Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post-World War II Texas: a cowgirl by anyother name--than feminist

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Texas Women
THEIR HISTORIES, THEIR LIVES

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A Cowgirl by Any Other Name—Than Feminist

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Cowgirls hold a strange place in the American conception of the West. In scholarly literature, film, and the popular press, cowgirls are portrayed as icons of feminism. Dressed quite fetchingly in jeans and boots and doing everything their iconic counterparts, the cowboys, can do, they seem the quintessential feminists in action. Yet ranch or rodeo women who came of age prior to or during World War II either appear not to have had a clear understanding of the concept or to have rejected that label outright. Instead, they considered themselves “cowgirls.” Despite differences in class and family economy, this moniker identified them as women who could step outside traditional female boundaries among the region’s unique environmental, economic, and cultural characteristics but could do so without challenging the established social order.

The community of women who participated in the first all-girl rodeo in Amarillo, Texas, in 1947 is the focal point for exploring this dichotomy of terms. Oral histories from four of the competitors provide insights from which to explore ranch women and rodeo performers’ views on gender roles. Their experiences help broaden one’s understanding of the complex, multifaceted ways in which gender is constructed in this region. Situating Texas women within the larger, national debate on feminism helps explain the unique regional interplay of feminine and masculine behaviors—attractively dressed and made-up women who rode bulls, for example—and why in this male-dominated society, women could both perform outside the boundaries of traditional female behavior and remain strongly antifeminist.

While the term feminism does not have a singular fixed definition, for this essay, feminism is defined as a self-conscious attempt by women to change fundamental conditions of gender equality in their society. Rural West Texas is not generally considered a bastion of feminist activity, yet the women who organized, produced, and competed in the 1947 Tri-State Rodeo have been credited as behaving in a feminist manner, or at least as being protofeminists. And not without reason. The story of Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr, who produced the rodeo, as well as of the competitors seems a compelling argument for feminist activity. Theirs was the first rodeo organized and produced by women and in which women competed in all the events featured in regular Professional Rodeo Cowboy rodeos: bareback riding, saddle bronc riding, calf roping, team roping, bull dogging (steer wrestling), and bull riding. Although a series of “All Cowgirl” rodeos had been staged in Texas during World War II, they had featured exhibition, or noncompetitive, events and included men on the roster of organizers and even guest performers.

In the context of national feminist activity, Binford and Farr’s decision to hold the 1947 rodeo and then continue their production partnership until 1953 seems to illustrate the freedoms women had gained during World War II, allowing them to participate in areas outside traditional gendered boundaries. Earlier scholarship on this rodeo generally assumes a feminist perspective, arguing that Binford, Farr, and the women competitors used the Tri-State as a means to fight against the increasingly circumscribed roles for women in the immediate postwar years. Candace Savage, for example, has written that cowgirls had been limited to “sponsor contests or serving as glamour girls in parades and production numbers. The up-and-coming generation of working cowgirls hated these restrictions.” In a similar vein, Charlene Walker ascribes the women’s drive for equality as their primary motive: the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association “includes legendary equestriennes and world champions, and, more so, it was started by a Tech-ex who believed women could rope and ride as good as any man and deserved the chance.” Mary Lou LeCompte argues that Farr “dreamed of the chance to compete in real rough stock and roping contests like the cowboys” and had discussed the “frustration at being shut out of rodeo competition” with Binford. Either explicitly or implicitly, changing the rules and/or finding a venue to continue competing in a full slate of rodeo events on par with men’s events emerge as the prime motivations for creating the Tri-State Rodeo.

A closer look at the lives of Binford, Farr, and the other riders also suggests that they lived outside the gendered boundaries of the era, implying their status as at least protofeminists. Nancy Binford had grown up on her family’s
ranch outside of Wilderado, Texas. Her parents had settled there in 1911 and encouraged Nancy to enjoy athletics; they also expected her to participate in all the chores necessary in running a large cattle operation—riding, roping, and branding. Binford was thirteen and her older sister, Barbara, was fifteen when their father died in 1934. Despite the large scale of the ranch and farming operation, their mother took over management of the family business, relying on her daughters for help. After high school graduation, Binford attended Texas Technological College, graduating in 1943 with a degree in physical education. She taught high school for one year, but “during the war my mother needed help here on the ranch,” so Binford returned to Wilderado in the spring of 1944. The two women subsequently ran the large ranch as a partnership.¹

Thena Mae Farr, a longtime friend of Binford’s, came from a third-generation ranching family located outside of Seymour, Texas. And as with Binford, Farr learned to ride at a very young age and participated in the day-to-day operations of her family’s cattle business. She earned the reputation as an accomplished rider and ranch woman, acquiring her own herd in 1944, during her senior year of high school. After graduation, she attended Texas State College for Women (now Texas Woman’s University) for one year, returning home in the spring of 1945 to continue in her family’s cattle business.²

