸¹ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 27.

¹⁸² LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 26.

¹⁸³ “Rodeo Historical Society Nomination,” Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁸⁴ “Correspondence,” Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

the public eye, and she remained as relevant as possible after the end of her career through her efforts including interviews and writing the manuscript. The manuscript was never published and in correspondence with Mr. Clarence on March 18, 1974, Gray complains about \$4000 being lost to potential publishers and a pending lawsuit to recoup lost funds.¹⁸⁵ She wrote again to Clarence in April of 1974,

My book is still idle on the shelf. I am damned mad about it, but must rely on the attorney. No other way! Could be rich today if it were on the market. Still get calls from all over the world about it, but,---.¹⁸⁶

Determined to provide the public with an inside view of early rodeo, Gray lamented the loss of access to the work being published. According to correspondence from Gray, she won the lawsuit and received the money paid to the publishers. With the manuscript and photographs returned, Gray insisted the manuscript be published, but this never happened during her lifetime or after.¹⁸⁷ The draft remains housed at the Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.

¹⁸⁵ "Correspondence," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁸⁶ "Correspondence," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

¹⁸⁷ "Correspondence," Rodeo Historical Society Papers, DRC.

Chapter Five

Life After Rodeo

Bonnie Gray officially retired from rodeo in 1935 according to an interview she gave to the *Glendale News-Press* on Friday, December 1, 1972. Journalist Zita Ginsburg interviewed Bonnie to discuss life after rodeo. Gray informed Ginsburg and readers about her life after rodeo stardom. She retired from rodeo in 1935 at the age of forty-four. However, she continued to stay busy by working in the film industry. Bonnie recalled always playing the female lead that the male actors fought over in the films. No definitive record exists for the number of films she stunt-doubled or acted in. Ginsburg details Gray's recollection of acting in at least three to four movies with Wally Wales.¹⁸⁸ Record of one film she acted in appears through IMDb records with Bing Crosby and Wally Wales in *Flying Lariats*. Released in 1931, Gray portrayed Bonnie Starr as the leading lady.¹⁸⁹ Pat Ryan of *The Valley Times* reported *Flying Lariats* as Gray's last foray into film as an actress; however, the role she played as a stunt double does not have a definitive date.¹⁹⁰ Despite not competing in rodeo after 1935, she continued to live on her ranch she and her first husband Harry Greenwald purchased after they moved to Burbank, California. Gray lamented the forced sale of her ranch to Ginsburg as she noted the plot of land became the site of Jordan Junior High School.¹⁹¹ Contradictory reports over the sale and use of the ranch appear across multiple articles within the Hall of Fame Nomination Files at The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. Raquel Cook described the Bonnie Gray Ranch becoming Von's

¹⁸⁸ Zita, Ginsburg, "80, she's still cowboy at heart," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

¹⁸⁹ "Flying Lariats, Full Cast and Crew," IMDb, October 12, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021880/fullcredits/?ref_=ttpl_q1_1.

¹⁹⁰ Pat Ryan, *The Valley Times* (North Hollywood, California), November 27, 1959.

¹⁹¹ Ginsburg, "80, she's still cowboy at heart," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

Market after Gray lived on the ranch for twenty-six years. According to Cook, the city of Burbank required Gray to sell the property in order to build the store. She spent the remainder of her days living across the street in a garage apartment with memorabilia and her cat named Perky. Gray reinforced her activity level and commitment to rodeo, even at the age of 90, by continuing to reiterate her desire and aptitude for riding one of her horses multiple times each month. Cook detailed Bonnie's determination to ride after involvement in a car accident in her 80s that left her with permanent injury to one leg. Bonnie stated, "I've always had a horse and I'm never gonna' be without a horse till I die."¹⁹²

The King Tut manuscript ends with her marriage to Donald W. Harris.¹⁹³ According to the scrapbook Bonnie maintained with newspaper clippings, Harris and Gray divorced shortly after exchanging vows in the 1930s.¹⁹⁴ Mention of her second husband Donald Harris in articles dated later than the 1950s remains void. Attention to her early rodeo career and details about her marriage to Harry Greenwald are provided to reporters and correspondents instead. Gray's marital status often appears as widowed versus divorced.¹⁹⁵ Despite the divorce between Harris and Gray, Bonnie's induction to the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame lists the inductee as Bonnie Gray Harris.¹⁹⁶ Details on Gray's marriages often remain removed from any public press except one instance of a clipping from her scrapbook. Harris, a landowner at the

¹⁹² Cook, "A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives 'em all," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

¹⁹³ "Manuscript," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, DRC.

