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Ladies' Champion of the World

SHE HAD TALKED MISS WHITNEY into letting her go to the afternoon Wild West show. Usually everyone in Miss Whitney's small troupe had to work at every performance. The company ran a show every hour from one in the afternoon to eleven at night, but once in a while Blanche would allow one of them to skip a performance or two.

"Hurry up, Babe," Bessie hissed. "You need to be dressed in five minutes." Babe Griffith was Goldie's first stage name.

"Guess what—I'm gonna go to the Mulhall show today," Goldie whispered back as she pulled off her dress and squirmed into her leotard and tights. She and Bessie were 'wrassling' in the first show today. The five girls took turns exhibiting the different sports. Goldie pinned her long hair up and back and she was ready. Although women wrestlers were at the height of their popularity in 1910, to say that what Goldie was doing was a novelty was quite an understatement.

Young ladies in 1910 did not go to gyms and work out. They did not go on stage. They did not *wrestle*, for heaven's sake.

Boxing, another contact sport, was just as bad. In fact, American girls knew little to nothing of the benefits of exercise for health. They learned how to make mayonnaise, how to serve tea. Doctors advised women to refrain from vigorous physical activity or risk destroying their reproductive capabilities. Most women who participated in sports were considered unfeminine and often faced social isolation. Attitudes in the West were not as restrictive as on the East Coast, but what Goldie was doing was not in the mainstream of any part of the country.

What she was doing may have seemed anomalous to much of America at the time, but for her it was normal. Goldie grew up in show business. She was born on the last day of September 1893 in her grandfather's house in Kinmundy, Illinois, in Marion County. Her father, John Griffith, had a medicine show, and he and his wife stopped traveling just long enough for Allie to give birth. Goldie later told a newspaper reporter she was named after the gold rush and had a cousin named Silver.

Goldie's earliest memories were of dancing and singing with her mother to draw customers to the wagon, which was always parked off the road a good bit to allow for a crowd. The two of them would set up by the road, and Goldie danced and performed acrobatic tricks. She also helped her father mix up the liniment and put it in the bottles that they sold for a dollar. The "cure-all" was made of syrup, water and a bit of peppermint flavoring. "We told them they could rub it anywhere on their bodies or just drink it," she laughed during an interview years later. "Oh yes, father was a little crooked."

When she was seventeen, Goldie became a professional athlete, making her own money, and her mother allowed her to travel by herself. Goldie claimed she was always a tomboy, so for her it was logical to move on from acrobat and dancer to chorus girl to wrestler. She started wrestling as a 142-pound welterweight who challenged any girl to catch-as-catch-can wrestling and would take on any 160-pound man. Sometimes the girls would grab a man who had come to see the show to wrestle

with them. If the man couldn't throw the girl in fifteen seconds, the girl won. With other girls, they had to go the full round.

Although the bill advertised the lady athletes, Blanche's show also included strongmen Bartell and Elson, acrobat Harry Morrison, and advance man Mr. Lousshy. Admission to their show at the Appalachian Exposition was twenty-five cents.

Goldie and Bessie peeked around the curtain as they waited offstage for their entrance. The house was about two-thirds full, not bad for the middle of the week.

"Babe, you're gonna get in trouble, chasin' after a man like that."

"I weren't chasin'. He's the one who gave me a ticket."

"You know what I mean."

WITH A FLICK OF HER DAIN'TILY GLOVED HAND, the rope began swinging in a growing arc that reached far in front of her and then over her head. The Mulhall Wild West announcer called out her tricks through his long megaphone. She stepped in and out of a flying loop, swirled a big circle out over the first few rows of the grandstand, balanced a whirling loop on her arm and then her leg, and kicked a loop so that it fell neatly over her pony's neck. Facing her, Sam Garrett was performing a mirror image of her act, but Goldie couldn't take her eyes off Lucille. She seemed so slight, but she was obviously a master at moving the heavy rope. A fringed sash was tied around her waist, and her heavy divided skirt swung around her ankles. Her neckerchief draped gracefully over her dark, pleated shirtwaist blouse. Lucille's long blond hair was pinned back with a wide bow that was fastened at the nape of her neck, and her serene expression under the wide-brimmed hat seemed real to Goldie.