Back on their respective ranches in 1945, the two women had family, ranching, and rodeo connections that placed them in a strong position to organize a rodeo when the opportunity presented itself. As Binford recalled during a 1985 interview, “Amarillo for years had had this regular rodeo and it had become a place where they couldn’t even fill the grandstand.” Learning that the state fair commissioners for Amarillo’s Tri-State Fair would not be holding a rodeo in 1947, according to Binford, “Thena Mae Farr and I decided that we would try to produce an all girl rodeo.” They took their idea to the chamber of commerce in Amarillo; “they said if we thought it was possible that they would let us put on an all girl rodeo and see if it would be successful.” With approval in hand, the state fair board helped the women advertise their upcoming rodeo. A photo essay appeared in the local paper, telling the story of this novel rodeo and helping generate interest. Captions below the images read, “A Dream in the Making” (Binford and Farr sitting on a fence); “The Girls have reached their decision” (the two sitting on a fence, smiling); “Happy over their decision” (smiling, standing next to a fence); “Girls off to meet Mr. L. B. Herring, Jr., mgr of the Tri-State Fair” (one on horse, other closing corral); “The making of the Tri-State All Girl Rodeo” (Binford and Farr on horseback, Herring standing between the horses and reading the women’s proposal); “Happy are the Girls—contract signed” (the two women galloping their horses, waving the contract);
“Not only can they produce a show...” (sitting in house, Binford sewing button on Farr’s shirt); “The girls are good cooks, too” (Binford and Farr looking into a pot); “The girls at Miss Binford’s ‘M’ Bar Ranch” (on horseback), concluding with an image of Binford and Farr standing next to a horse trailer that would be awarded to the best all-around cowgirl. Wearing jeans, boots, and simple western shirts, the two women epitomized the image of independent, competent cowgirls.5

To draw enough contestants to put on a good show, the two women called on friends, young ranch women like themselves, to help out. Binford recalled, “My last year or two in high school and in college the rodeos around the county would invite different girls to come and ride and they, the girls, were called sponsors or sweethearts... That’s how I started rodeo-ing and then meeting some of the girls.” The women had developed strong friendships based on their shared experiences as ranch women and the competitive camaraderie that developed during West Texas competitions. Binford and Farr's ranching friends were eager to pitch in.

With the exception of the announcer and pickup men—riders on horseback who picked up rodeo contestants from horses, bulls, or from the ground during bucking events—women filled all the positions as contestants, judges, promoters, and staff supporters at the 1947 Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo. The organizers went to great lengths to fill the slate and make the rodeo a success: twenty-four riders filled the eighty entries, with the women competing in bareback riding, calf roping, sponsor contest, cutting, team tying, saddle bronc riding, steer riding, and an exhibition bulldogging performance. Dixie Lee Beger Mosely remembered, “Jackie Worthington and myself rode in all seven events, and I was also trick riding and trick roping, and I think I was still riding my horse over the cars at the time. And I was also the rodeo clown. I was a very sore person every morning.” Jerry Portwood Taylor was unusual in that she competed in only one event: Farr had pleaded with Taylor’s mother to allow Taylor to participate. Taylor was living in Fort Worth at the time but had grown up on a large ranch outside of Seymour, Texas, near where Farr lived, and they were “close as sisters.” Taylor’s mother finally relented, and Taylor “just flew in. I didn’t stay even the whole rodeo. Thena picked me up [from the airport] and took me to the show. [saying], ‘She’ll kill me if you get hurt!’ Taylor won the cutting competition riding Farr’s horse, then returned home.6

Since the early 1930s, women had competed in the sponsor contest at regular rodeos, and the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo also featured this event. The sponsor contests emerged as a rodeo event at the Stamford, Texas, Cowboy Reunion in 1931, where it was the only event for women. The intention was to “add a little charm and glamour to the previously masculine rodeo.” To compete, riders had to be “sponsored” by a civic organization or local ranch. To ensure that their “participation would conform to more traditional views of feminine behavior,” prizes were awarded based on most attractive riding outfits, best-looking mounts, and best horsemanship (based on subjective and secret criteria). Producers Binford and Farr eliminated the cowgirl costume portion of the contest and ended the practice of having a panel of male judges subjectively evaluate how the women rode around the barrels. At the Tri-State Rodeo, the contest was objectively evaluated—timed—with the woman with the fastest time declared the winner.8

Much to the organizers’ delight, the rodeo was a huge success. “We had three performances,” Binford recalled, “and the last performance in Amarillo they didn’t even have standing room only.” Newspaper reporters confirmed that “the girls rodeo is a knock-out... The two promoters have a great, great opportunity. No reason why they shouldn’t break into Madison Square Garden within the next winter or two.” With very few exceptions, such positive stories filled the pages of local newspapers. Support from the state fair board and the riders encouraged Binford and Farr to hold another all-girl rodeo in Amarillo the following year. Once again, the women performed in front of enthusiastic, standing-room-only crowds. With the future for all-girl rodeos looking bright, twenty-three of the cowgirl contestants met immediately after the second Tri-State Rodeo and organized the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) “to standardize rodeo rules applying to girl contestants, and to eliminate unfair practices.” In particular, the association “intended to bar cowgirl sponsor contests from Rodeo Cowboy Association and Girls Rodeo Association—approved rodeos except where it is made a timed event.” This insistence on fairness turned the sponsor contest, originally a feminine complement to the cowboys’ rodeo events, into the highly competitive, lucrative, and popular event known today as barrel racing.8

