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View the documentary film “From Cheyenne to Pendleton” at the Oregon History Museum on Sunday, May 23, 2010

Portland, OR – April 24, 2010 – After three years of research and filming, documentary filmmaker Steve Wursta will present a discussion and viewing of “From Cheyenne to Pendleton, the Rise and Fall of the Rodeo Cowgirl” on Sunday, May 23 at 1 p.m. at the Oregon History Museum located at 1200 SW Park Ave., in Portland.

The film was made possible, in part, through a generous grant from the Idaho Humanities Council.

This historical documentary offers insight into the west and women’s participation in the rodeo in the early decades of the 20th century that has never been assembled before. The film chronicles the lives of Idaho’s Bonnie McCarroll, Colorado’s Bertha Blancett and Washington’s Mabel Strickland during the years 1904 through 1929. All three women have been inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas.

“The reason I made the film was to answer the simple question ‘why?’ “Why were women allowed to compete in the rodeo and why were they removed from the arena?” explained filmmaker Steve Wursta.

“How these women got started in the rodeo was relatively simple; they all grew up on homesteads working side by side with their fathers and brothers. This gave them the skills and confidence to be called ‘cowgirls,’” said Wursta.

However, the reason they were forced from the rodeo arena is much more complicated.

Join us for a special showing of this documentary, coinciding with the Oregon History Museum's current exhibit, Tall in the Saddle: 100 Years of the Pendleton Round-Up. Please RSVP for this event at 503.306.5214.

About the Oregon Historical Society

The Society has served since 1898 as Oregon's primary research collection and museum about Oregon history. OHS has an extensive collection of historical pieces, including over 85,000 artifacts and 3 million photographs and films. It safeguards and presents Oregon's history through a museum, research library, traveling exhibits, school programs and website content.

Background on the film provided by Steve Wursta, Producer/Editor/Photographer

Many historians point to the death of Idaho's beloved cowgirl Bonnie McCarroll at the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up as the reason for the expulsion of women from the rodeo arena, but in reality, the tide had turned against the cowgirls many years earlier.

Part of the reason was that women were strong competitors.

In 1914, Bertha Blancett came within 4 points of winning the All Around Cowboy title at the Pendleton Round-Up. In response, Pendleton quickly changed the rules. Cowgirls may only come in second place.

After World War I, both Cheyenne Frontier Days and the Pendleton Round-Up had difficulties with Mabel Strickland, a 98-pound cowgirl from Wallula, Washington. After the birth of her child, Mabel learned to rope steers and became quite good. She became so good that in 1925 she earned national recognition for setting the world's record in steer roping with a time of 24 seconds at Cheyenne Frontier Days.

Both rodeos barred this petite woman from competing against the cowboys.

But the problems with cowgirls reached a boiling point before the start of the 1926 Pendleton Round-Up when the Round-Up committee announced that competition for women had been eliminated in favor of paid exhibitions.

The reason they gave was rather odd.

It was because a 19-year-old girl had been given a New York City ticker tape parade for swimming across the English Channel faster than the fastest man—only a month before the start of the Round-Up.

As Pendleton's East Oregonian newspaper explained September 18th, 1926:

"Women now swim the English Channel and they can ride about as swiftly as can any man who ever walked, hence they do not require nor do they desire the same degree of attentiveness when the Round-Up was young."

While this may not make sense, it fits quite well with the pattern of social and economic changes that pitted the conservative rural farming communities against the more liberal urban cities of the east against after World War I.

Throughout the 1920s the rodeo cowgirl was losing ground to the Rodeo Queen, an invention of the Pendleton Round-Up, which was viewed as the more 'appropriate' role for women.

By the spring of 1929, the newly formed Rodeo Association of America had already announced that 1929 would be the last year for women in the rodeo.

"When the RAA formed they implored them to include women's events and make rules for them...for reasons we will never know they refused. Simply wanted no part of it," explained rodeo historian Mary Lou Lecompte.

Bonnie McCarroll's tragic and avoidable death at the Pendleton Round-Up became the excuse to remove women once and for good.

The film opens as 21-year-old Bertha Kaepernik, arrives in Cheyenne, Wyoming for the 8th annual Frontier Days Rodeo in 1904—the first year women were allowed to compete in the bucking bronc competition. The film concludes with the death of Bonnie McCarroll at the Pendleton Round-Up of 1929.

Along the way, the film explores how the settlement of the west shaped the lives of these women: The free-grazing cattle barons, the birth of the cowboy, the horrible winter of 1886 and death of hundreds of thousands of cattle, the growth

of the family homestead, the rise of the western myth and of Buffalo Bill's wild west show, the origins of the sport of rodeo and the role of the rodeo queen.

