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A Decided Novelty

SHE DIDN'T TELL THE YOUNG REPORTER, but she figured it was really, ultimately, Charley's fault—if she hadn't fallen for him, she wouldn't be a cowgirl, and she wouldn't have married Harry. She was seventeen when she first met Charley. He was twenty-one.

She'd been sneaking out beyond the tents to the corrals where the Wild West horses were kept after her shows with the Lady Athletes in Knoxville. She'd always loved animals, and she felt a strong attraction to the show horses. She talked to whichever horse would come to her and scratched behind its ears. A voice behind her made her jump.

“Like horses?” It was him, Charley. Her knees wobbled, and her heart felt like it might stop, but at least she didn't fall over. She stopped stroking the horse's nose and stared at him. He was as good looking up close as he was riding by on his horse during the frequent parades staged by his father's show. Curly hair popped out here and there from under his big hat and framed a boyishly handsome face and deep-set, serious eyes. He obviously



Goldie fell for the young, handsome Charley Mulhall, posing here for a publicity photo for the Mulhall Wild West Show.

*Reprinted from Lucille Mulhall: Her Family, Her Life, Her Times
by Kathryn Stansbury*

liked dressing the part of one of the best-known cowboys in the nation. He wore a bright green, over-sized silk neckerchief tied loosely, tall boots with tall heels, and one of the biggest hats Goldie had ever seen. From head to toe, Charley Mulhall was a bronco rider in his father's Wild West show. She thought he was *the most handsome* man she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Always did like 'em." She nodded at the horse who was giving up on her and moving away. "What's his name?"

"That one's Bill Oliver, my sister's horse."

"Who's Bill Oliver?"

"Bill Oliver is the president of the Exposition."

She thought about it a few seconds. "Does he have other names when you're somewhere's else?"

Charley laughed. "Sure does."

An old show business trick was to find a way to relate to the local crowd. Sometimes performers changed their hometowns or their names to this end, so why not their horse's name?

"You're over at that Blanche Whitney show."

She blushed. He knew who she was. "I'm Goldie Griffith." She extended her hand and thought to herself that her mother might not approve of introducing herself to this handsome young man, but, really, he already knew who she was.

"Pleasure. Charley Mulhall." He gave her hand a tiny squeeze. "I seen your show. You girls're pretty tough." Goldie blushed again. *He'd been to her show.* He didn't seem to notice her red face. "Wanna see the broncs I ride?"

A young woman who Goldie recognized immediately appeared behind Charley's shoulder. "Oh, darling brother, are you pestering this young lady with your outlandish stories?" She put the emphasis on the word pestering, brushed his cheek playfully, and winked at Goldie.

"He's not bothering at all," Goldie assured her earnestly.

"Miss Goldie Griffith, my sister, the esteemed Lucille, who will never leave me alone, even for a minute." Charley's tone was teasing.



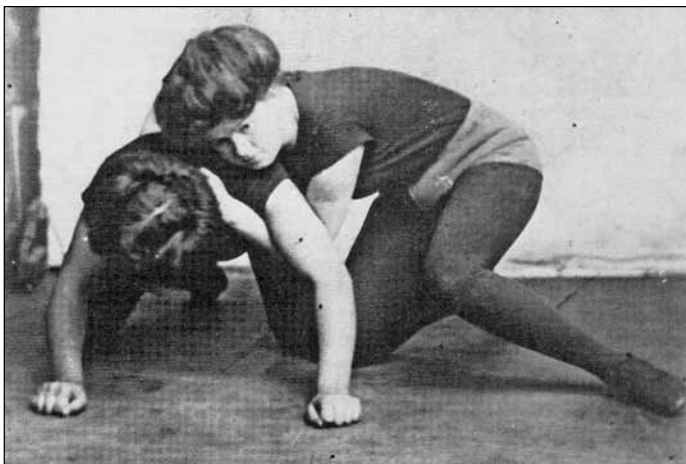
A publicity photograph of Goldie for the Blanche Whitney Lady Athletes at the Appalachian Exposition in 1910.

*Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave,
Lookout Mountain, Golden, Colorado*

(Next page) This photo may have been taken in Chicago before Blanche Whitney's troupe left for the Appalachian Exposition, where the price of admission was raised from 10 cents to 25 cents and where Goldie met Charley Mulhall. Goldie is the fourth girl from the right.

The Sterling family





A publicity photo for Blanche Whitney's Lady Athletes shows Goldie Griffith, right, wrestling another woman.

Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, Lookout Mountain, Golden, Colorado

“Glad to meet you, Miss Goldie Griffith.” Lucille smiled and offered her hand. Goldie was honored to take it. Lucille was famous, not only in America, but in Europe too. And she wasn't finished teasing her brother. She winked again at Goldie. “Watch out for my brother. He fancies himself a ladies' man, although he's really nuttin' but a cowpoke from Oklahoma.”

“Watch out, sis. You're an Okie too.”

“So I am. I just came to warn you. The Colonel is lookin' for you. He'd better not find you here.” With that, she sidled off, waving good-bye over her shoulder.

Charley sighed. “Guess I gotta go. Maybe you'd like to meet my other sisters, Mildred and Georgia? Come see a show? I got'a extry ticket.”

Goldie nodded, hardly believing her ears. He separated a ticket from several that he pulled out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “So long, Miss Goldie.” As he turned to leave her alone in the corral he said, “Come soon, I'll be watchin' for you.”