Although eliminating the costume and equipment judging portions of the sponsor contest, the new GRA rules did not ignore appearance altogether. The bylaws required participants in GRA-sanctioned contests “to ride in the opening parade and always be dressed in colorful attire when they appear in the arena.” The following year, the officers updated the GRA rule book to include behavior as well, stipulating that sanctions would be applied to members who swore in the arena, drank publicly on the rodeo grounds, or behaved in an otherwise unladylike manner. The decades between World War I and World War II had witnessed a revolution in manners and morals all across the United States, giving women greater freedom to publicly engage in what had been considered
behaviors appropriate only for men—smoking, drinking, and swearing. Although women in urban areas were more likely to engage in this behavior, the rule suggests that the revolution had spread to the rural West. The women who served as elected officials of the nascent GRA did not want to alienate the state fair commissioners or spectators in the increasingly conservative post–World War II era. “Don’t ever go to an All-Girl Rodeo and expect to see a bunch of rowdy gals raising the devil” came the word from James Cathey, columnist for Western Horseman Magazine. “They are the only professional sportswomen who don’t smoke or drink in view of their public. The girls are selling their profession to the public and the public is enthusiastically accepting them.” The restrictions demonstrated marketing savvy but applied only to conduct on the rodeo grounds. After the show cowgirls joined cowboys for some fun after a long day at the arena. Dutch Taylor, Jerry Portwood Taylor’s husband, a roper from West Texas, recalled, “After the rodeo, well, we’d all go to the street dance, but we still drank and had fun…. Jackie Worthington and I—I guess I drank a washtub full of whiskey or more with her.” Mary Ellen “Dude” Barton, too, recalled the evenings out: “‘Most of the time we weren’t that rowdy. We just got into things once in a while.” Even so, the freedom and opportunity the cowgirls enjoyed seemed to defy the restrictive norms for post–World War II women.10

Binford and Farr accomplished their goal with the 1947 event: the Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo brought their community of amateur cowgirl athletes in a traditional rodeo competition. Between 1947 and 1953, when the two women ceased producing rodeos, interest and acceptance of all-girl rodeos continued to increase among spectators and competitors alike. Cathey was amazed to discover that “the bug bites the fair sex as well as the ruggedest and roughest of the species. Girls love rodeo as well as the boys.” And spectators loved watching women compete, too. “The people of the southwest,” he continued, “will have over two dozen chances to see one of the All-Girl affairs this summer.”10

The close-knit group of cowgirls worked hard to keep their all-girl rodeos going. Because of the distances that separated the women and the expense of telephone calls, they gathered after one rodeo to plan the next. Mosley remembered the conversations: “We used to say, okay, our next rodeo is going to be two weeks from now over there. Well now, everybody’s got to show up so we’ve got enough to have a rodeo.” The rodeos offered women a time to socialize, a break from the everyday demands of ranch work. “Well have rodeos Thursday, Friday, and Saturday,” recalled Mosley, “and then everybody went back to their ranch and worked hard so they could go to the next rodeo.” Ruby Gobble agreed. “We all worked on ranches,” she said. “I lived there with Nancy Binford and her mother, worked there. And Katie, her mother, used to work our butts off!

And we’d be so tickled to drive out of there and go to a rodeo so we could rest.” Creating a culturally acceptable venue in which women could gather with friends—and get a reprieve from the demands of ranch work—emerged as a motive for continuing the all-girl rodeos.12

Friendships aside, the women took competition seriously. Mary Lou LeCompte has written that “the camaraderie and friendship with the group were much stronger than the competition between individuals, since all wanted this sport to succeed,” but according to the women interviewed, they took competition seriously. Sitting in the lobby of the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2006, Mosley and Gobble joked about competing against one another. When Mosley laughed, “You beat me in the calf roping!” Gobble shot back, “You never will forget that, will you?” And Mosley, responded, “You always beat me in the calf roping!” Turning serious, Gobble reflected, “We were all really good friends, but when I roped, rode into the box with the calf, if I could beat Dixie I would. . . . When you’re competing, you always want to win.” Mosley agreed: “You do want to win, or you shouldn’t be competing to begin with. If you don’t want to win first, sit out. Don’t go.” Although they talked about the women riders’ willingness to help one another—loaning a rope or piece of tack—everyone played to win, if for no other reason than to earn enough money to go to the next rodeo.13

At first glance, protofeminists seems to be an apt description for these women. After all, the renaissance of traditional gender roles that emerged after World War II emphasized a return to more conservative masculine and feminine behaviors. These behaviors, usually defined in opposition to one another, emphasized men as strong and aggressive, women as weak and passive helpedmates rather than independent agents. The women who organized and competed in the Tri-State Rodeo hardly seem to fit this description. Then, too, concerns about women crossing the line into “masculine” behaviors appeared in newspaper and journal articles on the all-girl rodeo, either blatantly or obliquely. “Despite the powerful ideology of the happy homemaker, women continued to encroach into the male sphere,” wrote one journalist, feeding into social critics’ fears that women would rob men of their masculinity by adopting masculine roles. While the cowgirls did not set out to challenge men or masculinity—and had no intention of competing against men—this topic kept resurfacing in newspaper coverage.14