The new sport of rodeo was unique in the sense that a local committee made all decisions regarding women's participation inside the arena and there were no women on those rodeo committees.

"It was never a question of whether women had the skills to compete with men in the rodeo, rather it was a question of it being socially acceptable – and the rodeo committeemen made those decisions," explained Wursta.

Since there are no records of how rodeo committees made their decisions, the film explores a variety of issues: urban versus rural, changing social mores, the Hollywood film industry, mass media and, of all things, the price of wheat and cattle.

Odd as it may seem, the effects of farm prices can reveal a great deal about the level of women's participation in the rodeo.

A short biography of the three featured rodeo cowgirls

Bertha Kaepernik Blancett, *Inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1975*

Bertha was born in Cleveland, Ohio and at the age of three moved with her family to a farm near Atwood, Colorado. Atwood is small farming and ranching town along the Platte River near the Nebraska border. Bertha was the first woman to ever ride a bucking bronc in the open men's division at Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo in 1904.

"It was one of the most remarkable exhibitions of rough riding ever seen here and would have been exciting had the rider been a man. As it was the great magnitude cheered to the echo this extraordinary lady who has conquered the west." –The Cheyenne Daily Leader, 1904

She later married Iowa cowboy Del Blancett, whom she met while performing for the Miller's 101 Wild West Show in 1909. Bertha was such a force in the early rodeos that she came within 4 points of winning the title of "All Around Cowboy" at the Pendleton Round-Up in 1914. (In 1915, the Pendleton Round-Up committee changed the rules so that a cowgirl could only win second place.)

Mabel Delong Strickland, *Inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1981*

Mabel was born outside of Walla Walla, WA and started her career in trick riding and horse racing at the Walla Walla Frontier Days Rodeo and the Pendleton Round-Up. While at a Pendleton Round-Up, Mabel met and later married Hugh Strickland, a rodeo star from Bruneau, Idaho. Hugh taught Mabel how to ride bucking horses and to rope steers after the birth of their child, April in Mountain Home, ID. At 98 pounds, Mabel looked more like a model than a steer roper, but her abilities put her in direct competition with the cowboys. She could rope a steer faster than most of the cowboys and set several world records. (The rodeo committees changed the rules so she could not compete against the men.) In 1926 she was the first woman to grace the cover of the Cheyenne Frontier Day's Program that, in retrospect, marked the high point for women in rodeo. The following year, in an odd twist, the Pendleton Round-Up awarded her the title of Rodeo Queen in 1927. As evident in the following newspaper quote, the growing national fear of how competitive sports would change women had reached even the small farming town of Pendleton, Oregon.

"There is nothing masculine in her appearance and she does not wear mannish clothes. She dresses with excellent taste, whether in the arena or on the street" – The East Oregonian, 1927

Mary Treadwell (Bonnie McCarroll), *Inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in 2002*

Mary was born in High Valley, ID and during the school year lived with her mother and younger brother in Boise. As a spectator to the 1913 Boise Stampede, Mary watched Bertha Blancett win the bucking bronc competition and her future husband Frank McCarroll set a world record in steer wrestling. McCarroll, who had a side career as a professional boxer, worked as a ranch hand in Idaho Falls. Mary Treadwell and Frank McCarroll were married in Boise on November 18, 1914 a little over a year from when they first met. After her marriage, Mary took on the rodeo stage name Bonnie McCarroll. This petite cowgirl from High Valley, Idaho, went on to travel the world and compete in rodeos with her husband. Dispatches of her accomplishments filled the pages of Idaho Statesman throughout the rodeo season. She rode for royalty at Wembley Stadium in 1924 and won the cowgirl World Champion Lord Selfridge Trophy.

"We cowgirls have butted in on a so-called strictly man's game...still, as I say, we cowgirls that like the game well enough to play it should play it just like the cowboys do. Why, I'd feel insulted...if I was told to tie my stirrups down!" –Bonnie McCarroll

In 1929, all this ended when Bonnie was fatally injured at the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up when her boot became caught in her hobbled stirrups – a practice know to be dangerous since 1912. Bonnie is buried at the Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise.

About Steve Wursta

Producer/Photographer/Editor, Arctic Circle Productions.

He holds a Bachelors in photojournalism and a Masters of Fine Arts in photojournalism from Ohio University and has spend many years in Washington, D.C. as a White House photographer and photo editor for United Press International and the Knight-Ridder News Service. He has produced three previous documentaries, “Among the Craters of the Moon, the Life and Adventures of Robert W. Limbert,” “The History of Idaho’s Redfish Lodge,” both of which aired on Idaho Public Television and “The Search for the Lost Valley.” Steve Wursta lives and works in Bend, Oregon. Preview copies of the film are available upon request. A preview of the film’s introduction is also available on youtube.com.

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