

COWGIRL ICONIC



Images courtesy of The Cowgirl

FERN SAWYER

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Out of more than 100 extraordinary pairs of boots in The Cowgirl Museum collection, few are as unique as Fern Sawyer's inlaid turquoise nugget boots. Beyond their connection to a national cutting and rodeo champion, they are a symbolic legacy and interpretive touchstone. They represent part of a life story.

Cowboy boots carry their own cultural capital, even the plainest pair. For Fern, boots and clothing were also declarations of her identity. Her turquoise nugget boots were crafted by legendary bootmaker Paul Bond, featuring 12 large natural turquoise stones, reportedly sourced from her ranch in Nogal, New Mexico. In her final documentary, *Just for the Ride* (1993), she proclaimed these her favorite boots. Fern wore custom-made rhinestone bras and bling before it was a thing called "bling." She wore shimmering spandex pants well into her mid-70s, long before it was typical or accepted.

This tangible object of boots connects us to Fern — the athlete, champion, and political and community activist. In the late 1930s, women's roughstock events were taking their last gasps of air on the rodeo circuit. At that time, Madison Square Garden in New York was THE rodeo to attend. In 1938, at age 21, Fern Sawyer won this coveted Madison Square Garden All-Around World Champion title.

She competed in matched roping contests and cutting horse competitions, and in 1941, when cutting was still included in rodeos, she began winning prize money against some of the top cowboys in the cutting circuit. In 1945, she won the Cutting Horse World

Championship in Fort Worth, Texas, besting 150 other competitors, all men. She listed this as one of her proudest accomplishments. The following year, she became a charter member of the newly established National Cutting Horse Association.

In 1947, she competed in multiple events in the first all-girl rodeo in Amarillo, Texas. When another bull rider was needed, she volunteered and completed the full ride on what she called a "big 2200 pounder," a ranch-sourced bull prior to modern specialized breeding. She broke her hand in nine places just from hanging on so tightly but won the All-Around Girls Rodeo Championship. The following year, she was a founding member of the Girls Rodeo Association, now known as the WPRA, and was selected as its director of horse events.

Empowerment, agency, and self-actualization are relatively modern words for what she lived instinctively starting almost eight decades ago. However, she would have rejected those terms; she was just a cowgirl. And these turquoise nugget boots that this cowgirl wore are a testament to the woman who is most representative and deserving of the term "iconic": Fern Sawyer.



Fern Sawyer's inlaid turquoise nugget boots are a prize among the two dozen pairs of her boots in The Cowgirl's collection.

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.

