

'Spoiler Alert: It's Men' - A Thesis on the True Cause of Female Exclusion from Rodeo Bronc Riding

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Abstract

Record keeping by the Rodeo Association of America began in 1929 but by 1942, for the first time, there was no provision for cowgirl bronc riding in either of the country's biggest competitions, Boston Garden and Madison Square Garden. The connection? Gene Autry. The Wild West movie star turned entrepreneur had turned his hand to rodeo just one year earlier and quickly amassed a monopoly in the sector which saw 'Gene Autry's World Championship Rodeo Company' in control of these and many more productions. It was Autry, and his organization, who took the decision to officially exclude women from the competitive elements of rodeo – relegating them instead to safe, glamorous centers of the male gaze. Why then, does practically every book, article and even museum exhibit on this period, portray the death of Bonnie McCarroll (1929) as the reason for women's exclusion from the sport? Whilst the tragic and graphic incident certainly played its part in changing perceptions of the sport, there is much to be accounted for in the 13-year interval between her death and the eventual all-out exclusion – most crucially its discounting of the narrative that Autry's decision was reactionary and born of concern for cowgirl safety. This study will investigate many elements including McCarroll's death, its immediate aftermath, the aforementioned intermittent years and Autry's attitudes to women's roles in various aspects of his career in order to argue that it was in fact Autry's personal biases that saw women excluded from competition before finally coming to investigate the landscape of the sport today and the women who have and continue to break back into it almost 80 years later.

Keywords: Women, Rodeo Bronc Riding, Gene Autry

1. Introduction

Summon the image of a rodeo in your head and perhaps you see competitors lassoing calves or riding bulls, but almost certainly at some point your mind will conjure the vision of a cowboy, clinging on for dear life to a bucking wild bronco until he is tossed to the arena floor. This is bronc riding, a staple event in rodeos across the United States since before official record keeping even began in 1929, with the formation of the Rodeo Association of America (RAA). Despite Western pop culture mythology, for most of its early life span this (and many other high-risk events) were not exclusively male, with women's competitions being held in approximately one third of all rodeos (often the most prestigious) throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Women were competing at the highest levels and, perhaps most crucially, against men who generally respected their ability to do so. But by 1946 the number of women reporting annual winnings from professional rodeo had declined to just seven, from a massive forty-nine in the years 1929-42². Their position in rodeo had instead changed from competitor to entertainer with most rodeos holding no competitions for women relegating them instead to "Rodeo Queens" whose role was to provide a visually pleasing, performance element. The question then, must be: why? Many historians have pointed to the severe hit that women's participation took following the graphic and tragic death of Bonnie McCarroll in 1929 in a bronc riding accident. She was thrown from and trampled by her horse and died from spinal injuries and pneumonia some days later. For many spectators, it has been argued, this display of female injury was too much to handle and caused many to determine the sport was simply too dangerous for the fragile female. However, with the RAA set up in the same year, I would argue that if McCarroll's death were truly that influential this new organization would have implemented an exclusionary ban in the immediate aftermath; we can see from the

records and statistics that this is not the case. What then, in 1942, saw women excluded? Or perhaps more specifically who? Gene Autry. The singing cowboy, movie-star-turned-entrepreneur had turned his hand to rodeo just one year earlier and quickly amassed a monopoly in the sector which saw "Gene Autry's World Championship Rodeo Company" in control of these and many more productions. It was his organization which took the decision to officially exclude women from the competitive elements of rodeo – relegating them instead to safe, glamorous centres of the male gaze. This paper will investigate many elements including the immediate aftermath of McCarroll's death, academic theories on external circumstantial influences on the sport's decline, and Autry's attitudes to women's roles in various aspects of his career in order to argue that Autry's personal biases had the biggest impact in seeing women excluded from competition, before finally coming to investigate the landscape of the sport today and the women who have and continue to break their way back into it almost 80 years later.

The forthcoming shall utilize several academic sources across as vast a period as could be managed in this relatively new area of study. Secondary sources such as articles (taken mainly, and somewhat surprisingly, from sport history journals) and books provide the basis for much of my statistical analysis and the interpretations of the sport's development, and analysis of the work and views of Autry by examining the content of some of his biggest Western films from a more modern and perhaps gender-centric viewpoint, while my current primary sources speak more to the landscape of the sport today, provided by oral histories from recent documentary film and TV shows, 'I'll Ride That Horse: Montana Women Bronc Riders'³ and 'Cowgirls'⁴. I am hopeful that while some of the topic's most prevalent scholars, such as Renee M. Laegreid, have focused their studies on different aspects of the sport and its development, their contextual and social arguments can nevertheless be applied and argued within the context of my own question. The academic focus on this area is still relatively new but its development in line with changing historical priorities of adjusting narratives of a completely and overtly masculine West has been noteworthy and something I hope to feature in my analysis.

