

## Girls Are Cowboys, Too

HEAR FAST FOOTSTEPS, a child's, cross into the room. A sharp intake of breath, loud enough for me to hear. Then, "Mom, look at this!" I turn to see a small boy run toward the display case, eyes fixed on the saddle in the center. He's four, maybe five years old, and clearly enchanted.

"It's a cowboy saddle," he exclaims. He walks back and forth in front of the glass case, looking at the saddle from every possible angle. "It's a cowboy saddle!" His eyes widen as he looks at the shiny saddle, lit by a recessed spotlight in the top of the display case.

His mother, a bit breathless, catches up to him and stops. "Look," she points toward the tooled words on the upper part of the saddle, the skirt, "it says 'Little Britches Rodeo', and down there," she points to the part above the stirrup, the fender, "it says 'Champion Senior Cowgirl, 1957.'" She pauses a moment, her thoughts catching up to what she has just read. "Oh, it was a girl's saddle, not a boy's."

I watch the boy turn to look at his mother, his expression solemn. "A girl? Does that mean girls can be cowboys too?"

"Yes, Sweetie, girls are cowboys too." Just then she sees me watching and, with a barely suppressed smile, says, "I think they're called cowgirls."

"Oh." He looks back at the saddle longingly. "I wonder who she was."

I suppress any impulse to tell them that the saddle belonged to me, that I had been that girl, that cowgirl, the one who had been Champion Senior Cowgirl in 1957. Standing in front of that exhibit in the Littleton History Museum, looking at my saddle, the one I'd ridden, cleaned, and oiled for fifty some years, I realize that the girl who'd been the 1957 Champion Senior Cowgirl was history. I watch the boy and his mother for a few minutes longer, give the saddle a last, lingering glance. Then I return to the curator's office to finish signing the papers transferring ownership to the museum.

When I leave the museum, I drive through Littleton, which had been a small town of 2,400 people when I was growing up. Now it's a suburb of Denver with a population of approximately



1957 Senior Cowgirl Championship Saddle

48,000. I cross the railroad tracks and see the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad Depot where we used to meet out-of-town visitors arriving by train. No longer a working station, it's an historical landmark.

Downtown Littleton is lined with boutiques, shops, restaurants, the usual 21st century storefronts characteristic of suburban towns. The old, familiar storefronts are long gone: the Littleton Dress Shop, Vito's Saddle and Boot Repair, Lemke's Meat Market, the Five & Dime. The old Littleton Flour Mill, an imposing structure at the west end of town, now says, "5280 Roadhouse and Brewery." Centennial Race Track is now a park and golf course.

And, everywhere, houses, running off in all directions, as far as I can see. I make my way to the aptly named Ridge Road and find a spot to park where I can see the mountain ranges that tumble westward, one after the other, each one higher and darker blue than the one before—except the tallest, covered in a shining white blanket courtesy of yesterday's furious snowstorm. The sky, a brilliant blue that exists only in clear, high altitude air, provides a backdrop for the snowy peaks, which look impossibly perfect, like they've been plucked from a Hollywood set. I step out of my car so I can see everything.

I don't remember how many times I rode my horse along this road, then a little dirt lane, and saw these same mountains, their flanks sprinkled with cattle and horses, the occasional ranch house here and there. Then when I listened for the birds, they were all I heard. Now, listening to the buzz of traffic, I realize how quiet it was then, how sweet the way my days unfolded, slowly, to reveal their delicious gifts of time, space, and the freedom to roam.

I suppose I hadn't really been a cowgirl but more of a horse girl. Horses were part of my intimate family. I knew every inch of my horses, where their hair formed perfect whorls on their chests and flanks, which part of their ears felt like velvet, how they

smelled, the feel of their coats when wet. I knew what spooked them, what delighted them, how they felt running flat out. I knew how they nickered when they heard me rattle the grain barrel, and I knew precisely how they looked in the bright light cast by the Milky Way. I guess you could say I literally lived and breathed those horses.

Looking west, I trace the outline of the foothills, the gentle rising and falling of the earth, and am astonished at the sheer number of houses standing where I once rode. My eyes stop at the indentation I know marks the spot near the Ken Caryl Ranch, once a prize Hereford cattle operation, now a housing development and park. I often rode my horse through the ranch with my friends, careful to leave the gates the way we found them and to make sure we didn't disturb the cattle. I rode almost exactly where Columbine High School stands today.

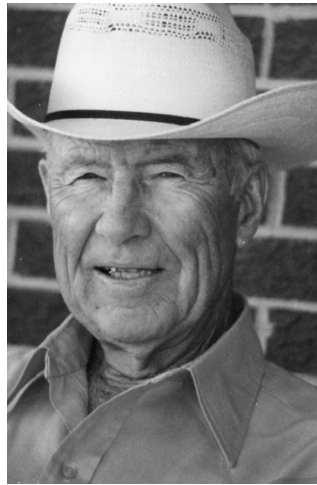
Years before my father died, he stopped going to the mountains because, he said, there were too many people there. That was before interstates and an international airport brought people to Colorado from every part of the country. Standing here on Ridge Road, I shudder to think what he would say to see the land full of houses, roads, stores, malls, traffic lights, people. I remember all the rides we took in the mountains, along the irrigation canals closer to home, through the ranchland spread everywhere around us. All the parades we rode in, the horse shows and rodeos. Nothing unusual, just everyday life, which to me meant miles of uncluttered space, clear air, lunch sometimes cooked over a fire, horses grazing nearby, their cinches loosened and bridles removed.

And now my saddle, trophies, ribbons, and a set of black and white photos are part of an historical exhibit, an attempt to show how life was lived in the past, during a time when life was slower, when families still gathered around their pianos and sang together, when everyone we knew went to the local Grange the

first Friday of every month for a potluck dinner and the women competed to see who could bring the most unusual Jell-O salad.

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Back home in New Mexico, I think about my saddle anchoring the museum exhibit, hear the little boy realizing girls can be cowboys, too. I look over at the bulletin board where I've pinned a photograph I took of my dad.



**Dad**

He's sitting on a chair in one of our corrals, denim shirt crisp and summer Resistol hat shaped just right. His smile and crinkly eyes seem to be saying, "Now it's your turn. Tell stories about growing up the way you did, when there weren't all these people around. Tell about how you rode your first horse when you were a baby. What it was like to saddle up and head out toward the mountains where all you see are sky, clouds, horses, wildflowers, and hawks. No fences, just you and your horse. Oh, yeah, and maybe a rattlesnake or two. Tell about that."

So I will.