Moreover, that initial historical analysis must encounter and explain the antifeminist words of many commentators at the time. Newspapermen’s patronizing words contrast with legitimately impressive accomplishments, easily casting for present-day readers a feminist light on actions that the rodeo women themselves may not have understood as such. While guardedly approving of
their activities, the language of the articles and essays characterized the women's rodeos as less important than "real" rodeos. An article in the *Quarter Horse Journal* on preparations for the 1948 all-girl rodeo in Amarillo reported, "The female frolic had its inception in Amarillo last fall when a group of girls, most of them reared on ranches in New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma and had learned as youngsters the real ups and downs of the cattle business, decided to sponsor a rodeo of their own for a little fun and diversion." This commentary seems dismissive, an example of antifeminist sentiment that allowed women to engage in traditional rodeo events as long as it remained "a diversion," an amateur show, separate from men's "real" competition. Nevertheless, Binford and Farr appeared to have made a significant contribution to women's demands for equality by creating a venue in which women could compete in rodeo on their own terms, thereby paving the way for women to reenter the professional world of rodeo.15

Though reading women's actions that flaunted contemporary gender roles as feminist makes sense in a superficial way, emerging oral history theory and new scholarship on rural western women indicate that a more holistic approach is warranted. Given Estelle Freedman's injunction to women's historians to question how multiple identities shaped women's consciousness, we should take seriously the regional context from which rodeo women came and thus must revisit the "protofeminist" characterization of their experience. This admonition prompts different questions, including some about these women's thoughts on feminism. Sixty years later, three surviving members of the Tri-State Rodeo—Dixie Lee Reger Mosley, Dude Barton, and Jerry Fortwood Taylor—and Ruby Gobble, who began competing in women's rodeo in 1950, argued against equality as a motivation for their involvement in rodeo and ranching. Indeed, they were a bit surprised, if not disinformed, to learn that they had been celebrated as feminists.16

Since the 1990s, scholarship on women has matured to encompass complicated and often intersecting factors; that same rigor has not been applied to the scholarship on cowgirls in particular. The women connected to the Tri-State Rodeo shared a number of features—their ethnicity, for example. During the 1940s and 1950s in West Texas, non-Anglo ranch women or rodeo contestants were few and far between. Taylor recalled, "There was never a Hispanic girl that rode, or anything, that you know of. One might have been a Spanish girl, [but] she was a rancher, not really a [contestant]." Taylor's comment offers insight into more than just the dearth of Hispanic ranchers: she described a young woman from a ranch family as a rancher herself, and she made class and race assumptions when she characterized a ranch owner as Spanish rather than working-class Mexican.17

YET COWGIRLS—ranch women and rodeo performers—are not a monolithic group although they lived in the same "country," as Mosley referred to the region, and although all "were ranch women [who] grew up on a ranch." Some, like Taylor, came from old money. Others, like Fern Sawyer, Jackie Worthington, and Judy Hays, "had been longterm ranch families, and they hadn't been doing all that well" until the discovery of oil on their property. Mosley and her sister, Virginia Reger, had spent their entire childhood as part of a family troupe of rodeo performers; the income the girls earned as trick riders helped support their family. Binford and Worthington obtained college degrees, though Barton readily admitted that she only barely graduated from high school: "It wasn't an interest to me at all." While Taylor moved from her family's ranch to Fort Worth at age fifteen and thereafter preferred the glamour of city life, many of the other women remained on their families' remote ranches. The diverse group of participants in the all-girl rodeo also included older women such as Tad Lucas (a champion cowgirl from 1919 to 1929, when opportunities for women in sports blossomed); rank novices; women who married early and often; and "women who don't date men." Dispensing with a monolithic lumping together of the women under the term cowgirl demonstrates that the participants defy a simple definition, economic pattern, or even sexual orientation.18

In the larger debate on feminism, the idea that Binford, Farr, and other contestats exhibited protofeminist tendencies does not seem outside the realm of possibility, especially considering that Texas women have been both in step with national trends with the feminist movement and outside of it. In her book, *The Cowgirls*, which focuses on women in the West Texas region, Joyce Gibson Roach writes, "The emancipation of women may have begun not with the vote nor in the cities where women marched and carried signs and protested, but rather when they mounted a good cowhorse and realized how different and fine the view... From the back of a horse, the world looked wider." Nevertheless, the culture of West Texas has provided arguments against the feminist movement since before women received the right to vote.

Three unique aspects of the region's social, cultural, and economic environment contributed to the resistance. The feminist movements, supported by white, middle-class urban women, had been predominantly concerned with urban issues that did not necessarily resonate with rural, agriculturally oriented West Texas, especially during the hardscrabble years of the Great Depression and drought. "Ranch and farm women," historian Sandra Schackel notes, were "not a group ready to call themselves feminists." Lingering southern attitudes, too, played a role, with views shaped as much by the concern that involvement in politics would "unsex" white women—a point articulated by a Texas legislator who warned that suffrage would rob women of "those modest charms so
dear to us Southern gentlemen”—as by the fear of empowering black women with enfranchisement.