For one of her tricks Lucille roped six horses running abreast. Charley was riding the inside horse that came closest to his sister. As soon as the gigantic loop settled over all six horses and

riders, Lucille let go of it, and raised her arms in acknowledgement of the crowd's approval. Goldie's applause was ecstatic.

Goldie had seen a Wild West before—the best and biggest Wild West—Buffalo Bill's show—with her parents when she was little. The Mulhall show, even though it was smaller, was better than anything she'd hoped for. Charley, of course, was the best part, but everything else was pretty spectacular too.

Charley and his sister Lucille led the Grand Entry on their prancing white horses. Following them was their father Zack in front of the cowboy band, and then came sisters Georgia and Mildred. Mildred was about Goldie's age.

Goldie watched all the riders with new-found interest. The Nation Race pitted cowboys, cowgirls, and Indians in a daredevil contest twice around the arena. The Pony Express skit involved the rider changing horses each eighth mile and demonstrated the rider's agility in jumping from horse to horse.

A swaying stagecoach thundered away from outlaws in a cloud of dust in the Deadwood Stage Coach Robbery act. The announcer told them that the old coach belonged to the U.S. government and had been made available to Zack Mulhall with former President Roosevelt's help after the Mulhalls' coach was badly damaged in an accident in Kansas City. The hold-up in the Mulhalls' show was a realistic portrayal of an attack on the Overland stagecoach on the Deadwood Trail by the notorious white outlaw, the Apache Kid.

Lucille showed the tricks her trained horse, Governor, could do. The big sorrel horse picked up the wooden handle of a dinner bell with his mouth and swung his head back and forth to make the bell ring. At another command, he played lame and hobbled around. He also danced to music, reared on his hind legs and walked, and played dead. Lucille had even trained him to walk on his knees on a special mat. At the end, Governor bowed to the audience by falling to his front knees. Goldie watched with avid interest, and cheers rose from the audience.



Lucille Mulhall throws her arms in the air to stop the clock after roping a steer in a Wild West competition. In 1900, the *New York World* described the cowgirl: *Little Miss Mulhall, who weighs only ninety pounds, can break a bronc, lasso and brand a steer and shoot a coyote at 500 yards. She can also play Chopin, quote Browning, and make mayonnaise.* When Lucille broke her leg in San Antonio, her adoring fans built a special stand at the show for her wheelchair. Later that evening her box at the opera house was filled with roses.

*Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection,
Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society [16588]*

The Sioux and Cheyenne Indians danced in native regalia. The Indians were recruited from the reservations, and curious audiences flocked to see the “wild” and “heathen savages.” The Indian Boy race exhibited reckless bareback riding by the young sons of the Indians with the troupe. The Fight over the Water Hole enacted Frederick Remington’s painting of the same name. Just as the cowboys found the water hole, they were attacked by the Indians who were trailing them. A battle followed, with the cowboys winning—of course.

Lucille, who was introduced to the admiring crowd as the Ladies' Champion Roper of the World, single-mindedly chased down a wild steer, her divided skirt and long hair flying. She threw the rope she had been twirling over her head and landed it neatly around the steer's head. She had changed horses, and this horse, Sam, stopped instantly, pulling the rope taut. Lucille leaped to the ground in a cloud of dust, running toward the thrashing steer. She whipped a small piece of rope out of the pocket in her skirt and tied two of the beast's ankles together. As she jumped up she threw her arms in the air in a triumphant salute to the crowd. Everyone stood, whistling and applauding enthusiastically. The announcer told them that in rodeos around the country she regularly beat out cowboys who couldn't handle a thousand-pound steer as quickly as the diminutive Lucille could.

A fake Mexican bull fight was staged since real bull fighting was illegal. And Henry Grammar wrestled with a 'Mexican' steer. The Chase For A Bride provided comedy as one of the cowgirls was chased by all of the cowboys. When one overtook her, she was lifted from her saddle to his while their horses were running at full speed. Goldie could feel herself riding behind that virile cowboy on his pony, circling the arena to the sound of stomping and cheering fans.