

COWGIRL ICONIC



Images courtesy of The Cowgirl

ANNA LEE (MILLS) ALDRED

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Most early twentieth-century cowgirls entered the rodeo arena through horse experience gained on family farms or ranches. Anna Lee (Mills) Aldred arrived by a different route: the racetrack. She remains the only woman to race professionally before joining the rodeo and the first U.S. woman to obtain a jockey license.

As a child, Aldred rode in bush races which are exactly as they sound: makeshift dirt tracks in fields with varying lengths, marked by trees or fences. Boys dominated the races, and Aldred was one of only a few girls to take part.

She got her jockey license in 1939 by asking a racing judge for one, innocent of the historic magnitude of that simple ask. Just as important as the question itself was where she asked: Agua Caliente Racetrack in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. In the U.S., women were essentially barred from jockey licenses by racing commission rules, overt sexism, and societal norms. Nearly three decades later, in 1968, Kathy Kusner would have to fight in court to secure a U.S. jockey license.

To qualify for her license, the judge observed Aldred breezing a horse, entering and exiting the gate, and riding alongside others to ensure she rode “clean.” At 18, she was issued her license allowing her to race professionally against men.

While Aldred’s racing career launched in Mexico, her credentials qualified her to race in the U.S. She competed at Del Mar, Belmont, and the now-defunct Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, California. Aldred rode on major tracks, “riding for anybody and everybody,” until 1945, when she got too heavy at 118 pounds.

When her racing career ended, she turned toward the rodeo circuit where her brothers were already active. She chose to learn trick riding. Racing came naturally to her, but learning to trick ride required some help. Fellow riders taught her how to rig her saddle, place her holds, and execute demanding maneuvers.

When Aldred passed in 2006, *TIME* magazine profiled her, and *The New York Times* carried her obituary, both acknowledging her singularity. Aldred’s skills as a jockey, with her expert horsemanship, balance, core strength, risk tolerance, and high-speed precision, translated well to trick riding. Both are sports in which small mistakes can have big consequences, just like an innocuous ask can turn into a historic first.

Pictured here for the first time in print is that historic license, along with her wooden renewal license issued the following year.



Cowgirl Iconic is developed in partnership with and draws from the rich archives of the National Cowgirl Museum & Hall of Fame. Go to cowgirl.net to learn more.

