Bonnie McCarroll Thrown from Silver, 1915

By Walter S. Bowman

This photo shows Idaho cowgirl Bonnie McCarroll being thrown from a horse named Silver during a bucking contest at the 1915 Pendleton Round-Up. It was taken by Walter S. Bowman, a Pendleton-based photographer.

Cowgirls were among the first professional female athletes in the United States. Between 1890 and 1943, more than 450 women worked as professional cowgirls. Most learned their riding and roping skills on the farms and ranches where they grew up, performing the same work as their fathers and brothers. In addition to the rodeo, many cowgirls also earned money at Wild West shows, local exhibitions, and, after World War I, acting in motion pictures.

Bonnie McCarroll was one of many professional cowgirls who competed at the Pendleton Round-Up, which had offered separate events for both men and women since its beginnings in 1910. Cowgirl events at the first Round-Up included a bucking contest, a relay race, a pony race, and a standing race, as well as exhibitions of fancy roping and trick riding.

McCarroll began her career in 1915, the year the photo shown here was taken, and continued to travel the rodeo circuit until September 1929. The 1929 Pendleton Round-Up was to be her final competition before she and her husband retired to their home in Boise. However, on the first day of the Round-Up she experienced a tragic accident. The September 20 Oregonian reported that “Bonnie McCarroll, giving an exhibition of broncho riding, was hurled from her mount as it pitched forward, and the animal turned a somersault on her. The girl was tenderly gathered up and hastily removed to a hospital.” She later died from her injuries.

After the death of Bonnie McCarroll, many rodeos, including the Round-Up, discontinued cowgirl bronc riding, which some considered too dangerous for women. Changes in the organizational structure of rodeos and several other factors also resulted in a decline in opportunities for skilled cowgirls during the 1930s and 1940s. Today, women still compete in professional rodeos, but they do not enjoy the status that Bonnie McCarroll, Mabel Strickland, Tad Lucas, and other early professional cowgirls once did.


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