

Vintage Cowgirl Dolls

BY DONNA W. BROWN

The 1950s was an era of modern entertainment—the television. On that flickering, tiny, black and white screen, there were game shows, variety shows, soap operas, mysteries and situation comedies, but the most popular genre was the western. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were approximately 120 TV shows starring cowboys. One of the first was *Roy Rogers, King of the Cowboys*. Roy, along with his wife, Dale, appeared first in movies and then on TV from 1951 to 1957.

Dale wore a plaid blouse, fringed vest, leather boots, a double holster around her waist and rode into the sunset on her loyal horse, Buttermilk. Every little girl wanted to be like Dale Evans. Every doll manufacturer took note

of this desire and many transformed its most popular doll into a cowgirl. Some dolls had fancy outfits with gold trim, while others were more demure.

In the 1950s, Nancy Ann Storybook marketed a pair of 8-inch hard plastic Roy and Dale dolls. They had stationary legs, sleep eyes, red plaid shirts, tan felt hats, a brown skirt or chaps and guns in holsters.

Of course, there were cowboy dolls before Roy and Dale. Effanbee sold the Grumpy Cowboy in approximately 1915. It was 11 inches tall, made of composition arms, feet and head and had a



Sally Starr, 10½-inch fashion doll.



Sally Starr, hostess of Philadelphia television show *Popeye Theater*.



Sally Starr cowgirl outfit for 36-inch doll.

cloth body. His face was painted in a frown, and he had a felt hat and plaid shirt. In 1936, Effanbee made a 14-inch Skippy Cowboy very similar to Grumpy, but with a happy face.

Arranbee Storybook dolls came in a 9-inch cowgirl and cowboy in the late 1930s and early 1940s. They were made of composition, had molded hair, painted faces and a holster with a gun. In 1955, Arranbee's Littlest Angel wore a brown leatherette vest and skirt, plaid shirt, two guns in a holster and a felt hat. A matching outfit came on their larger Nannette doll the same year.

In 1949, Terri Lee Inc. marketed a 16-inch plastic cowboy doll labeled Gene Autry, another movie and television star. Terri Lee and Jerri Lee dolls came in matching western outfits in the early 1950s. They wore elaborate satin shirts with fringed cuffs and large hats.

Glamourlovelies was the name used for the beautiful girls on Ken Murray's variety show in the early fifties. A and H sold a Ken Murray's "glamour cowgirl" doll, an 8-inch display doll with chaps. When you turn her over there is nothing under her chaps in the back and her belt says, "I like the wide open spaces."

Vogue offered many versions of a cowgirl doll over the years. The first Vogue cowgirl was manufactured in 1949, and came with a cowboy doll. They wore plaid shirts



Celluloid Indian carnival prize and display doll.



Ken Murray's Glamour Cowgirl.



Indian and cowgirl display dolls.



Cowboy rag doll, stuffed plastic, 1950s.



Cowboy rag doll, composition head, 1940s.

and white leather vests. Similar dolls were sold by Vogue in 1950 as part of a brother and sister series. They had mohair wigs, wore matching red satin shirts, felt vests, yellow neck ribbons, and red hats. She had a white skirt and he had poodle chaps. In 1951 and 1952, Ginny, in the Frolicking Fables series, came in a black and silver cowgirl outfit with a pink scarf. In 1958, when Ginny was at her height of popularity, she wore a white skirt, vest with silver trim, a white hat, silver boots, and had a silver gun hanging from her skirt.

Vogue also transformed its 10-inch fashion doll, Jill and companion Jeff. In 1959, Jeff came with a turquoise and black cowboy suit with silver trim, and two silver guns in a holster. In 1960, Jill and Jeff came out in matching rodeo outfits that were white with red and gold accents.

The American Character doll company in 1954 took the very popular Sweet Sue doll and dressed her up as Annie Oakley, a famous Wild West woman. She had a yellow satin shirt and scarf, green vest, black belt and holster. Her yellow skirt was fringed and embroidered with her name, Annie Oakley.

In 1957, the 12-inch Ideal Shirley Temple doll had a beautiful black cowgirl outfit with white fringe. Actually, Shirley had been a Texas Ranger in 1936. The special



Christmas Cowgirls photo, c. 1950s, donated by Jane Walker (friend of author).

souvenir composition doll of the Texas Centennial came in four sizes. She wore a vest, chaps, boots and pistol in a leather holster. Complete with a red neckerchief and a 10-gallon hat with a band that read, "Ride 'Em Cowboy."