Goldie couldn't believe her good luck—he was *so* fine-looking. She stuck the ticket in the waistband of her skirt so she wouldn't lose it. She'd have to run to make lunch on time. If she was too late, Miss Whitney would be mad. If Miss Whitney got mad, there was the chance she would telegraph Goldie's mother. And that might mean that Goldie would have to go home. She was wearing the Blanche Whitney outfit, the one they were supposed to wear out to promote the show. Her short skirt came to just below her knees, and her tights showed off her legs below the skirt's blue stripes. Her scarf, which she had carefully tied over her shoulders, flopped around as she ran through the crowd in the Midway Jungle to the big tent that housed the Blanche Whitney Lady Athletes.

This was her home for a whole month. She was one of the Blanche Whitney Lady Athletes. The newspaper clipping that she had stuck in her scrapbook called them *a decided novelty*. It was the same way the press had treated Blanche Whitney in Chicago where a police censor was “agin’ ” wrestling exhibitions in which women took part, reported the newspaper, *at least when he got orders from headquarters*. The paper went on to report that, *He stopped an exciting contest between Miss Cora Livingstone, 'champion woman wrestler of the world,' and Miss Lou Harris. Miss Whitney, reported The Chicago Daily Tribune a short time later, bears a striking resemblance to Miss Livingstone, whose title she appears to have usurped*. As Blanche Whitney, the female wrestler was meeting all comers at the American Theater in defiance of the police censor. Reported the newspaper, *Her opponent is Miss Belle Myers. The way they yesterday mauled and pulled each other around the dirty mat used in the exhibition was marvelous, considering that they go through the same performance once an hour from noon until close on to midnight every day*.

When June's heat wave started suffocating Chicago, Blanche moved out to the amusement park in the White City next to the lake. Reporter Richard Henry Little visited the park and was shown around by the assistant manager on a day when the temperature hovered around 90.

After a long, hard winter, he wrote, the ballyhoos, whose voices have long been silent, were upraised in a gladsome chorus. The girls at the ticket booths were chattering like a lot of song birds in the tree tops, and the band poured forth paeans of joyous melody. The manager hummed a few bars of "Angel Eyes" and led Little to where a woman was giving wrestling exhibitions.

The 'robust' woman [Blanche Whitney] told Little: "*I have four classes of society women. They come out here and I wrestle with them and teach them the half-nelson and the hammerlock and the rest of the game.*"

Blanche told the reporter about the benefits for women to learn to wrestle. "*If a husband is cross and disagreeable, just put him on his back as fast as he can get up. This clinging vine stuff is all right, but believe me, the woman is a winner who can look her husband straight in the eye and say, 'What about the coin for that new dress? Do you come across like a little man or do I throw you down and sit on you while you think it over?' Men are just big bullies,*" Blanche pontificated. "*When women are able to take care of themselves it will be a different world.*"

Little reported the manager exclaimed, "*My, my! Are you a suffragette?*"

"I am not," said the lady wrestler.

"You ought to join. They would make you a walking delegate. When woman gets her rights I'm for you for chief of police."

Blanche's next engagement was the Appalachian Exposition, and she decided to take a troupe. She didn't have to look far to find athletic girls who were willing to join her show—performers like chorus girl Goldie Griffith who, in spite of the heat, did four turns a day in a vaudeville show in the White City amusement park. When Goldie suggested to her mother that she wanted to join Blanche's show, it was a tough sell. But finally Allie relented, and at the beginning of November her daughter left Chicago on the train with the rest of the troupe.

It was a small show compared to the Zack Mulhall Wild West, but it was where Goldie would work for the month she was in Chilhowee Park, three and a half miles north of Knoxville. The whole Appalachian Exposition of 1910 covered

about 100 acres, and the gleaming white main exhibition hall was a voluminous 80,000 square feet behind its massive columns and formidable stairs. Goldie hardly ever went there. Mostly she liked to visit the Livestock Building or the Women's Hall. There was a lot to see and do on the vast fair grounds, but now Goldie knew there was only one place she'd be visiting, and that was the corral behind the Mulhall Wild West where she could see the horses and where she might run into Charley.

Just the day before, Mary Church Terrell had given a speech about "equal rights" for Negro women. Blanche's girls were still talking about it at lunch when a breathless Goldie slipped into her seat, although none of them had heard it in person because they were, of course, performing. They compared what they heard Mary Church Terrell had said to their experiences in Chicago. While in Chicago, before they came to Knoxville, the girls had met Jack Johnson, the heavyweight boxing champion. In the mornings the Whitney girls worked out in Connell's gymnasium. Among the men who worked out in the afternoons at the same gym were Fatty Nelson and Jack Johnson.

Johnson was the first black athlete to break the color barrier in sports, long before Jackie Robinson stepped on the major league baseball field in 1947. Almost 40 years earlier, in 1908, Johnson, one of the most powerful counter-punchers ever, knocked out Tommy Burns in Australia to become world champion, but he wasn't given the title until 1910, the year Goldie met him, when he beat Jim Jeffries in Reno in a fight that ignited race riots. Johnson was famous for more than fighting. He was a flamboyant character who had his own jazz band, owned a Chicago nightclub, acted on stage, drove flashy yellow sports cars, and reputedly walked his pet leopard while sipping champagne. He loved white women and married three of them. In spite of the flash, the son of a former slave knew what it was like to make-do. When he saw the troupe of pretty white girls working out in the gym, he offered them use of his apartment since the men all had their own private rooms for changing clothes

and cleaning up after their workouts, but there were no facilities for women because, of course, women didn't go to gyms.

The girls' workouts for wrestling were mostly just learning how to get out of a hold—quickly. They practiced whipping their heads around, throwing their shoulders back and fighting off an opponent's half-Nelson. They practiced tricks for defeating all the holds, including the hammerlocks, scissors, and hip locks. Workouts for the fencing and boxing were more strenuous, and Blanche made them work hard. The Whitney girls appreciated the use of Johnson's apartment after their sweaty workouts, and Goldie had a great admiration for the huge boxer.