¹⁹⁴ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

¹⁹⁵ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

¹⁹⁶ "Bonnie Gray Harris, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, May 19, 2023, <https://www.cowgirl.net/portfolios/bonnie-gray-harris/>.

time of marriage to Gray stayed out of the public eye in comparison to Bonnie's constant quest for exposure to rodeo audiences.¹⁹⁷

Marriages full of strife due to convenience and necessity were not uncommon during the Golden Age of rodeo according Michael Allen in the article "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941." Women rodeo competitors needed a male counterpart due to purses and cash prizes provided to women being lower than male rodeo winnings. One example is the career of Mabel Strickland. She married Hugh Strickland as a young woman and became involved in rodeo. Ultimately, Strickland maintained a career of stardom. However, their marriage declined as women often had to maintain the role of a wife and rodeo star despite the appearance of a more independent lifestyle.¹⁹⁸ Bonnie and Donald encountered the same obstacles to marriage. Gray, used to managing her own career, suddenly found herself married to a man also involved in rodeo. Whether the relationship suffered from clashing careers, prize earnings, or other influences remains unknown. However, Bonnie documented her divorce experiences in the scrapbook, with details on her dress as she entered the courthouse to in her best riding outfit.¹⁹⁹

Several factors may have influenced her retirement decision in 1935. One being her recent divorce to another rodeo competitor, another due to the fact women's place in the sport of rodeo had changed drastically. Elyssa Ford maintains the challenges for women during the 1930s specifically encapsulates the inherent dangers of competing in rodeo, which became highly publicized after the death of Bonnie McCarroll, the effects of the Great Depression, and

¹⁹⁷ *The Sacramento Union* (Sacramento, California), July 28, 1930.

¹⁹⁸ Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl," 126.

¹⁹⁹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

professionalization of rodeo all contributing to the decline of the Golden Age of Rodeo.²⁰⁰ These three circumstances and events generally impacted rodeo for women and actively reduced the ways in which women could compete. In 1935 when Bonnie retired, the role and opportunity for women to compete in male dominated events was all but gone. The average career for rodeo cowgirls between 1929 and 1947, according to LeCompte, lasted at least 14 years and typically most lasted a little over eight. There were at least 250 women who competed in professional rodeo between the same time frame and most completed in multiple events.²⁰¹ Bonnie represented one of the 250 women competing in relay racing, bronc riding, trick riding, bull riding, and she competed in stunts.²⁰² In many ways she exceeded the typical rodeo career for the Golden Age of Rodeo.

Bonnie's retirement signified the end of her rodeo stardom and was impacted by the factors Ford argues. Space no longer existed that allowed competition for women as before. Most struggled to make a successful living in such a niche sport as rodeo prior to the significant changes after 1935, and Mary Lou LeCompte details the average earnings a women committed to rodeo as a career received during the 1930s as only 60 to 70 percent of the winnings available to men. A sustainable rodeo career after the decline of female participants competing in male dominated events became difficult when the average yearly earnings in 1936 were no more than \$4000. Any amount after 1936 decreased unless the rodeo star could monetize through endorsements like Alice Greenough who endorsed cigarettes and saddles. The decline of the sport for many women rodeo stars forced them into other careers.

²⁰⁰ Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion*, 13.

²⁰¹ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 322-23.

²⁰² "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

The first factor and beginning of the ouster of women in traditional male events in the early 1930s was the death of Bonnie McCarroll. She tragically died in an arena while bronc riding in 1929 at the well-known Pendleton Round-Up.²⁰³ She rode in the saddle with hobbles that locked her into stirrups due to them being tied together under the horse's belly. The audience witnessed the gruesome death. The rodeo community lamented the tragedy and called for changes to secure competitor's safety according to LeCompte. Bronco riding as an event for women to compete in took a drastic hit after the death of McCarroll. She was not the first person to die in the arena from an accident during an event; however, McCarroll was one of the most popular contestants and the tragedy shocked everyone when she died in the ring. Calls for rodeo reform and change influenced the new organization called the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) which never advocated for or provided support for the female contestants. LeCompte also describes small rodeos as staunch supporters of the RAA and as such supporters, they were more likely to disregard women's events and not allow them to participate in bronc riding. The death of McCarroll became the catalyst used to justify exclusion for women in competition to equal or exceed the levels of participation prior to 1929.²⁰⁴

