

COWGIRL ICONIC



FRANCES KAVANAUGH

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In the early 1940s, roughly half of American single women were in the workforce, most as secretaries, teachers, or nurses. Yet, a 25-year-old from Texas was in Los Angeles pursuing a very different career path as a Hollywood screen writer, script polisher, and occasional director: Frances Kavanaugh.

This Cowgirl of the Typewriter, as she is now known, wrote or co-wrote more than two dozen B Westerns in the course of a decade. Since she was born and raised in a state that prides itself on cowboy culture, and having ridden herself, the genre came naturally to her. Kavanaugh built a solid career for herself in a male-dominated industry, telling male-hero stories: *The Daring Caballero*, *Death Valley Rangers*, and *Lone Star Lawmen*, to name a few.

Screenwriters can work in multiple capacities, developing stories, writing dialogue, setting scenes, revising scripts, and tailoring dialogue for specific actors. More than half of her credits are as the sole writer of both story and screenplay, or the sole writer of the screenplay.

The B Western, (the second feature that followed the “A” film) was comprised of stock characters such as the land baron, the sheriff, the teacher, the outlaw, or the corrupt politician. They had predictable story lines (Kavanaugh called them “patterned”) and were a little over an hour in duration. They were the Fords of Hollywood: dependable, widely appealing, efficiently made, and Kavanaugh was adept at turning them out.

Her discovery tale has two versions. One is that after her family moved to Los Angeles, she enrolled in drama school and began writing dialogue for her fellow students. A film producer, Robert Tansey, was in the audience on one occasion, heard the dialogue, and hired her to polish scripts. The other version is that she was working on dialogue while she was selling theatre tickets. Tansey bought a ticket from her, asked what she was writing, and hired her.

In *Stars Over Texas* (1946), Kavanaugh, who studied accounting at the

University of Texas in Austin before moving to Los Angeles, scripted a scene in which Eddie Dean, the hero cowboy, has just finished a cattle drive and arrives at the ranch expecting to meet the (male) rancher, but instead meets the sister, Terry, played by Shirley Patterson. Eddie Dean notes his surprise:

Dean: “I didn’t know Hank had a sister.”

Terry: “Well, I’ve been away at school, only coming home in the summers but since Mom and Dad passed away, why, I decided I’d better stay back here and help Hank run the ranch.”

Dean: “You were, uh, studying home care, I suppose?” he says with a flirty grin.

Terry: “No - High finance.”

Cue Eddie Dean looking stunned.

Many of our cowgirl icons remain under vitrines in museums, and fortunately for Kavanaugh, her papers and effects are held at The Autry Museum in Los Angeles. But, Kavanaugh has made the monumental leap from being known in niche film communities and western museums to academia when an article on her appeared in the 2023 *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, a peer-reviewed leading international journal.

She married freelance writer Robert Hecker in 1951, and they collaborated on television scripts for years before she opted to devote herself full time to their children.

This Texas woman thrived in Hollywood’s rough-and-tumble B Western world, mastering a formula-driven genre and subtly reshaping dialogue with wit. Her scripts entertained millions at Saturday matinees and Frances Kavanaugh wrote herself into history with her favorite title card of all: The Cowgirl of the Typewriter.

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

