



## RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

by Rachel Herbert

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## Clothing and Saddles: Manifestations of Adaptation

One concrete way to explore how women adapted to life in the West is to examine material artefacts such as clothing and saddles. History has captured the image of the newly arrived English rancher in his tailored suit and necktie topped by a Stetson hat, or wearing his bowler hat with woolly chaps. Less known is how women combined their former ideals of dress with the new realities of ranch life. By examining how women dressed we can see how they employed similar adaptive strategies as their male counterparts while they assimilated cultural components and environmental elements of the Alberta ranching frontier.

The image from Wild West shows of a “cowgirl” in full, flamboyant western regalia has been popularized more as a way to titillate and entertain than to reflect how women actually dressed. As much as possible the first generation of ranching women attempted to maintain the manners of the Old World through their choice of traditional dress, but out of necessity they made concessions to practicality by gearing themselves appropriately for the range. On most ranches, conservative decorum dictated to some degree what women wore. Late-Victorian and early-Edwardian tradition mandated that women, particularly those from the middle and upper classes, wore a full wardrobe. This costume typically included a corset, bodice, and assortment of petticoats, topped by an ankle-length dress. Often an apron was worn as a protective addition to the ensemble. While

this attire was functional for housework and limited barnyard chores, it restricted the work that women could perform with safety and efficiency on the ranch at large. Riding apparel was originally composed of a tailored, tight-fitting jacket, modelled after the corseted bodices of classical Victorian fashion, and a long, very full skirt suitable for keeping a woman modestly covered while riding side-saddle. Even this ensemble, designed for horseback riding, posed limitations on the extent of women's activities. The transition to clothes more appropriate to an active ranching lifestyle, replete with rough riding and working with livestock, was gradual. There was no mass revolution in "ranch fashion"; rather, each individual modified her wardrobe as necessary to suit her social position, tastes, and activity level. This fluidity of style makes photographs of ranch women from this period notoriously hard to date, as women's style of dress differed from person to person and according to occasion. There was no definitive point when fashions changed. Some women were strictly practical in their choice of attire, as were an American mother and daughter duo who independently ran an enterprising ranching operation south of Moose Jaw. A travelling reporter in 1902 found these "refined, good looking" ladies "dressed in good fitting men's clothing, and they excused themselves by saying they were doing men's work and couldn't do it while wearing women's clothing."<sup>1</sup> Others preferred to remain more traditionally attired and found ways to modify their feminine wardrobes to suit both function and formality. On most southern Alberta ranches the predominant style of dress was a hybrid of late-Victorian fashion and characteristic western function. Edith Ings, born to a high-society Ontario family, combined Eastern styles such as English riding breeches and boots and her much-loved hound's tooth riding jacket with typical cowboy accoutrements such as a wide-brimmed hat, silk scarf, and gauntlet gloves that sported fringe and Indigenous beadwork.<sup>2</sup>

Ranch women who maintained the standards of femininity that they deemed fitting to their station in life attempted to stay up to date with current Eastern fashion even while dressing for work. When occasion permitted, they enjoyed dressing in their finest. Newspaper accounts of early balls and dances recognized the glamour and air of decorum that women strove to bring to the frontier by maintaining formal customs, manners, and fashion, and photographs indicate that they attempted to do this in their everyday dress as well.<sup>3</sup> Thus the same woman who rode astride



5.1 MISS E. M. SHACKERLY IN FORMAL WINTER RIDING ATTIRE (C.1916).  
REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

sporting cowboy boots and rowelled spurs could be seen corseted, in a fitted, high-collared dress, and topped with furs when making a social call. This unpredictable, or timeless, nature of ranch women's fashion makes photographs from this period notoriously hard to date. Women's style of dress differed from person to person and according to occasion, blending modern trends with tradition and functional gear with high fashion.