One rodeo star, Reba Perry Blakely, argues the idea men used the tragedy to remove women competing in the specific events such as saddle bronc riding, relay racing, and bulldogging along with any event viewed as a male specific sport. Reba also posits male contestants were looking to monopolize the rodeo circuit, and she states, "Money's the real reason I got this right out of the horse's mouth back in 1930. They said they wanted to keep the cowgirls out and put all the money into men's events. The cowboys told me if the rodeo

²⁰³ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 324.

²⁰⁴ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 323-5.

association was going to pay any money, they wanted it.”²⁰⁵ As witness to the death of McCarroll on the day she died, Blakely goes on to place the blame on two cowboys who did not correctly act as spotters. Additionally, she recounted the story of a cowboy who almost died in the same manner.²⁰⁶ However, the accident for the cowboy did not make the same outrage as McCarroll’s death.

Women contestants never found footing with any of the rodeo associations that formed including with the RAA. LeCompte discusses the development of the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA) that eventually developed into the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). Women in the 1930s were allowed to be members of the CTA but were not allowed to vote on any topic. The rights of women competing in the CTA during this time period were strictly provided by their male counterparts of the CTA. The organization was responsible for regulations and inclusion for women in rodeo; however, no movement to encourage female participation ever resulted from the early years of the organization. LeCompte stated, “With the 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 sport grew.”²⁰⁷ The associations created and managed by male rodeo competitors removed women from almost all of the rough stock contests leaving little room for any female competition after the formation of the organizations. Ford

²⁰⁵ “Former Cowgirl Bitter About End of Rodeo Competition for Women,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁰⁶ “Former Cowgirl Bitter About End of Rodeo Competition for Women,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁰⁷ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 334.

stated, “The newly created professional rodeo associations of the 1920s and 1930s were run by men for men.”²⁰⁸ These left women with the roles that deemed less dangerous like relay racing.

Rodeo women did not have an organization of their own and did not attempt to form it. Cowgirls may have been opposed to forming their own organization as it would have rivaled the cowboys in the industry who were often married to each other, and their husbands belonged to the CTA or were daughters or CTA members. As such, these women would not have wanted to defy their husbands and fathers.²⁰⁹ Bonnie Gray on the other hand was not married during this time period. She did publicly speak out on the formation of a professional rodeo organization, and it was reported on in an article in the scrapbook that she kept of her dislike of the opinion that an organization should be formed for men and women both.²¹⁰

The aftermath of McCarroll’s death created ripple effects, first with the RAA and then in the rodeos throughout West. Many began to ban bronc riding for women, and additionally the rules for relay racing changed. Relay races were typically held outside as indoor arenas did not have enough space. Because of the space requirements, relay races realistically only became popular in the Western rodeo circuit. This limited where a rodeo competitor could compete in a relay race, and LeCompte provides details on relay races and availability in western rodeos such as Cheyenne Frontier Days. Eastern rodeos and the rodeo production at Madison Square Garden could not sustain relays because of the event set up. The geographic ability for women to have an additional event like relay racing to compete for consistent salary declined during this time with the removal of saddle bronc riding and the restrictions of locations a relay race could successfully be held. Relay racing moved to a contract event after 1929 and further inhibited

²⁰⁸ Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion*, 13.

²⁰⁹ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 333-5.

²¹⁰ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

women from being able to compete. The East coast circuit also changed events to contract appearances for trick roping and riding events and often only invited specific competitors instead of opening the event for any contestant. The change in rodeo event format further limited the way in which a woman could participate.²¹¹