As less expensive alternatives, many exclusive dolls were copied. The Active Doll Company had a doll similar to Ginny named Mindy. She wore a copy of Ginny's cowgirl outfit in 1956 and 1957. A Norma Original toddler had a caracul wig, and wore a cotton print top, a ribbon scarf, chaps, red boots, a felt hat and a metal gun in a red vinyl holster. Virga Creations distributed an 8-inch cowgirl in 1957 who wore a red hat, brown fringed skirt, boots and a holster.

Many 8-inch hard plastic display dolls, with stationary legs, were dressed as cowgirls. Accompanying cowboy



Gail of the Golden West, Deluxe Toy Creations.

and Indian dolls were also sold. Some were very cheaply dressed and others were of higher quality with detailed accessories. Most were unlabeled so identification is difficult.

Large dolls of lesser quality also came in cowgirl dresses. Most were 20 inches and unmarked. Identifying them depends on finding one in the original box. One was a little girl doll, Little Miss Fashion Doll by Eegee, was made of rigid plastic with very short rooted hair and sleep eyes. She came with four outfits—ski suit, dress, pajamas and cowgirl. The cowgirl suit consisted of a brown satin blouse, a dark brown skirt with gold trim, plastic boots and a felt hat.

The identical outfit was also found on a large unmarked glamour or fashion doll with high heeled feet. This doll was packaged in a box that had a decorative interior with a cardboard horse silhouette and stable. The doll was firmly attached with staples for display purposes. The same doll and outfit came in a plain box labeled Gail of the Golden West. These dolls did not come with holsters and guns, and often were sold in grocery stores.

In 1959, Georgene Novelties introduced a 15-inch Little Lulu doll in a cowgirl outfit featuring a pale yellow blouse with tie and brown fringed skirt. She wore a belted gun



Cowgirl doll 1953, Wards Christmas catalog.

holster and six shooter. Her body was made of muslin and her face was pressed cloth with black thread curls.

The most popular cowgirl doll in the Philadelphia area was the Sally Starr doll. The real Sally Starr was the host of a local children's show called *Popeye Theater*, which ran from 1955 to 1971. Each evening dressed in full cowgirl regalia, Sally would introduce cartoons and Three Stooges shorts. Sally became a close friend to little girls who begged their parents to take them to one of her many public appearances. At grocery stores and farm markets, she would often promote her 10½-inch, circle P fashion doll.

The Sally Starr doll wore a felt blouse and skirt with her name on it, a white hat, red boots and a holster with two guns. She had rooted wavy platinum hair, high heeled feet and three painted eyelashes. Her outfit came in white, blue or yellow, and could be purchased alone. The same outfit, minus the holster, was available for larger 33- to 36-inch dolls.

Patterns for western attire were available for the Ideal Toni and the Mary Hoyer dolls. In 1951, *Simplicity* offered a sewing pattern of a cowgirl outfit for 14-inch dolls, while *McCall's* pattern for Toni came in multiple sizes. An undated pattern of the same style was sold by Advance for 15-inch dolls. Dime stores provided doll size hats, holsters and boots with spurs to complete the outfit.

Sears, in its 1950 Christmas Wish Book, had an entire page of holster sets for children adorned with plastic bullets. Some guns held caps, others came with spurs. A Dale Evans set came with cuffs and a skirt made of genuine cowhide. In 1951, Sears had two pages of western outfits listed as play clothes, not costumes. The same catalog sold bikes with saddlebags, rifle holders and popguns for "young cowpunchers."



Ranch Family paper dolls, 1957.



Pattern and illustration from *McCall's Annual* magazine.



Ranch Family paper doll clothing, 1957.



Seiberling Tires advertisement, 1953, *Saturday Evening Post*.



Effanbee cowgirl, 1976.

Dolls and outfits were not the only items sold with a cowgirl theme in the 1950s. Merrill Company Publishers released a set of six paper dolls in 1957 called the Ranch Family. Valentine and birthday cards featured cowgirls and boys. Paper party decorations, magazine ads, dressing table grooming sets, metal spinning tops and coloring books all found that a western theme was in high demand.

By the late 1960s, western shows on television were out of style. No longer did little girls play dress-up as Annie Oakley, donning boots and cap guns, and no longer did they want their dolls to do the same. Occasionally Barbie had a western look, and Effanbee sold an 11-inch cowgirl as part of its America series in 1976, but the era of fringe, spurs, and holsters was over. Sadly, Dale and Roy took their final ride into the sunset singing "Happy trails to you until we meet again."

All dolls are from the author's collection.



Tin spinning top.

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