The cowgirls who produced the Tri-State Rodeo and the majority of those who competed in it were born in the 1920s, when attitudes in the region continued to support antifeminist sentiment. On the national scene, the early years after World War II saw the stirrings of a new feminist movement, part of the “increasingly affluent society which was beginning to turn its attention to the question of racial equality.” The feminist issues of the time, however, did not resonate in the rural West Texas region: census reports from the 1940s and 1950s indicate at most very small numbers of Hispanics or African Americans in the West Texas counties. Nor did the cowgirls identify with the new feminist emphasis on breaking free of the restrictive parameters of women’s “separate sphere” to engage in society at large. These women had always been engaged. Postwar feminism also became linked to sexual deviance and subservient communist activity, a cause for national alarm as the United States quickly shifted into the Cold War. The few cowgirls described as “women who don’t date men,” for whom feminism might have provided a community of understanding, would have risked public censure had they admitted to being feminists. Although “the mid-twentieth century was a particularly homophobic time,” the cowgirls in the Tri-State Rodeo group did not care about their friends’ sexual orientation and encouraged and supported one another.

So why have scholars writing about the Tri-State Rodeo cast the producers and participants as feminists? In part, it is because of their identification as cowgirls. In many ways similar to the male cowboy image, the “cowgirl” has been created, shaped, and marketed by forces outside her world, and those forces may have had agendas that did not resonate with the women themselves. The term cowgirl entered the national vernacular through public figures such as Will Rogers and Theodore Roosevelt, who witnessed the skill and daring of female rodeo performers in the late nineteenth century, during the era of the New Woman. And as with her male counterpart, the cowgirl’s image carries connotations of the West and of living by virtues that historian Elliot West has cataloged as “an unerring integrity, a spit-in-your-eye individualism, and a simple and unsullied honesty with others and themselves.” In the West, however broadly it was defined, it was possible, sometimes even necessary, for women to step outside of traditional gender boundaries and engage in the same activities as their male counterparts.

Connecting the Tri-State cowgirls with the West is important. The idea of Texas as a western region was still a new concept in the late 1940s. Only a decade earlier, the 1936 Fort Worth Frontier Centennial, held in Fort Worth, consciously sought “a new public view of Texas history that emphasized Texas as both a Western and a quintessentially American state.” The city’s business leaders capitalized on national trends that had turned to the region “with special enthusiasm during the 1930s and 1940s, years of crisis when Americans were looking for reminders of their abilities and assurances that dangers would be survived.” The increasing interaction with Hollywood, the lure of economic growth, and a desire to shift away from the association with its Confederate past encouraged Texas to distance itself from its southern roots and to forge a western identity. Cowboys and cowgirls from Texas became western icons.

When film and media representations of the western woman as cowgirl became widely popular in the post–World War II era, they fit within the contemporary discourse of gender roles: cowgirls as pretty, spunky, very feminine—sexy, even—helpers rather than equals to their counterparts. Dale Evans, a Texas-born singer and actress in western movies, became the quintessential glamour cowgirl, while images of young women in skimpy western costumes appeared as pinups in fashion magazines. “The cowgirl as a subject for the great pin-up artists arrives late in the game—in the 1940s,” observes Max Allen Collins, displacing “Indian maidens” as an excuse “for artists to depict pulchritude.” The movie industry deserves credit for firmly connecting Texas cowgirls (and cowboys) to the romanticized idea of the West. Indeed, Mosley identified three different categories of cowgirls: movie cowgirls, rodeo cowgirls, and ranch cowgirls. The cowgirls who participated in the Tri-State Rodeo crossed Mosley’s categories of ranch and rodeo women: Gobble crossed all three, playing roles in Western movies as well. The term cowgirl has expanded to a fourth category—self-definition—as the connection between the West and cowgirls became more firmly fixed in the popular imagination. However, the importance of repudiating the southern past and connecting Texas cowgirls and ranch women to the West is not to be underestimated when casting them as feminists.

During the 1970s and 1980s, women historians began to explore the lives of ranch and rural women of the West. Recalling Frederick Jackson Turner’s words that “each age writes the history of the past with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time,” it is not surprising that the Tri-State cowgirls, now Western women, found their story interpreted through a lens shaped by emerging feminist scholarship. They seemed likely candidates, enjoying freedoms and adventures that seemed to defy the cultural strictures of urban and suburban women. These cowgirls managed ranches and produced or competed in all of the same rodeo events as men. They trained, loaded, and hauled their own horses and generally traveled alone. And they had great adventures. For example, when her family began to receive oil money, Jackie Worthington bought an airplane and used it to stay connected to friends. Barton remembered, that for one rodeo, “We decided that Jackie would fly to Paducah and pick up a lady
that we all knew and we wanted to be with her. So Jackie gets in this plane and flies to Paducah and their airport, and she got there, and they hadn't shredded [mowed] it or nothing. She said sunflowers were higher than that plane when she hit the ground. She said 'I never want to get in that kind of a mess again!' . . .