The second factor for the decline in rodeo participation for women and potential cause for Bonnie's retirement from rodeo was the Great Depression. David Wrobel provides details of the impact of the Great Depression on the West and by 1930 the Great Depression impacted California significantly, by 1932 the Pacific Northwest, the Great Plains, the Rockies and the Southwest felt the additional effects of their Great Depression.²¹² The depression affected the nation during the 1930s and also gripped the rodeo circuit. Rodeos occurred; however, the way in which women participated continued to change and many rodeos shuttered and went bankrupt. For most successful female contestants, the closure of smaller rodeos because of the effects of the depression and lack of available events contributed to the end of successful careers of the 1920s-early 1930s. The big rodeo operations were able to sustain and provide events for men and women to compete as well as provide entertainment to fans in the form of film. The tiny, local rodeos that were scattered across the United States during the Great Depression were much less likely to be able to offer women the opportunity to compete. Often the winnings were small prize purses, and these events typically went to men first. Male competitors took a pay cut in winnings during this period and LeCompte provides data that by 1937 annual winnings a "Champion All Around Cowboy" received \$3000 on average when the year prior the average was \$9000.²¹³

²¹¹ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 326-27.

²¹² Wrobel, *America's West*, 129-30.

²¹³ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 329.

The third factor rodeo declined for women in this era became the monopolization of rodeo by the singing cowboy Gene Autry. Autry united many of the competition rodeos together during the late 1930s early 1940s leading to Autry becoming the “largest promoter of American rodeo sports during the 1950s” according to Michael Duchemin.²¹⁴ Autry worked to stylize the presentation of rodeo to appeal to fans all across the nation and the world. The space for women to compete slimmed event further during this period as the presentation became about appearance. Autry helped popularize the presentation of rodeo women in film with movies like *Melody Trail*. The film appealed to fans of rodeo who wanted to see a challenge to the social norm and to young rodeo fans who enjoyed watching his horse, Champion, perform.²¹⁵ However, the presentation of a challenge to traditional gender roles by rodeo through film was apparent in film only. The idea remained in direct contrast to the actuality of the experiences of women trying to break into traditional rodeo. Additionally, many cast for the roles had no experience with horsemanship at all. For example, LeCompte details the experience of a successful rodeo star, Alice Greenough, and her experience trying to teach Dale Evans to ride a horse when she had never actually been on one. Such representation in film became one of the reasons that woman would eventually lose the hard-earned representation of women in the West as rodeo stars.²¹⁶

Autry’s rise to fame in the 1940s as the singing cowboy also helped bring attention to rodeo and the Western film genre. He appeared in films which created the public representation for cowboys in western lifestyle and culture.²¹⁷ The films propagated the idea of a romantic

²¹⁴ Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy*, 225.

²¹⁵ Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy*, 53, 70.

²¹⁶ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 339-40.

²¹⁷ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 338-9.

Western culture and “the recreational spectacle of rodeo sport.”²¹⁸ Duchemin understands this to be appealing to young Americans coming out of the Great Depression in the 1940s, and his research shows audiences paid to see more rodeo events than other events related to sports except for football and baseball in 1941. These rodeos, influenced by Autry, allowed women to compete but in a different manner than during the Golden Age of Rodeo in the 1920s. The rodeo productions of the 1940s were carefully crafted to present rodeo in an extremely specific light. Often, these rodeos created by Autry, used black lights with traditional events.²¹⁹ Entertainment remained the goal, and the competition was supposed to be a spectacle with expert showmanship. The rough and tumble rodeos of the 1920s through early 1930s no longer took center stage. The typical rodeo fan expected to see all of the events available at a rodeo made famous by the stars of the Golden Age of Rodeo, and through Autry’s expertly crafted stylization of the new rodeo these events appeared with extra detail. He also created requirements for rodeo participation. For example, Duchemin details the role a star had to play. His contestants had to be in a parade with a certain uniform. Each contestant needed a big hat, bright shirts and often a costume designer was employed to streamline the style.²²⁰ The changes to rodeo through the 1930s through 1940s continued to remold the space for women in rodeo. By the 1950s, Autry had consolidated numerous companies and rodeos throughout the years and the representation of women as rodeo contestants drastically differed from what Bonnie Gray would have been used to. The new roles were cemented when Autry created Flying A Ranch Rodeo, and continued his popular appearances at Madison Square Garden. These representations pushed traditional domestic values closing the slim opportunity for women to return to the rodeo circuit.²²¹

²¹⁸ Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy*, 53.

²¹⁹ Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy*, 202.

²²⁰ Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy*, 202-4.

²²¹ LeCompte, “Home on the Range,” 341-42.

