



## Hollywood: Her Story September 2021 ENewsletter Westerns

When we were conducting the research for our book, we were amazed at the number of women screenwriters who were writing Westerns during the 1930s. Women have contributed to Westerns over the decades in many other roles as well. These include director, actress and stuntwoman. Come along, Little Dogies, and let's learn about them.



Stage actress, dancer, theater producer and vaudeville performer **Anita Bush** left vaudeville and dancing after a back injury. She then turned to drama and organized her theater company that performed in New York City from 1915 to 1920. Bush left the theater in 1920 to pursue a film career. She appeared in two all-black Westerns in 1921 and 1922, both filmed in the predominantly black town of Boley, Oklahoma. *The Bull-Dogger* was released in 1921 and *The Crimson Skull* in 1922. In her later years, Bush served as the secretary of the Negro Actors Guild.



A writer with more than 100 credits over a thirty-five year career **Elizabeth (Betty) Burbridge** began her career as an actress during the silent film era. By 1917 she was a screenwriter, working on silent short films. She transitioned to talkies and by 1926 wrote Westerns almost exclusively. In an advertisement featured in 1941 editions of *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, Burbridge is shown at a Smith-Corona typewriter with text that reads "Gene Autry's script writer". Burbridge said, "I read pulp Westerns until I was bored to tears. That's how I learned the story racket – that and talking to the movie cowboys on the set. When I began doing these things, I'd take my plots from New York state plays that I had seen. I'd simply change the setting to the wide-open spaces, put the characters on horses, work in a couple of chases with a sheriff and a posse – and there would be a screen story."



In 1923, when stuntwoman **Frances Miles** showed up on the set the first day for the filming of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, she realized she was responsible for the horses used in the movie. She said, "It was rugged. I took a lot of pushing around, but my real fate in Hollywood was settled that day, although I didn't realize it then. I worked in fifty-two two-reel Westerns, and then graduated into five reelers with guys like Hoot Gibson, Jack Hoxie and Buck Jones. I've done all the falls, fights, chases you could ever think of. When Westerns began to go sissy with banjos, guitars and quartets I branched out into features. I've doubled for lots of stars, but I wouldn't be one for love or money."



Like Anita Bush, **Barbara Stanwyck** also worked in theater before pursuing a film career. She made 85 films during her almost four decades in the movie industry which began in 1929. Her memorable Westerns include *The Furies* (1950), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *Forty Guns* (1957). Over the course of her career, Stanwyck was nominated for four Best Actress Oscars. In 1982, she received an Honorary Academy Award "for superlative creativity and unique contribution to the art of screen acting." Said of Stanwyck, who was orphaned at four years old, "She only lives for two things, and both of them are work."



Considered the most accomplished rider to perform in Westerns, stuntwoman **Evelyn Finley** performed stunts for almost fifty years. She stunted in her first film in 1936 as the stunt double for Jean Parker in *The Texas Rangers*. She also acted; her first starring role was in 1940 in *Arizona Frontier*. She continued to act and perform her own stunts through the 1950s. Thereafter she either stunted or served as a stunt technical advisor through the mid-1980s. The final movie for which she consulted was *Silverado* (1985) starring Kevin Costner and Scott Glenn.



The “Cowgirl of the Typewriter”, one of the few women writing Western screenplays in Hollywood during the 1940s and early 1950s, **Frances Kavanagh** wrote the screenplay for the 1945 movie *Song of Old Wyoming*. Unlike Betty Burbridge, Kavanagh grew up around ranching and riding horses which she said gave her the feeling for Westerns. Her first screenplays in 1941 were for *The Driftin’ Kid* and *Dynamite Canyon*. With more than thirty film credits, she was inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum in 2014. In 1997, she was honored by the Autry National Center’s Museum of the American West to which she donated her typewriter, scripts, press materials and cowgirl clothes.



Before she became the first woman nominated for the Best Director Oscar in 1997, Italian director and screenwriter **Lina Wertmuller** directed the Western *The Belle Starr Story* in 1968. As she was learning her craft, her mentor Federico Fellini told her, “If you are not a good storyteller, all of the techniques in the world will never save you.” Wertmuller was nominated for the Best Director Oscar for *Seven Beauties*, for which she also received a Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen Oscar nomination. She received the 1985 Women in Film Crystal Award recognizing her work to expand the role of women in the entertainment industry

through endurance and excellence. In 2020, Wertmuller received an Academy Honorary Award for her contributions to the movie industry.

Women in front of and behind the camera make the movies that we all welcome into our hearts and homes. Women across all the areas of moviemaking from actress to animator, editor to stuntwoman, costume designer to screenwriter, producer to director have contributed to the success of the movie industry since its founding in the 1890s. Help us celebrate these women who are written into movie history in *Hollywood: Her Story*.

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