Even those not required to perform "men's work" found it necessary to adopt clothes more suited to their new lifestyle and environment. Evelyn Springett, who wore the traditional riding habit fitting her position as a privileged ranch manager's wife in the 1890s, abandoned convention in favour of practicality after a particular incident revealed how unsuitable, and indeed unsafe, her attire was for life on the remote foothills range west of Fort Macleod. One of Springett's weekly tasks was to ride or drive nine miles to fetch the mail. She rode in a side saddle in "the long, clinging, old-fashioned riding habit."<sup>24</sup> On one particularly hot prairie day her horse stumbled and both horse and rider fell. Although they were unhurt, her horse refused to be caught and she attempted to walk back to the ranch, fearing for her safety due to the threat of wild and dangerously unpredictable range cattle. She soon discovered the impractical nature of her



5.2 A PRACTICAL ENSEMBLE (C.1890–1905). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

ensemble, for she could barely manage the terrain in her restrictive dress and when she finally managed to catch her horse she had to walk another mile until she found a boulder large enough to assist her to mount. In her memoirs, Springett recalls this event as a specific turning point in her choice of dress: “I must say that shortly after this I took to using a stock saddle and thereafter felt much safer and independent.”<sup>25</sup> And presumably, she adopted a split skirt to accommodate her new riding style.

Even if they still rode side-saddle in a full habit and skirt on occasion, by the early 1900s many ranch women had adapted their wardrobes to include split skirts. As early as the 1890s, saddle makers and popular catalogue companies, such as Eaton’s, offered women’s western riding outfits, made up of wide-legged divided skirts suited to riding astride. Wearing clothing that facilitated riding with one leg on either side of the horse made practical sense for several reasons. Being able to ride more athletic, high-spirited ranch horses enabled women to participate in a wider range of activities, such as sorting cattle and riding for sport, and gave them the

confidence of knowing they could travel long distances on isolated terrain more securely. Springett was not the only western woman to learn from experience that it was imperative to replace the conventional riding habit and side saddle with split skirts and a stock saddle. Maude Kemmis, who ranched in the Pincher Creek district in the 1890s, always rode side-saddle but realized from experience the hazards of skirts. One day her usually reliable horse Captain “stumbled badly, throwing her to the off side where she hung, upside down. Her new riding habit skirt caught on the pommel of the saddle. Maude put her hands over her head to protect it and Captain trotted on. Finally just as the waist band gave way, J. K. [her husband, who was riding ahead of her] looked back saying ‘What on earth are you doing there?’ ‘Picking daisies of course, catch my horse!’”<sup>6</sup> Edith Ings, a Nanton-area rancher, also learned the shortcomings of her full-skirted riding habit after falling off her horse. On one of her four-mile return trips from town, the cinch holding the side saddle on her horse broke. Ings was obliged to make the rest of the trip precariously balanced sideways on her horse’s bare back, as her skirt prevented her from riding astride.<sup>7</sup> In Montana, Evelyn Cameron found that most ranch horses were terrified by the approach of a woman in billowing skirts and that, even when assisted in mounting, to swing one’s leg up across the pommel at the front of the saddle often prompted these horses to buck. She wrote that “it was clear that to be perfectly independent I must ride old ‘dead heads’ which were not at all to my taste. I therefore determined to ride astride.”<sup>8</sup>

The divided skirt, while fundamentally changing the way a woman rode, was not a drastic departure from the traditional habit. Women continued to be plagued by the problem of spooking their horses with their billowing clothing or by having their skirts dangerously tangled in their tack. Even updated riding outfits designed for riding astride were not always appropriate for the rugged conditions of the frontier. Among their shortcomings was the fact that they required more maintenance to keep clean than basic work clothes. Monica Hopkins, who learned to ride shortly after arriving at her Priddis ranch home in 1909, wrote, “I have an awfully nice habit, really far too good to wear all the time. I shall have to get a cheap riding skirt which the ‘mail order’ catalogues have listed.”<sup>9</sup> She soon became a competent horsewoman, accustomed to wearing clothes suitable for the environment, but on special occasion was thrilled to have “the very latest in riding habits.”<sup>10</sup> On a social call to a new English bride