Women adjusted to the rodeo changes and competed in events available. Calf roping eventually became the event that would become the forerunner for how women would compete after the 1940s. Many women made the transition from calf roping to barrel racing.²²² The participation in barrel racing was created from necessity as steer roping was banned and many large professional rodeos began to allow cowgirl calf roping instead. The gradual change and movement towards barrel racing forced women to compete in the event if the competitor wanted to remain in the rodeo community. Blakely again reiterated the disappointment in the direction of female rodeo participation with the statement, “In the arena we didn't wanna compete against men but against each other.”²²³ In the same article, she also reveals her distaste for barrel racing and lack of quality cowboys and cowgirls with values from her rodeo days. She stated, “Cowboys today are selfish brutes- they make me sick. They've got the macho bit down pat and make groupies of cowgirls. Cowgirls are sex objects unless they're particularly outstanding.”²²⁴ At this point in time, Bonnie would have been well past her heyday from the Golden Age of Rodeo and its competition was completely different then how she and her competitors like Tad Lucas and Reba Perry Blakely competed. Women in rodeo during the 1920s and early 1930s were able to create lasting careers. As expert competitors, they competed against each other in rodeos like Cheyenne Frontier Days, Calgary Stampede, Pendleton Round-Up, and competitions at Madison Square Garden. These women were very familiar with each other, and all realistically suffered from the decline of rodeo that resulted because of the perception of Bonnie McCarroll’s death, through the lack of support from the rodeo organizations, the effects of the Great

²²² Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion*, 13.

²²³ “Former Cowgirl Bitter About End of Rodeo Competition for Women,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²²⁴ “Former Cowgirl Bitter About End of Rodeo Competition for Women,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

Depression, and Gene Autry's presentation of rodeo. The impact is still felt until this day as often women still do not compete in events they once competed in in the 1920s and early 1930s.²²⁵

Many former female rodeo stars went on during this period to different careers after their retirement. For example, Tad Lucas became the president of the Rodeo Historical Society (RHS) based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in the early 1970s.²²⁶ She also utilized her skills to perform in Autry's rodeos as a trick rider in the 1940s.²²⁷ Reba Perry Blakely became involved in writing and researching rodeo and advocated for other rodeo stars. Blakely, instrumental in Bonnie Gray receiving induction as an honoree in 1981 at the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, helped provide the information for the inquiry paperwork, gathered photos, and provided the president, Margaret Formby, updates on the process.²²⁸ She often wrote about Bonnie and other rodeo stars, and submitted her writings to the press in order to tell the stories of these women. For example, Blakey told Gray's story in *World of Rodeo and Western Heritage* in June 1978 with her article "Bonnie Gray-A Gifted Show Woman." She described her courage and composure as like none other in the sport during her time. Women like Vera McGinnis wrote books about their experience in rodeo. Some had family that followed the path of rodeo and were able to stay involved as the roles for women shifted; one example was Tad Lucas's daughter Mitzi Lucas. Mother and daughter both stayed involved amid the shifting roles for women in rodeo. They both successfully stayed engaged and adapted when others retired from the sport altogether.²²⁹

²²⁵ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 346.

²²⁶ Rodeo Historical Society Records, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²²⁷ LeCompte, "Home on the Range," 344.

²²⁸ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²²⁹ Blakely, "Bonnie Gray-A Gifted Show Woman," Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

Another example of life after rodeo that was common for women and not unlike Bonnie Gray's story was Mabel Strickland. Mabel married Hugh Strickland and were a rodeo couple that competed. The marriage of Mabel and Hugh struggled throughout the period of the relationship, and after his passing at a rodeo in 1941, she quickly exited the sport. She married a cattleman and moved to Arizona and then raised horses and cattle instead of choosing to adapt to the sport.²³⁰ Gray, similarly, struggled in her marriage to a rodeo contestant and shortly divorced after marriage. She did not stay in rodeo much longer, and instead maintained a relatively private life.²³¹

Bonnie's life after rodeo remains elusive except for details available in several interviews she provided to reporters and through various census, social security documents, and city directories. She always presented herself as a successful rodeo star anytime she gave details pertaining to her life and often skirted around the current state of her day-to-day lifestyle. She continued the narrative in interviews she provided about her past as late as the 1980s.²³² She never described a clear picture of her life outside of rodeo to any of the reporters and correspondents, and the details she presented only detail the most miniscule of insight. From these details, research shows she was divorced from her second husband Donald Harris in the 1930s shortly before she retired from rodeo. Bonnie Gray, a rodeo star in her own right, appeared as a local celebrity for the event to make it into the news. Additionally, the public announcement showcases the independent nature and challenge to societal norms Gray presented to rodeo audiences. Census records from the 1950s did not list her marital status as divorced, instead, widowed appeared. Gray's first husband Harry Greenwald died in 1929, and she was only ever

²³⁰ Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl," 126.