Yep, she picked [the friend] up and took her to the rodeo, and she rode back home with me.” Historians during this era tended to view cowgirls' freedom and opportunities through a feminist lens—that is, as evidence that they had gained equality with men in the region.25

Returning to the question of how to define the term cowgirl, Roach provides a specific definition: “A cowgirl is a female whose life is or was for a significant part influenced by cattle, horses, and men who dealt with either or both, often as dominant figures but not always.” Roach recalled that when she asked Jackie Worthington’s sister, Ada Worthington Womack if she minded being labeled a cowgirl, she said no: “It’s what I was. I don’t mind being called one today.” Roach suggests that women who could be called cowgirls were the advance guard of the feminist movement: “These women probably never heard of Susan B. Anthony and the rebellious ladies who wished to have the right to do exactly what the cowgirls were doing, but they rode down the same road, some distance in advance of the theoretical feminists.” But to consider the cowgirls feminists would be to engage in a type of “linguistic slippage,” a misappropriation of causality. For example, an observation such as “environmental and occupational exigencies faced by ranch women and rodeo riders in Texas made it possible, if not necessary, for them to become active in activities prescribed for men” could be simplified into a less accurate assessment such as “cowgirls were feminists or protofeminists because they crossed gender boundaries to participate in men’s ranch and rodeo activities.” Rather than assuming that activities indicate an acceptance of feminist philosophies or ideals, women may have crossed gender boundaries because their activities supported and were supported by the regional patriarchal culture. In short, there is a distinction between having a feminist agenda and engaging in activities that are culturally acceptable in the region. In this context, place or region plays a significant role.26

Indeed, as Freedman points out, “The diversity of female experience [is] best understood at the local or regional level.” In his landmark study, based in large part on his observations of West Texas, Walter Prescott Webb concludes that environmental factors created the region’s distinctive cowboy ethos—masculine, violent, and fiercely independent. Later scholars studied the infusion of immigrants and the morphing of cultural patterns that “have helped make Texas the special place culturally that it undoubtedly is,” thereby drawing attention to gender roles. Gender roles of the ethnic groups that moved from the upland South exhibit striking similarity to attitudes in the West Texas region. Though society remained strictly patriarchal, women were expected to work alongside their husbands or fathers, performing tasks such as working in the fields, tending livestock, and slaughtering cattle that could well have been considered inappropriate in other regions.27

Beverly J. Stoeltje also describes the cultural attributes of the “backwoods belles” who moved west into Texas. “The primary distinction between this woman and the refined [southern] lady,” she notes, “is in the strength and initiative in coping with the hardships and the demands of the life they led.” The defining feature of the Texas women was “their ability to fulfill their duties which enabled their men to succeed, and to handle crises with competence and without complaint.” Backcountry culture did not make “womanhood a cult,” she argues; rather, it encouraged contempt for “leisure-class standards of femininity.” Despite their demanding physical work, women did not become masculinized. Quite the opposite. A great deal of weight was placed on femininity and attention to sensual female dress. Expectations that women would be independent, hardworking, and maintain traditional definitions of beauty shaped the concepts of gender in this region, seamlessly becoming part of the cowgirl culture. The title of the G.A. Offically Abolished in 1870, exemplifies the regional attitude toward roles of and expectations for women.28

The normative gender behaviors and social patterns seen in post–World War II West Texas were part of the baggage Anglo women who migrated to the Texas frontier brought with them. Not everyone subscribed to or would have been consciously aware of this baggage, but, whether or not people are aware of its role, culture shapes and guides behavior. In particular, these women's concepts of gender and work differed markedly from those of their northern sisters. Historian Ann Patton Malone writes,

The wives, daughters, and other kin of yeoman farmers, small slaveholders, craftsmen, and tradesmen . . . were probably more comfortable on the frontier than any other groups of Anglo women. Like elite women, they, too, were strongly influenced by the feminine role expectations of the Victorian code . . . but these women also had the advantage of a broader work experience. Because their lives had not been ones of either luxury or abject poverty but of hard work and activity, these yeoman-class frontier women were better prepared to fulfill their expected roles on the frontier. [These women were], in some respects, masculinized by the frontier experience.

Malone is speaking of the first generation “middlin’ sort” of Texas frontier women as being more at ease with stepping outside strict gender roles; they moved into the region already familiar with the necessity of fluid gender roles,
engaging in whatever chores needed to be done to ensure economic survival. Antifeminist rhetoric in national press and magazines, such as a 1901 essay in which Henry T. Finck argued that women should avoid “all employments which make women bold, fierce, muscular, brawny in body or mind,” would have held less weight with Texas frontier women than their urban sisters.29

This pragmatic attitude continued, as witnessed by the number of Texas women engaged in the physical, day-to-day activities associated with ranch work, their independence and confidence reflecting regional gender norms that respected if not encouraged women’s engagement in activities that in other places would be considered beyond the pale of middle-class acceptability. Photos, interviews, and newspaper clippings depicted the cowgirl athletes as western women challenging the conservative roles blanketing the country: they roped calves and rode bucking broncs; some even rode bulls. But according to the reports, the cowgirls accomplished these feats while looking like ladies. The papers not only described the appearance of Binford, Farr, and the other cowgirl athletes but also reported on their personal lives, describing their after-rodeo hobbies, interests, and family. One paper announced that “after a day in the arena, [cowgirls] went home to cook dinner for the family, work a little needlepoint, or maybe on a Friday night, get dressed up for a night on the town” with their husbands. An earlier interpretation considered this emphasis on femininity and domesticity a way to reassure readers that traditional gender distinctions and heterosexuality remained intact even as the women competed in the traditionally male sport of rodeo. Such reassurances were especially important for a sport that advertised that women would participate in “all the events that made up the best of male rodeos.” But instead of trying to convince the public that cowgirl athletes were indeed feminine women, it seems more likely the cowgirls were celebrated by journalists as embodying the regional norms of feminine and capable women.30