5.3 RIDING ASTRIDE IN A STOCK SADDLE, MRS. ED HARTT LOOKS AT HOME ON THE RANGE (C.1904–16). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

in the area, Hopkins discovered the near impossibility of keeping clothes pristine when horses were the primary means of transportation: “I had warned Billie that I wanted to be taken by the very driest of trails, no splashing through creeks or wallowing in muskegs for me. I was willing to scale hilltops but go where there was water I would not. My habit is ‘washable’ but I had no desire to wash and iron it for months to come and as Billie is back again on the wash tub he was almost equally anxious to keep it from getting soiled.”<sup>11</sup> As luck would have it, she came off her horse in a muddy bog and the anticipated visit was called off in favour of returning home to soak her “beautiful habit” in the wash basin. Accordingly, “the ride home was not as sedate as the going and I gaily splashed through mud holes without a thought to the mud that was getting on me; a little more wouldn’t hurt anyway.”<sup>12</sup> The reality of range conditions, such as unpredictable terrain, and the circumstances of frontier households, including

laborious washing methods, increasingly made it all the more appealing to wear practical clothing.

In some circumstances, there was resistance to the revolution in women's clothing. Evelyn Cameron, a remarkably progressive rancher and photographer, recalled that when she made her first public appearance in a split-skirt "California riding costume," in the late 1890s, she was threatened with arrest in Miles City, Montana, and "after riding into town forty-eight miles from the ranch, I was much amused at the laughing and giggling girls who stood staring at my costume as I walked about."<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Charles Gage, who worked alongside her husband to establish their ranch in the Stavely, Alberta, area in 1903, preferred practical dress, but was aware of the traditional social mores her husband favoured. Her daughter recounts:

Mother took her place with Dad in the fields, handling at first four head of oxen and later horses. That was before the day of slacks for women. Mother soon found trousers the most suitable garb for field work, but always tied to the hames of the harness was a skirt for a quick change in case anyone came along. The era was still Victorian, and Dad would have been mortified if a stranger had seen Mother wearing overalls.<sup>14</sup>

Even when cognizant of resistance to their masculine apparel, women were motivated by comfort, practicality, and personal circumstance when they chose their mode of dress.

Ranch women all throughout the West chose to adopt practical clothing when it facilitated their expanded roles on the range. American cowgirl Agnes Morley Cleaveland described her drastic departure from traditional clothing in the mid-1890s, emphasizing that her rejection of the side saddle and the restrictive feminine wardrobe that accompanied it was a major step toward her "emancipation":

First, I discarded, or rather refused to adopt, the sunbonnet, conventional headgear of my female neighbors. When I went unashamedly about under a five-gallon (not ten-gallon) Stetson, many an eyebrow was raised; then followed a double-breasted blue flannel shirt, with white pearl buttons, frankly unfeminine.

In time came blue denim knockers worn *under* a short blue denim skirt. Slow evolution (or was it decadence?) toward a costume suited for immediate needs. Decadence having set in, the descent from the existing standards of female modesty to purely human comfort and convenience was swift.<sup>15</sup>

In response to Cleaveland's unconventional apparel, her brother offered the weak threat of not riding with her – a threat that, out of necessity, he was promptly forced to retract. Often what was deemed acceptable in one community was seen as radical in another. As Teresa Jordan points out in her study of American ranch women, most had limited knowledge of women in other areas. This was also true of women in isolated Canadian ranching communities; thus, each woman assumed her own modifications to suit her particular needs and situation.<sup>16</sup>