²³¹ "Scrapbook," Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

²³² Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

divorced from Donald.²³³ Harris does not show in any other records for Gray unless reported on by others. She often put that she was the head of household and her occupation listed as status as “unable to work”.²³⁴ The record differed from a prior census that listed her marital status as widowed with an occupation as professional rider.²³⁵ Gray provides information on her early life and career during several articles from the 1970s and early 1980s, and she never mentions Donald. Instead, she insists she was widowed from her first husband.²³⁶ The lack of detail about her marriage and divorce from Harris leads the research to infer the second marriage may have been unsavory. It is alleged Donald abused Bonnie and was the reason for the end of the turbulent relationship.²³⁷ Harris, as a fellow rodeo star, may have expected Gray to adhere to the role of a married women in rodeo as many other women did. However, by the time Donald was married to Bonnie, she had become successful on her own and managed a sustainable career. We can only posit the relationship may have been impacted by Bonnie’s success and independence.

A U.S City Directory record from 1956 provides vital information about her life after rodeo. The record indicates she held a position at Gladden Products as a machine operator.²³⁸ This sharply contrasted to the 1950 census occupation listing as “unable able to work.”²³⁹ Her employment with Gladden Products is further supported in an article describing her life in 1956.²⁴⁰ Few other details are provided; however, this small and seemingly insignificant detail sheds light on her life at the age of sixty-five. Gladden products, during the 1950s, became

²³³ Directory of Deceased American Physicians 1804-1909, digital image s.v. "Harry A. Greenwald," *Ancestry.com*.

²³⁴ 1950 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*.

²³⁵ 1930 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*.

²³⁶ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²³⁷ Chris Enss, “Cowgirl Iconic: Bonnie Gray,” *Cowgirl Magazine* (July 2020) April 23, 2024, <https://www.cowgirlmagazine.com/cowgirl-iconic-bonnie-gray/>.

²³⁸ *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995*, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. “Bonnie J. Gray,” 1956, *Ancestry.com*

²³⁹ 1950 United States Census, Burbank, Los Angeles, California, digital image s.v. "Bonnie J. Gray," *Ancestry.com*.

²⁴⁰ “Scrapbook,” Bonnie Gray Papers, Box 2, DRC.

known for at this producing the Mustang motorcycle.²⁴¹ The company, located in Glendale, California, also created and manufactured aircraft products, motors for boats and shipping and general machining supplies.²⁴² Production began to decline in 1956 around the time that Bonnie was acting as machine operator. Her position at the age of sixty-five potentially would have been difficult for her to maintain leading to her application for Social Security at the age of sixty-eight in 1959.²⁴³

Gray went on to lead a normal life after her rodeo and film retirement in the 1930s. She remained unmarried after her divorce from Harris, she did not have any children, and worked as a blue-collar worker in California when she was able to work. However, her changed career path remained only a slight setback as Bonnie's sense of success from her career in rodeo stayed at the forefront of her life story to the public. Her time in rodeo defined her life in many ways, including her cultivation of relationships. She mentioned in letters to her friend Clarence that she stayed in contact with Rose Smith and Ed Wright who competed alongside her.²⁴⁴ These letters dated from 1973 to 1974 often discuss varying levels of sadness that former rodeo stars were passing away or experiencing hardship and sickness. It also provides additional insight into what some of the rodeo stars, especially the female rodeo stars, were doing after their rodeo career ended. For example, Rose Smith worked for Western Union after she retired from rodeo for twenty-six years in Los Angeles, according to the letter Gray wrote to Clarence. Ed Wright went on to marry one of Bonnie's sister- in-laws and remarried after she died. He spent the rest of his life in California, according to Bonnie, and stayed in contact with each other up until the day he

²⁴¹ "1956 Mustang Pony", National Motorcycle Museum, January 23, 2024, <https://nationalmcmuseum.org/2017/02/10/1959-mustang-pony/>

²⁴² The National Museum of American History, "Smithsonian Trade Catalogs-Gladden Products," January 23, 2024, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/SILNMAHTL_17491

²⁴³ "Social Security Application and Claims Index, 1936-2007," s.v. "Verna Grace Harris", *Ancestry.com*.