The women’s acceptance of the existing gender expectations is reflected in how they perceived the importance of rodeo to their careers or futures. None of the women interviewed saw rodeo as a potential career or intended to become a professional rodeo athlete. Binford remembered that when practice began for the 1947 rodeo, “We had eight ropers out the first day and some of them had never thrown a rope in an arena, and there wasn’t a calf missed. They were real excited about it, and it turned out real well.” According to Mosley, “A lot of it was, like most of the ranch women, they roped calves to work their cattle, and they sort of wanted to have some fun and compete against other women.” Mosley, like the other women interviewed, “never wanted to compete against...men calf ropers,” and Gobble recalled wanting “calves small enough that we could rope and throw and make a good show of it and wouldn’t make us look like a bunch of idiots out there—which we were, but that’s all right. But we wanted to make it look good.” Neither woman thought of participating in rodeo as a means of challenging women’s role in society or of competing with men. Constructing an organization that encouraged rodeo as a career had not been their goal. Binford remarked, “We did it as a hobby—there wasn’t enough money to really say you went to a rodeo to make money—you went because it was a life you liked and a part of a life that you lived.”31

Ironically, the women who played key roles in establishing the GRA, which later won the right for women to compete in Professional Rodeo Association events, found the focus on individualism and competitiveness disconcerting. Mosley captured the sentiment of her colleagues when she lamented that women’s rodeo—particularly Professional Rodeo Association barrel racing—has become such big business, part of the shift during the 1970s when “athletics would be turned into a business enterprise [where] winning isn’t everything, but striving to win is.” Although women had been competing in sports for “over a century, it’s only recently that they’ve been accepted as true athletes—competitive, aggressive, and bold.” Mosley said, “I definitely feel confident that all of us...had more fun and fellowship than these barrel racers that’s making a hundred thousand dollars a year...They gotta stay on the road to make enough money to make a living from it.” Similarly, Taylor noted, “All you had was fun, because you didn’t make any money.” In fact, the women interviewed were troubled by the shift in priorities from competing against one another as a form of socialization to high-stakes individual rivalries. Barton particularly disliked the fact that modern rodeo contestants were not ranch women: “Now most of these women go to school and learn what they do. We learned it by getting out and working at it.”32

Binford and Farr dissolved their rodeo-producing partnership after the 1953 Colorado Springs All-Girl Rodeo. Binford had already begun to focus more heavily on cutting horse competitions; Farr turned her attention to her family’s cattle business. Mosley married after the Colorado Springs rodeo, and as Barton recalled, “When the rodeo was over, she said, ‘Well girls, this is it. I’m getting married.’” And that was that. At her wedding just a few weeks later, her white cowboy boots were peeking out from under the hem of her white satin gown. At about the same time, Jackie Worthington became more involved in running the family ranch. Barton could not remember why she quit the rodeo. There was a drought, and she “probably decided it was time to go to work.” Though they enjoyed the competitive camaraderie, these women put all-girl rodeos behind them and turned their attentions back to regular life—marriage, family, the demands of running ranches.30
Though they had opened the way for cowgirls to become professional rodeo riders, these women did not think of themselves as having done anything special. And they definitely did not see themselves as feminists or protofeminists. Yet when pressed, they recognized that the characteristics that defined them as cowgirls—their independence, assertiveness, and capabilities—are necessary to succeed in the patriarchal culture that permeates the region.24

Many of the women who participated in the Tri-State Rodeo needed these characteristics beyond the rodeo arena. In his 1950 essay on the G.R.A., Cathey wrote, "These girls have an eye for business too. The president, Nancy Binford, manages her mother's ranch near Amarillo. In fact most of the directors manage ranches or some other business, and they certainly manage that rodeo business of theirs." So, too, did many of the contestants. "Ranch girls," Taylor explained, "are independent because they have to be independent. They're used to doing things kinda for themselves. And they're used to thinking. You know, if you have a business or something like that, like a lot of them, it's been handed down to them... well, they've got to think about business. And men are sometimes hard to do business with. Cause they always will take advantage of you, a lot of the time." She concluded by declaring that independence is a trait that you have to acquire. Nevertheless, she considered feminism and demanding equality the wrong way to do business. She understood the problems regarding unequal pay and opportunities for women, but she believed that success required working with the region's paternalistic structure.25

Fern Sawyer, winner of the all-around award at the 1947 Tri-State Rodeo, well expressed the cowgirls' argument against feminism:

I don't believe in women's lib. When I started cutting, a woman had to do double good to get the same marking. But I don't believe in preaching women's lib or hollering about it. I believe action proves more than words... The people that are really independent and do things, don't like women's lib... All they're doing is raising hell and putting women in the draft and bunch of crap that they shouldn't be doing... You can't tell me that in America, if you're good at your job, you won't make it. I've seen too many of them make it. And without women's lib.