While some people were uncomfortable with women's departure from traditional dress, most were realistic about the safety and efficiency provided by women ranchers riding astride like their male counterparts. According to an Ings family story, as told to me by my mother, Edith Ings was encouraged to ride a stock saddle by her husband, Fred, who was concerned for her safety. Although Edith was an accomplished horsewoman who had ridden to the hounds in a side saddle in Ontario, Fred suggested she adopt a more secure seat by riding astride when she began jumping barbwire fences in her side saddle in Alberta. Of course, as a tragic incident from the Longview area illustrates, jumping wire fences remained dangerous no matter what style of riding was involved. Rancher Arthur Dick was killed in plain view of his wife and six children when he lost control of a colt he was riding and it jumped a wire gate. He was thrown to the ground and never regained consciousness.<sup>17</sup> On the range one could merely lower the risks, not eliminate them completely. However, despite the inherent danger of horseback riding, the gradual evolution in riding apparel helped to further women's independence by making their essentially egalitarian means of transportation – the horse – safer, more enjoyable, and more accessible.

A woman's saddle and her style of riding were just as indicative of her level of assimilation to the ranching frontier as was her style of dress. Many women had been educated and experienced equestrians prior to their arrival in the West; however, they had been trained to ride side-saddle, a



5.4 THIS RIDER LOOKS READY TO GO TO WORK ON A BIG, SOLID STOCK HORSE (NO DATE). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

style thought to be suitable for modest women. The art of riding side-saddle was thought to embody grace and elegance, yet in reality it was (and is) a challenging and athletic practice. Women on side saddles could keep up with their male counterparts, who rode astride: they jumped, galloped,

rode across rough country, and hunted with hounds. Initially, even on the ranching frontier, side-saddle was the standard mode of riding for women. Photographs illustrate the juxtaposition of women posed elegantly on their English side saddles against a backdrop of western rangeland. Even though stock saddles were requisite for cowboys and male ranchers, women rode side-saddle as a reflection of their cultural origins. It was a distinctive part of their Anglo heritage and a reflection of femininity. Owning a saddle was a source of pride and a reflection of maturity. When Bella Chappelle was eleven years old, in the 1890s, she stayed with a family friend near her ranch on Heath Creek, Alberta. The friend gifted her a side saddle that she no longer used. Chappelle recalled, "I was so proud I could hardly sleep."<sup>18</sup> Even when they performed strenuous ranch work, some women enjoyed the tradition of riding side-saddle and never adapted to a stock saddle. Abigail Sexsmith, who independently raised horses and cattle on her family's original homestead near High River, continued to ride side-saddle her entire life. Sexsmith even rode for miles "with skill and grace" on her niece Elsie Gordon's ranch when she was eighty-six years old.<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Gordon, too, rode side-saddle throughout her entire ranching career.<sup>20</sup> In the Parkland district in the early 1900s, a teacher, Miss Claire, rode side-saddle – "a style that seemed very genteel and strange to most of the students, although the Broomfield girls at first rode that way, and so did Mrs. Til Fisher who could take her part in the round-up with the men."<sup>21</sup>

As more women began to ride the ranges of southern Alberta at the turn of the twentieth century, several types of saddles were designed specifically to meet their needs. Some women still preferred to ride side-saddle but needed and wanted to ride many long, hard miles on their ranches. A sturdier, western-style side saddle was developed to provide for this market. Western side-saddles were made with heavier skirting than their English-style counterparts in order to be more durable and resilient to hard riding conditions, and they sported intricate tooling on the leather much like the decorative work on a stock saddle. Some used double rigging, with a front and back cinch, which helped the saddle stay in place when women rode rank horses or covered rough terrain. These saddles sometimes incorporated a pocket or pouch designed to carry small items in the saddle skirt or had saddle strings with which to tie on a load needed for long days in the saddle.<sup>22</sup> This cross-bred saddle is a remarkable symbol



5.5 NOTE THE DOUBLE RIGGING ON THE STURDY WESTERN SIDE SADDLE AND THE WESTERN HEADSTALL (C.1890–1905). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

of the marriage of eastern tradition with western function. Indeed, it reflects the role of ranch women as cultural mediators; through their appearance, women maintained a sense of tradition and femininity while they engaged in the same pursuits as the men – chasing cows, exploring new ground, and becoming at home in the West.