²⁴⁴ Rodeo Historical Society, DRC, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

passed away. She often lamented to her friends that the good years disappeared and attempted to reconcile the fact each had become “old timers.”²⁴⁵

She also remained connected with Reba Perry Blakely, who often advocated for her in articles and for her induction into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. They maintained a relationship through letters and according to these Reba and Bonnie visited each other.²⁴⁶ The letters contain insight on Bonnie’s life in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She discussed paying her yearly \$10 dues to be a member at the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, and she details her daily life. Bonnie wrote about often attending events in Burbank including the daily lunch at the senior citizens center and arriving there by bus.²⁴⁷ She describes reporters visited, according to these letters, to view her scrapbook. She insisted on never removing it from her home. Further details about Gray’s life come from a letter from Reba Perry Blakely to Margaret Formby in 1981. Reba provided Margaret with a few updates specially about Bonnie and noted she was excited for Bonnie to be inducted as an honoree for 1981. At this time, Blakely discussed Bonnie’s need to walk with a cane and her age was eighty-nine years old.²⁴⁸ Bonnie also wrote Margaret in July of 1981 in a response to a letter that Margaret had sent her. Bonnie wanted to go to the celebration to commemorate the honorees of 1981 and unfortunately could not attend. She detailed the difficulty of travel at the age of eighty-nine and that she had been in an auto accident when she was eighty-eight that left her with trouble walking. Prior to her induction into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame as an honoree, she petitioned

²⁴⁵ Rodeo Historical Society, DRC, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²⁴⁶ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁴⁷ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁴⁸ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

the Rodeo Historical Society at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, then known as the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, to request an honor or induction. A series of letters to the RHS, in early 1973 detailed her disappointment in her delay in membership to the RHS. She eventually joined by paying the \$10 dues, and she was accepted on July 23, 1973, on the recommendation of Johnny Mullins. This was confirmed in the societies' records from the secretary at the time, Francis "Flaxie" Fletcher.²⁴⁹ Ultimately Bonnie Gray was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame as an honoree in the champions and competitive performers and entertainment category. She was inducted as Bonnie Gray Harris in 1981.²⁵⁰

Additional letters to her pen pal Clarence provide information on the publication of her King Tut manuscript that she had been steadily working towards completing, and the struggles with publishers.²⁵¹ Another letter addressed to "Sunshine and Happiness," potentially Reba Perry Blakely, in 1982 is in response to her being asked to provide more details on her life. Reba learned Bonnie had been hard at work drafting a manuscript and attempting to have it published. Gray had been contacted by publishers, and maintains the book received favorable reviews. She details the potential offer of \$4000 to publish it immediately. However the book deal fell through, and she hired an attorney, according to her letter, to ensure the return of the manuscript and any pictures sent to the publisher. She wanted to tell the story of her life and include every aspect of her rodeo career, including her pet coyote and various animals kept as pets.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Rodeo Historical Society, DRC, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²⁵⁰ "Bonnie Gray Harris, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, May 19, 2023, <https://www.cowgirl.net/portfolios/bonnie-gray-harris/>.

²⁵¹ Rodeo Historical Society, DRC, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²⁵² Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

However, the published book never came to fruition and her manuscript remains unpublished today.

Her induction into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame as an honoree in 1981 came without Bonnie attending or having a manuscript available for the public. However, she provided an acceptance speech dated August 22, 1981, and delivered at the ceremony she stated, “A this time it is impossible for me to join with you in the big celebration,” and continues “I’ll be with you in mind only.” Her lack of attendance resulted from an injury sustained which she wrote in a letter with great detail to explain her inability to attend. She insisted she was hit in her car by a Cadillac and injured both of her knees. One knee never fully recovered and caused her to continually use a cane to move independently. She followed up with another letter from July 18, 1982, to thank everyone who participated in the induction ceremony because the accident that had happened to her a few years prior dictated how far she could travel.²⁵³

Bonnie viewed her success in rodeo in 1981 and she states, ““I’ve finally beat ‘em all (her competitors) by outliving everyone. Isn't that the limit?””²⁵⁴ This exemplifies Gray’s competitive nature, but her life could not last forever. Bonnie passed away April 28, 1988, in Los Angeles at the age ninety-seven.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁵⁴ Cook, “A true woman of the West: Cowgirl Bonnie Gray outrides and outlives ‘em all,” Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁵⁵ "U.S. Death Index, 1940-1997," s.v. "Verna Grace Smith", *Ancestry.com*.

