



Episode 012 – Bonnie Gray (transcript)

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfo.org.

Announcements

Marcus Garvey stated that “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” The Burbank in Focus department of the Burbank Public Library is always seeking local history donations of images, yearbooks, and other Burbank related artifacts.

The library is also offering a new personalized service in which a librarian can help you pick out your next few books based on your reading preferences. Check out the Book Connection on the Burbank Public Library's website and get some reading suggestions today!

Story

And now for today's story.

“Bonnie Gray, who's that?” you ask. Well, she was one of the spunkiest Burbankers to ever leave an imprint on our town. At a time in history, when women's roles were largely domestic and gender barriers seldom broken, there were those brave enough to challenge the norm. Bonnie Gray was one such individual who definitely helped open doors for later generations of women in terms of opportunities and options because Bonnie Gray was a certified cowgirl. She paved her own way and made her own rules.

Born Verna Grace Smith in 1891, she hailed from Kettle Falls, Washington. She was a woman ahead of her time earning both an undergraduate and graduate degree in music. She was an accomplished pianist and a tennis champ to boot. But her true love was horses which is how her career of rodeo and trick riding began. She pursued this to

her family's dismay, declaring, "If one loves a thing and does it well, why shouldn't she do it?" Her famous equine companion was named King Tut and their signature trick was to leap over an open automobile filled with agog civilians. Bonnie also appeared as a stunt rider in many films, performing as a stunt double for the likes of actors from Bing Crosby to Hoot Gibson. It is widely reported that she had a close call during a dangerous stunt in which the movie studio had her and her horse hurtle down a ten-foot cliff. While she was handsomely paid \$10,000 for the stunt, she vowed to never do anything that risky again.

She competed in rodeo globally. Rodeo stars experienced a sense of freedom as they ceased to be "hobbled by the restraints of social convention. They felt alive with a good horse under them, the wind blowing through their hair, the exhilaration of a fast ride or conquering a thousand-pound bucking animal" (Thomas, 2014). Her online bio claims that she was "allegedly the first woman to perform the under-the-belly crawl on a horse...and one of the first women to ride bulls in Mexican bullfights." The *Deming Headlight* reported that Bonnie not only attracted attention as the only woman to have ridden bulls in competitive bullfights, but for her beauty as well. The article expressed her as being lovely "in a softly, feminine way, with a row of dazzling white teeth that show no traces of dental adornment. She's fearless in the saddle as well as beautiful." (Ens, 2020) Many rodeo stars "proved that athleticism and femininity are not mutually exclusive" (Thomas, 2014). The characterization of "cowgirl athletes suggests that while they were assuredly involved in a masculine realm, they had not lost their femininity" (Laegreid, 2010). They were steeped in a western tradition in which necessity bred the sport. According to cowgirl expert Elizabeth Flood, "Despite the broken bones and long hours on the road, many of the early cowgirls admitted that rodeo in the 'teens and 1920s was glamorous. When asked what motivated her to live such a hard life, Bonnie Gray answered, 'Oh honey, I love it. I was tops in this and tops in that. I just loved being tops.' Cowgirls thrived on the attention". She was memorialized in the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 1981.

Bonnie was not just a pioneer cowgirl renegade, she had an altruistic side as well. During World War I, she studied nursing under the tutelage of her doctor brother. She then used those skills during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic by aiding hundreds of the Apache population in Arizona where she served as a Red Cross Volunteer.

So, how did she end up a Burbanker? She fell in love with one. Bonnie married fellow trick rider Donald W. Harris in 1930 with the remarkable caveat that all one hundred people, wedding party and attendees alike be on horseback. In fact, Bonnie's ranch could be found at 1220 W. Oak Street, which is now where David Starr Jordan Middle School is located today. While there seems to be some conflicting details of whether she donated or sold the property, by the mid-50s, her address became 725 S. Glenwood Place which is now the teachers' parking lot. I surmise from my research that

the expansive ranch land went to the school district and she stayed put inside the ranch's homestead. According to local historians, buried under the playground is her pet cemetery with the remains of eight horses, two mules, and many cats and dogs. By the mid-1960s, she had made her final move to 429 W. Alameda Avenue.

In 1982, at the age of 90, Bonnie was presented with an award from the Hollywood Appreciation Society that she accepted and proclaimed, "Ninety years old and all my own teeth," followed by a lengthy grin. Bonnie lived in Burbank until her death in 1988 at the age of 97. You can visit her grave at Forest Lawn Hollywood Hills. She is a true Burbank legend. A trailblazer in a field that was historically reserved for men and she made no apologies for her life choices.

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's new comes from the November 2, 2019 Burbank Leader.

Group begins to set process to rename middle school. A Burbank Unified facilities-naming committee has been charged with renaming David Starr Jordan Middle School. The group gathered only for the second time since Burbank Unified's school board, on the request of the committee, unanimously voted to change the name of David Starr Jordan Middle School because of its namesake's connection to the controversial theory of eugenics.

Although the committee was not formally accepting possible new names, preliminary suggestions included pioneering aviator Amelia Earhart; Hollywood icon Ron Howard; famed horsewoman Bonnie Gray; or former Jordan student Christopher Wilke, whose death due to a rare cancer in 2014 galvanized the Burbank community to raise funds for cancer research.

15 of the city's 17 comprehensive public schools were named for white males. The Burbank Unified board has championed a policy giving preference to women and minorities in name changes. The board bypassed its policy when it named Burbank High's athletic field after school icons Dave Kemp and Frank Kallem in May.

And that is Burbank's news from November 2, 2019.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves.

Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfo.org

Thank you for joining us today.