Although almost ubiquitous among ranch women of Anglo origin during the 1880s and 1890s, the side saddle was beginning to disappear by the turn of the century. Evelyn Cameron, who had been one of the first to ride in a split skirt in Montana, gave compelling reasons for women to give up the side saddle: for one, “sidesaddles are of little use in the west except on ‘plumb gentle’ horses.”<sup>23</sup> In 1914, describing what she felt to be the authentic “cowgirl,” Cameron wrote, “For some twenty years past there have been cowgirls on Western ranches who are the feminine counterparts of the cowboys – riding in similar saddles, on similar horses, for the purpose of similar duties, which they do, in fact, efficiently perform. The abolition



5.6 MISS LUCILLE MULHALL, CHAMPION LADY STEER ROPE. THIS WESTERN STOCK SADDLE IS STRONG ENOUGH FOR ROPING (1912). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

of the side saddle was naturally the first step towards the creation of the cowgirl.<sup>24</sup> When women were required, or chose, to participate in rigorous and dangerous ranch work, such as roping calves for branding or breaking young horses, they were most effective when dressed and mounted appropriately. A stock saddle that used heavy single or double rigging and had a thick horn attached to a sturdy tree was most suitable for roping and holding cattle and riding rough-stock. However essential for ranch work, this type of saddle was cumbersome and required a certain degree of strength to wield. As rancher Doris Burton recalls in her memoirs: “I only saw one cowgirl who could hold a skittish bronc and swing her heavily loaded saddle on with a one hand grip on the horn, while the cinches almost caved the shuddering bronc in on the other side. I would have liked to have strength like that, but not the vocabulary that went with it.”<sup>25</sup> As women began to phase out of side saddles, demand grew for a western saddle designed specifically for women.

This next evolution produced a practical lightweight saddle that could be found in use from Texas to Alberta.<sup>26</sup> This saddle was comfortable and close-fitting, much like an English saddle, but was stouter and had a high cantle that made it more secure. It had less rigging (cinches and plates to

fasten it) than a man's saddle, contributing to its light weight and enabling women to conveniently tack up their horses themselves. The trademark characteristic of these saddles was the brass or nickel horn, an attractive feature that unfortunately reduced the structural strength of the saddle tree, making these pretty saddles unsuitable for roping heavy cattle or horses.<sup>27</sup> My own family had one of these brass-horned saddles, gifted to my granny on her eighth birthday from her mother and passed on to my mother, who rode in it until her death in 2014.

Another interesting innovation in stock saddles was the “mother and child saddle.” This saddle was designed to accommodate a mother riding with a small child seated in front of her, a common and essential practice in ranching country, particularly prior to the advent of motorized vehicles. An example of this style could be found at our Trail's End Ranch west of Nanton, Alberta.<sup>28</sup> It was still in use up until the late 1980s. This saddle sported a long seat, a small horn, and a narrow pommel to allow a child to sit in front of its mother comfortably. The seat was made of quilted calfskin leather that is less slippery than a traditional seat, providing the riders with additional security. As with the brass-horned saddle, the mother and child saddle was not built for roping cattle, but was perfectly suitable for covering many miles and for performing basic cattle work. Though many women simply rode whatever saddle was available, for women of some means and for whom a saddle was an important part of their lives, there were a number of different styles on the market from which to choose and they were treated as prized possessions.<sup>29</sup> A note in the handwritten magazine *The Rocking P Gazette* suggests the value and significance of a woman's – or, in this case, a teenage girl's – saddle: “D. Macleay's saddle arrived from Riley and McCormick on May 9th. It was a dandy and the owner is now swelled up twice her usual size.”<sup>30</sup> Possessing the correct working gear for the job was a matter of pride for women for whom working the range was both a requirement of their lifestyle and a source of identity and pleasure.