Conclusion

Bonnie Gray's Impact on the Golden Age of Rodeo

Upon entering the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame you immediately walk in and can view all the inductees to the Hall of Fame. Displayed neatly and clearly is a representation of women who have made a significant impact as women in the West. Visitors can see Bonnie Gray's name on the wall displayed as one of the honorees inducted in 1981, and it is with no small impact that Gray was inducted as one of the honorees. She was one of the determined women to make a space for herself in rodeo during a period when women competed alongside of each other in some of the most grueling and difficult events.

These contests showcased the skill and determination of the women in an era with contrasting representations of women in society. These women provided an alternative to societies expectations of women as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Many women in rodeo held those roles but they did not define them. Bonnie was a wife and rodeo star; she was also a daughter and sister that was trained as a music teacher and nurse. Despite the expectations and traditional roles of the period, Bonnie wanted to create a space for herself, and rodeo was her way. She did not want the world to forget the contributions she fought so hard for and continued to relay the events of her career after retirement. Standing in the museum and reading her description it struck me that the culmination of Gray's career rests in the hall of fame for audiences to briefly discover. Even into her nineties, when she was inducted, she wanted to leave a lasting impact and legacy. She was honored and recognized for her accomplishments after a lifetime of advocacy for herself.

Gray guarded her private life. However, the argument can be made that even as a college graduate, teacher, and nurse, Bonnie engaged in public life and worked as a professional in a

variety of occupations. Not one to shy away from attention and competition, early descriptions of Bonnie as Verna Smith provide details of her athleticism. Because of her reluctance to share the personal details of her life, many questions remain. Additional research will need to be completed in order to determine the effects of her early life on her rodeo career as well as how her personal life contributed to her stardom. She did not marry into a rodeo family or marry a rancher like many other women in rodeo at the time. Despite not knowing her reasons behind her decision to fully commit to a life as a rodeo star, Bonnie still made a meaningful contribution to the sport.

Bonnie Gray's greatest contributions to rodeo remains innovative stunts and stunt doubling. Gray proudly supported the idea she was the first women to fully encircle a horse while at full gallop and performed this stunt often. Evidence of the stunt was reported in many newspapers and clippings are pasted into her scrapbook as testimony to her success. She also worked hard to train her horse, King Tut, to jump a car. She eventually would perform this trick to sold out audiences and adjusted the stunt to include a car full of passengers that would be witness to the requirements and accuracy of the stunt.

Never one to become complacent, she would once again challenge herself and her horse by jumping over the front of a small plane. These stunts and the talent she developed allowed her to successfully enter the film industry as a stunt double. By using her well trained horses and Gray's skill, she performed stunts for famous stars like Tom Mix and Will Rogers for moviegoers to witness in their favorite films. Her proximity to the center of Western film making allowed her to not only stunt double but also perform in front of audiences across the nation.

Bonnie's life cannot be summed up more succinctly than the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame's biography of Gray that states, "She won everything. She rode anything. She

performed before everyone. There has never been another person like her.”²⁵⁶ Bonnie Gray, “The King Tut Cowgirl” represented the best of the Golden Age of Rodeo.²⁵⁷ Determined to advocate for herself, and her rodeo status, Bonnie participated in contests and events that influenced a generation of rodeo stars. She competed alongside some of the best-known female competitors and stars while making a space for herself in the burgeoning Western file genre. She challenged gender norms and societies’ expectations for women during the time period and provided for herself during a time when women were not expected to be in the workforce unless it was to fulfill a position relegated for women. Bonnie created a real and lasting legacy that ultimately lives on today through the transcendence of women in rodeo.

²⁵⁶ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁵⁷ Hall of Fame Nomination File, Bonnie Gray, The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

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