Mary Lou LeCompte's "Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo: 1929-1947" is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the decline in women's participation in competitive rodeo I have found in my research process. The article, written for the *Journal of Sport History*, provides the most thorough investigations and conclusions as to the numerous causes of the eventual exclusion of women from not just bronc riding but all competitive events deemed beyond their capabilities and/or stations. LeCompte handles most eloquently of any source I utilized the death of Bonnie McCarroll, managing to balance the incident's undeniable impact with the equally unavoidable reality of persistent female participation for years to follow. Interestingly, she highlights McCarroll's popularity and relative fame as a bronc rider over the incident itself, pointing to the deaths of many female bronc riders before her which saw no outcry for major rule changes or improved sanctions for the women's sport. Arguably this could suggest that the reaction to this particular incident was channeled into gender not due to sexist biases of spectators but perhaps at least in part due to truly emotional responses to the graphic loss of a great sporting legend. Nevertheless, she does acknowledge that the incident was followed by widespread calls for the newly formed RAA to step in and do more to regulate female participation in the sport and while the organization "consistently ignored pleas"⁵ the sport's numbers took a major hit in the following years, presumably as more women chose not to partake and/or more husbands and fathers made that decision for them.

She goes on to examine some of the social circumstances which also may have contributed to the major decline we see reflected in the aforementioned statistics throughout the 1930s and 1940s. On this point she is corroborated by Laegreid who, in tracking of the development of the increased glamour surrounding female roles in rodeo, highlights many of the same social and cultural changes as those that see the decrease of their competitive involvement; namely Depression, War and media. LeCompte points to the financial burden that accompanied the production of rodeos of all sizes and the impact this had on women's positions when economic circumstances meant cuts had to be made. For example how mixed rodeos, whose shift to contract style events rather than open entry to ensure a more streamlined and cheaper process saw the number of female entrants dramatically cut, as well as the collapse of early attempts at "All Cowgirl Rodeos".⁶ While events like the latter garnered "record crowds and excellent press"⁷ and perhaps could have ensured women's place in a separate, but nevertheless competitive, sphere they were thwarted by "financial constraints...and various other problems"⁸ of war. At the same time, the pressures of the period on spectators – Laegreid⁹ argues – encouraged rodeo producers to push women into the roles of glamour and entertainment in order to invigorate a sense of escapism from the bleak reality outside of the ring. On this, both authors point to the similar shift that was seen in film during the same period as audiences craved heroic, gunslinging, male protagonists who defeated the antagonist in a blaze of glory at each opportunity, perhaps to provide a hopeful ideal that this was happening on the frontlines. The strong, female characters of the old Westerns simply didn't play into this narrative and so instead we see them relegated to 'not only vapid [but] virtually anonymous...portrayed by actresses who could neither rope nor ride'.¹⁰ The priority now was promulgating the Western Mystique of the overtly masculine west that somehow academics are still fighting to dismantle with reality today. Interestingly, both authors bring Autry's films and productions into this final point, however, I feel neither apportions enough responsibility for his role in altering the 'perception of western women...in rodeo which increasingly mirrored the West of Autry's films'.¹¹

Before Gene Autry amassed his Rodeo Empire, he was the golden child of western media – specifically film and music. His undeniable talents saw his fame, fortune and influence quickly accumulate to see him become ‘The Singing Cowboy’¹² with over 57 movies, his own TV show and countless records. The relevance of this meteoric rise to fame in the context of its later impact on competitive female rodeo is the period over which it occurred. As we have seen from the analysis of film and media provided by Laegreid and LeCompte, this was a time in which we saw women’s roles in media and society in general were already being changed by the pressures of war and Depression, however LeCompte highlights how in his later years, when Autry turned his hand to writing and producing his films, he intensified this movement of women in western film away from ‘the competent, roping, riding, heroines of yore [to] merely decorations, to be rescued by the heroic cowboys, and then won over by their songs’¹³. One need not look in any great depth into the films and songs that Autry starred in and produced to see that they promulgate, at worst an overtly sexist narrative of western women as “not too bright, usually helpless [and] vapid”¹⁴, and at best a narrative of a masculine Western Mystique that simply wasn’t accurate. Stephanie Vander Wel (in her article on the music of Autry and his ‘singing cowgirl’¹⁵ Patsy Montana) argues that while Autry and his music “offered hope and promise to those suffering the devastating effects of rural poverty” it nevertheless “participated in the construction of a new western musical mythos of gender”¹⁶. She considers how the lyrics of his music relied on a nostalgic sentimentality that Wel names a “masculine yearning for a past far removed from the grim realities of the present”¹⁷, for a time that arguably never really existed. As economic hardship forced more women out of domesticity and into roles men saw as their own, perhaps Autry’s nostalgia spoke to a time when gender roles were more easily defined. This had, however, never been the case in rodeo with female competitors - as evidenced by the oral histories of Alice and Margie Greenough, Marg and Violet Brader and Bobby Kramer in the short documentary film “I’ll Ride that Horse: Montana Women Bronc Riders”¹⁸. Each of these women attest to gaining their skills through the equal expectation upon them to work on familial ranches breaking wild horses, as well as how their skills were in fact largely respected and encouraged by their male counterparts. Alice Greenough commented that her first ever participation in a bronc riding competition was prompted by “the old cowboys” who simply stated “why don’t you get up there? You can do it can’t you?”¹⁹. Thanks to these skills and the environment of rodeo, their working opportunities and positions were also more secure come the fall of economic circumstances, as Marg Brader remembered “when there was no pay for women’s work we just decided to do men’s work...and we got good pay because we [did] things the men wouldn’t think of like get up at four and bring the horses around”²⁰.