Over time and as they became more closely integrated into the working operations of their ranches, women dressed in a style that was uniquely western. The second generation of ranch women, those born and raised in the West, embraced clothing that was specifically suited to ranch life. As women adopted stock saddles and carried the same lariats as men, their “western” clothing took on a practical legitimacy of its own. Western dress



5.7 A TYPICAL WORKING OUTFIT BY THE 1930S. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

grew increasingly appropriate for women to wear after the effects of World War I had loosened conventions of female propriety in society at large. This is when the classic image of the “cowgirl” that we recognize today was created. By the 1920s, ranch women, like their urban counterparts, were sporting short hair and shorter skirts. Few, if any, ranch women dressed as provocatively as the now ubiquitous, provocatively attired pin-up cowgirl. As illustrations in the early-1920s *Rocking P Gazette* indicate, wearing pants, breeches, or denim jeans for riding was by now standard practice, with modesty and practicality influencing fashion. Like their male counterparts, cowgirls and ranch women wore a range of items that were functional, stylish, or both. Moreover, women were proud of their cowgirl accoutrements.

Chaps, hats, boots, spurs, and ropes became essential components of women’s working attire. The “matrimonial ads” that the teenage Macleay girls wrote in their magazine not only show a keen recognition of the practical desires of ranching men and women; they clearly reflect the sense of style that was typical of their time and place:

A Wife might be welcomed by independent western cowboy from the East – She must be a first-class rider, roper, horse-judge and cow-milker – must appreciate western style of dress. Must



5.8 A NEW PAIR OF BOOTS WAS SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF (1925). *ROCKING P GAZETTE*, COURTESY OF CLAY CHATTAWAY.

have strongly developed bump of locality and be a trained guide in the foothills by day and night. Cowboy offers black Stetson, studded cuffaderos, and a wall-eyed horse.<sup>31</sup>

A hat, *vaquero*-style protective leather cuffs, and a horse were obviously seen as items valued both by working cowboys and by teenage ranch-raised girls.

By the time the frontier period was long over and ranching culture had been appropriated as entertainment in the form of rodeos and Wild West exhibitions, women were as likely as men to be seen decked out in full western costume. What had begun with practical adaptations to ranch life became a statement of equality, independence, and fashion. For the rodeo cowgirls who competed in the popular ladies' bucking events, trick riding, and races, their costumes were a source of pride and an expression of their individuality. These tenacious women wore colourful knee-high cowboy boots equipped with jingling spurs. They sported bloomers, leggings, and chaps in varying lengths, unique shirts and jackets specially designed to complement their pants, and a range of accessories such as scarves and belts. Of course, fundamental to their ensemble was an enormous wide-brimmed hat. Tad Lucas, a prominent American rodeo competitor in the



5.9 ADVENTURE AND A GREAT OUTFIT WERE ALL PART OF THE SHOW FOR COMPETITIVE RODEO COWGIRLS (1913). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

1920s and 1930s, was famously photographed holding her infant daughter, Mitzi, comfortably nestled in her huge hat.<sup>32</sup> These women also unabashedly wore makeup and acknowledged that their beauty as well as their bravery impressed the crowds they entertained. Lucas recalled the importance of the costumes that she and her fellow competitors wore: “We all had lots of clothes. We always wore our best clothes, no matter what we were doing. If we had to ride a bull or a bucking horse or anything else, we wore our best clothes, we sure did.”<sup>33</sup>

Rodeo cowgirls represented the extreme side of women’s western fashion, but by the 1930s, on ranches everywhere, women wore clothes that reflected their lifestyle and occupation and enabled them to work freely and comfortably. The evolution of women’s clothing in ranching communities reflected, and perhaps even encouraged, the increasing emancipation of women in society at large and manifested in apparel and equipment appropriate for the physical work they performed on the ranch alongside their male counterparts.