

The Last  
*of* the  
Wild West  
*Cowgirls*

*A True Story*

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Perigo  
Press



## AUTHOR'S NOTES

I finished *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls* after four years of researching and writing, and on a warm fall day I visited Goldie's grave in Green Mountain Cemetery in Boulder, Colorado, the final resting place of many of Boulder County's most famous residents. The towering, stately trees glittered with autumn's fiery colors, and leaves crunched under my feet as I wound my way from the office up the hill to Goldie's headstone. After visiting her grave and wandering past some of the other headstones, I left the cemetery and climbed to a spot with views of the city of Boulder, the plains that flowed on and on, and, in the other direction, the mountains where I knew Nederland nestled next to its reservoir. As I looked back at the cemetery, I wondered if Goldie had picked this spot because it reminded her of Buffalo Bill's choice on Lookout Mountain. It seemed a fitting resting place for this feisty woman who never let the world tell her she couldn't do something.

Eighty years after Goldie was born, I moved to the small mountain town of Nederland, twenty miles west of Boulder. It was 1973, and that October the wind blew so hard I had trouble standing up straight when I walked to a neighbor's house at daybreak to catch a

ride to Boulder for work. I lived at the western edge of the reservoir, at the end of the street where Goldie had lived before going to a nursing home. The wind would sometimes stop for a day or two, but usually it blew so fiercely it picked up snow and dirt from the streets in town and blew them through my little one-room log cabin and across the reservoir. When I moved in, I didn't know how to build a fire in a cookstove, but I learned quickly. I learned how to saw and chop my own wood because I liked being warm. I learned how handy a pee pot was if you didn't want to get up and wrestle the wind to get to the outhouse in the middle of the night. I learned that lettuce would freeze in the refrigerator which never bothered to run because the closet where it sat hardly ever got above freezing that whole winter. On Halloween night, two children died when their house burned down just up the street from me. I never heard the sirens over the wind.

When spring finally arrived, a friend and I put two inches of insulation in the attic and chinked up the holes between the logs. The next winter was much more bearable. I loved being able to walk for miles from my front door. Some days I walked to the old Tucker homestead on Caribou Road after work. On others I explored the area near Caribou Ranch, not knowing that all these haunts had been some of Goldie's too. I started making wine, nothing very good, but I met my future husband over a bottle of home-made potato wine. Maybe three hundred people lived in Nederland, and every house except mine had three or four dogs which together wandered town in packs. When I walked out my front door I scooped up handfuls of rocks from the driveway to throw at the dogs that charged me. I would have to guess that many of those dogs were descendants of some of Goldie's precious pets.

I never met Goldie. A year after she died, I started a newspaper in town. In the first issue in that October of 1977, I asked the town to name it, and Marguerite Shellhaas, one of Goldie's first friends in Nederland, won the contest with *The Mountain-Ear*. Hers was our first obituary. Over the years, I wrote several times about Goldie, but I didn't really know that much about her.

It turned out that she and I had a lot in common. She ran a still and made her own booze; I made my own wine. She was a female business owner for almost thirty years in Nederland, as was I, although our businesses differed quite a bit. She ran restaurants; I owned a newspaper. She loved telling stories; so do I. And now I've had the chance to tell hers.

Place names change over the years. For instance, the name Nederland Lake was gradually changed to Barker Reservoir, and Boulder Cañon (also Canon) became Boulder Canyon. In all cases, I tried to use the name that was being used at the time. At the time of the Wild Wests, they were just that. There was no need to add the word show because everyone knew what the wildly popular Wild Wests were.

When I began researching Goldie's life, I had much to learn about Wild Wests and cowgirling. I grew up in Colorado, but my childhood was spent in Colorado Springs, not on a ranch. I did go to a few rodeos, and I learned to ride a horse, but they were passing fancies, so in researching this book I had to learn about the sport of cowgirling. In Goldie's time, cowgirls weren't restricted to barrel racing. Between 1886 and 1911, thirty-eight cowgirls competed in rodeos and performed in Wild Wests. The cowgirls were as famous as today's football stars, and they usually competed in all the events. This is not to say that they were better athletes than their counterparts today, but they did have more opportunities to prove their prowess on a horse.

Goldie worked as an athlete even before she became a cowgirl. She started her career as a fencer, boxer, and wrestler. America's first female athletes were thought of as anomalies and freaks, but the cowgirls' enormous popularity helped bring female athletes into the norm.

I spent many hours at the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave on Lookout Mountain pouring over their collection of scrapbooks and photos of Goldie. Their exhibits and films of the Buffalo Bill Wild Wests allowed me to ride alongside Goldie in my imagination. The Colorado History Museum produced an exhibit about cowgirls



Goldie's wedding outfit was the centerpiece of an exhibit at the Colorado History Museum in Denver in 2008.

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while I was writing this book, and it featured Goldie's wedding outfit and saddle. It was a thrill to walk through the doors to the exhibit and see a figure that could have been Goldie standing there. Goldie's grandson Mike completed the picture of Goldie with his many remembrances of "Grandma Goldie" in Nederland.

Goldie was a colorful character. Much of her story came from her own words. All the events are true. All the major characters, and all but a few of the minor characters, existed. When I put myself inside Goldie's mind, her thoughts came from what she had said in recorded oral interviews and to friends and relatives. All the dialogue is based on my research.

In a few instances, I couldn't verify the date of an event because, although those interviewed in the oral histories I listened to could clearly remember the event, they couldn't recall exactly when it happened, or because the dates remembered by different sources conflicted. In particular, when asked when she moved to Nederland, Goldie recalled several different years in the early 1920s. I spent many long afternoons at the library in Boulder looking through microfilm of old newspapers, trying to find some verification of which year. Although I found lots of news that I could use in telling Goldie's story, I couldn't figure out which year she moved to Nederland. I finally arrived at my best guess, and that's what I used.

I could tell as I talked to people in Nederland or listened to their oral history stories that they had discounted most of Goldie's stories as fabrications woven from many tellings into flights of fancy. I listened over and over to the two oral histories Goldie recorded before her death, and I faithfully took notes on her many exploits as she described them. I too thought, "How could one woman have done all that?" As I continued researching, I validated every one of her stories.

She left behind several scrapbooks and many file folders that she had filled scrupulously throughout the years with newspaper and magazine clippings about herself and her friends, including one well-worn, postcard-sized black book filled with photographs that she did not donate to a museum, presumably because its contents

were “private.” Her grandson kindly shared it with me, and in it I found the story of her tour with Lucille Mulhall’s Girl Rangers and clues to her relationship with the Mulhalls, one of the most famous of the Wild West families. Her scrapbooks were treasure troves of information.

Goldie wasn’t modest. She loved telling stories about her life. She was obstinate, opinionated, and fiery. She also was incredibly generous. She was the epitome of the cowboy-girl (their original name) who could ride the rodeo, hit the dust, brush herself off, and appear at a tea in town—all in the same afternoon. Although she could dress for tea and manage the etiquette of the “society” experience while expressing her strong opinions about politics and the state of the world, her speech never lost the coarseness of an uneducated, hard-working woman. A contemporary newspaper story referred to her as “a heller in skirts.” She wasn’t liked by everyone, and that bothered her some. She thought she’d lived a life worth sharing and had planned to write a book about it, but she never quite got to it. Fortunately, she left us with her stories.



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