I would argue that this presents historians with two critical considerations: firstly, if it is believed (as LeCompte suggests) that there is a correlation between the portrayal of cowgirls in film and perceptions their real-world capabilities by rodeo spectators and producers then arguably Autry and his creations had an effect on both of these elements that cannot be ignored. And secondly, I would argue that it speaks to the suggestion that perhaps Autry exhibits here the same personal biases which eventually act as his motivation for removal of female competitions from his rodeo. Perhaps, when these two worlds collide in 1942 with Autry’s entry into rodeo, what we see is the merely an official implementation of the biases of the same man who had so heftily damaged media perceptions in order to give further effect to the heroic, male-orientated, mythic West he appears so attached to. Jackie Donath argues that this is even dangerously evident in The Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum which she accuses of “vacuum cleaning the past [with] Disney Realism”²¹ (the Disney Imagineering Team was involved in the creation of a number of its exhibits) with the agenda of creating a west that is “sanitized, good-spirited and inaccurate nostalgia”²².

Before concluding, I would like to turn briefly to the landscape of the sport today and specifically the women of my final primary source and exhibition label, the stars of the documentary TV show, “Cowgirls”.²³ First aired in 2017 this show introduces us to the extraordinary young women who are partaking in competitive bronc riding today and most interestingly still facing the same challenges of exclusion and unwelcomeness among organizers and spectators alike. Whatever the cause of the original exclusion it appears as though the sport’s true history of not just inclusion, but respect and appreciation of female competitors has been forgotten in favor of a narrative that suggests this was never a woman’s place to begin with. The team’s coach for example, in the pilot episode, can be heard warning the women not to take anyone at their word that a competition time or location has been changed, for fear it may be a ploy to prevent their participation – “They don’t want you here”, he says. I found this perhaps even more sorrowful than the stories of the girls whose home states still maintain official bans on participation, as it demonstrates the extent of the damage to gender perceptions at a human level. That some male organizers, competitors and even spectators feel so entitled as to resort to such tactics to continue to exclude women proves that this goes beyond any notions of safety or protection and is instead rooted in the sexist misconception that women are somehow incapable or unworthy of competing in a sport which was historically always theirs. Nevertheless, the women that form the focus of this show power on through bureaucracy and sexism in the most admirable way imaginable: winning. Their dedication to their sport sees them travel all over the country, risk serious injury or even death each competition and they do so while holding on for just as long as their male counterparts, much like the original cowgirl competitors who came before.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion then, I remain unpersuaded by some scholars' arguments that the death of Bonnie McCarroll instigated the massive drop in the number of female participants in competitive bronc riding. The disparity between the timing of the two remains unavoidable and while it almost certainly had its impact on a level of more personal choice, it is not until the 1940s that we see the numbers drastically fall as a direct result of the blanket imposition of the exclusionary practices of Autry's company. We have seen from multiple sources that his biases towards the roles and positions of women were unashamedly presented in his movies and music, with some scholars even concluding that he was partly responsible for the changes to the portrayal of women in western film also. While there are various theories as to the causes of these underlying prejudices, their relevance in relation to this thesis is minimal. The fact remains that until 1942, when Autry monopolized many of the nation's largest and most prestigious rodeos, women held a position in competitive bronc riding that was prominent and respected and while numbers were falling until this point it was only after this effective ban that they dropped off almost entirely. These repeated correlations between Autry's biases and whatever production project had his focus cannot be ignored and as such I think it is crucial that we rightly apportion him, and not McCarroll, the blame he deserves for the exclusion of women from competitive rodeo bronc riding.

3. Acknowledgments

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