Sawyer's adamant opposition to feminism was not unique, and most of these women, like her, would probably have seen the feminist movement as unnecessary. They believed that the region's patriarchal system was fluid and diffuse enough to allow women the opportunity to demonstrate their competence and strength of character. Their worldview had been shaped by regional experience—the product of social and historical experiences intersecting with economic and gender systems to "reproduce the socioeconomic and male-dominated structures of [a] particular social order." Overall, the gender system provided an acceptable "set of contingent power relations" that allowed the culture to "reproduce, and reconstruct male dominance." And while it did, the need for young ranch women to help in the family business allowed them to engage in experiences that outsiders perceived as challenging the boundaries of the paternalistic system.26

Writing about Texas women and feminism in more recent times, Martha Mitten Allen asserts, "The new rural woman in Texas may not march for 'women's lib,' but she clearly demonstrates the heightened consciousness and feeling of confidence and self-worth that is at the heart of the movement for women's rights. She has been influenced whether or not she knows it, or likes it." Rather than unconsciously benefiting from feminist ideals, the women who participated in the Tri-State Rodeo more likely already had that sense of confidence and self-worth based on a combination of environment, regional culture, and a system of gender relations distinct from those in other parts of the country. The West Texas patriarchy, while circumscribing and limiting women in many respects, also allowed women the latitude to participate in activities that were off-limits to women in other regions of the United States. Whether or not the cowgirls are consciously aware of it, this rationale seems to undergird West Texas women's resistance to feminism.27

Taking the long view of regional culture—its origins, persistence, and subtle manifestations—cultural or social patterns that may seem radical from a contemporary perspective instead appear to be perpetuations of long-standing norms. Doreen Massey argues for the importance of focusing on the locality not as static or concrete but as the place where larger social patterns were first expanded. Considering the evidence, it is difficult to ascribe incipient feminism to these ranch women/cowgirls; they had been doing what was expected of them, not pushing the boundaries of gender behavior. Freedman describes feminism as a fundamental revolution in the way men and women thought of one another: by that test, feminism was not present in this context. Cultural heritage and environmental considerations set the stage for gender behaviors in West Texas that varied from other regions.28

The participants in the Tri-State Rodeo did not perceive their actions as part of a movement for social change. There was no self-conscious political movement, nor did they consider rodeo a movement for social change. Quite the opposite. For the cowgirls, rodeo reinforced social and political norms. Asked whether she and the other cowgirls were fighting to restate women's place in rodeo, Barton replied, "You know, I hadn't thought anything about it... Some woman was here not too long ago, and she brought up that Gene Autry really..."
didn't even want [women] to ride in the barrel [races], or anything. I had kind of forgotten, and I said, 'I've been watching him on television—I'm going to quit watching him!' Perhaps Barton experienced a glimmer of feminist consciousness six decades after the fact.

NOTES


3. Nomination Form, Nancy Binford File, National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame Archives, Fort Worth (quotation).

4. Nomination Form, Thena Mae Farr File, ibid.

5. Nancy Binford, interview, Hereford, Tex., 1985, transcript sra0, BBC Cowgirl Interview File (quotations), Nancy Binford Tri-State Scrapbook, both in National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame Archives.


7. LeCompte, Cowgirls of the Rodeo, 168, Binford Tri-State Scrapbook (each time a rider enters an event, it is considered an entry); Dixie Lee Reger Mosley, interview by author, March 15, 2006 (first quotation); Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview by author, March 16, 2006 (second quotation).

8. Hooper,时候, Fifty Years a Living Legend: Texas Cowboy Reunion and Old-Timer Association (Stamford, Tex.: Shelton, 1979), 94 (quotation); Laegreid, Riding Pretty, 77, 80–81.


11. Cathey, "Girls Rodeo Association" (quotation).


13. LeCompte, Cowgirls of the Rodeo, 169 (first quotation); Mosley and Gobble, interview (second quotation).


17. Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview (quotation).

18. Mosley, interview (first quotation); Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview (second quotation); Barton, interview (third quotation). For information on the "golden era of women's sports," see LeCompte, Cowgirls of the Rodeo, 70–79; Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin, Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xx.


24. Max Allen Collins, introduction to Artist Archives: Cowgirl Pinups (Portland, Ore.: Collectors, 2002), 1 (quotation); Dixie Lee Reger Mosley, telephone interview by Kim Moslander, 1993; National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame Archives; Ruby Gobble File, National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame Archives; Renee Laegreid, "Faux-Lo Pep: Urban Cowboys and the Inversion


31. Binford, interview (first and fourth quotations); Mosley, interview (second quotation); Mosley and Gobble, interview (third quotation).

32. Joel Nathan Rosen, The Erosion of the American Sporting Ethos: Shifting Attitudes toward Competition (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007), 78 (first quotation); Mosley and Gobble, interview (second quotation); Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview (third quotation); Barton interview (fourth quotation).

33. Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview; Barton, interview (quotations).

34. Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview.

35. Cathey, "Girls Rodeo Association" (first quotation); Jerry Portwood Taylor, interview (second quotation).


38. Massey, Space, Place, and Gender, 2–5; Freedman, "New Woman," 192.