

## **ALMA RAYFORD**

**1903-1987**



## **SILENT SCREEN WESTERN ACTRESS**

Silent westerns were characterized by stronger roles for women and usually more romance than in the sound era B-westerns. Alma Rayford was a leading lady in silent-era western films in the 1920s, opposite the leading male cowboy stars of the time. Her films were characterized by low budgets completed by small and mostly short-lived lower-tier B-movie studios.

Rayford was born in Muskogee, Indian Territory in March 1903. Her sister Adrian was born in 1907. She started her film career at age eighteen in *Hearts O' the Range* (1921), an independent western. In 1922, Rayford played opposite Victor Adamson (stage name Denver Dixon) in another independent western *The Lone Rider*. When talkies arrived, he produced Z-grade westerns featuring unemployed silent-age actors, including Buffalo Bill, Jr. (real name Jay Wilsey), Wally Wales and Buddy Roosevelt. His low-quality productions often had the opening credits misspelled!

*Smoking Trails* (1924) is where most filmographies of Rayford's work start. It also starred her younger sister Adrian, though her IMDB biography doesn't list this role but instead listed *The Gentleman From Arizona* (1939), where she is billed as Adrianna Galvez. Her biography for the film claimed she was born Adrian Sick in Muskogee in 1907 and had a sister named Alma Rayford.

Rayford was in six 1924 films, including *The Terror Of Pueblo* opposite Art Mix, the stage name of George Kesterson. He was renamed by Victor Adamson, who figured that a cowboy named "Art Mix" would be associated somehow with western superstar Tom Mix, and since small-town exhibitors who couldn't afford Mix's expensive films would use cheaper films marketed with the lesser "Art Mix" brand name.

In 1925, Rayford appeared in the "Cyclone Bob" series. Later that year, she was cast in *Cactus Trails*. She next appeared opposite Ken Maynard in an early "western horror" *Haunted Range* (1926). After becoming an accomplished horseman at circuses, Maynard was a trick rider with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. His horsemanship and rugged good looks helped make him a cowboy film star.

Rayford was cast in the "Buffalo Bill Jr." films including *Trumpin' Trouble* (1926), one of her eleven features that year. Her next film was an A-grade western *The Outlaw Breaker* opposite accomplished stuntman Yakima Canutt. When rodeo riders brought their techniques to Hollywood, Canutt would expand and improve them, including horse falls and wagon wrecks. His talents were showcased in *Stagecoach* (1939), and he choreographed the *Ben Hur* (1959) chariot race. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Spielberg paid homage to Canutt using a German transport truck.

Rayford was also a first-rate rider and her appearance with Canutt is testament to her horse-riding skills. Leading man Al Hoxie called her one of the best riders in the business. By 1927, Rayford's career was slowing. She appeared in two features opposite real cowboy Buddy Roosevelt. Her role was in the short film *The Border Wolf* (1929) was also her first appearance in a sound film. Her only major talking part came in *Lightning Bill* in 1934, an all-talking "Buffalo Bill Jr." series.

The former beauty contest winner from Oklahoma never made it into much "Class-A" fare, and left the screen in the early days of sound. Her name appeared in the 1940 census in Los Angeles, living with her mother Lillie and sister Adrian. Her family moved to El Paso at some point where Adrian died in 1979 and Alma died on Valentine's Day in 1987 at age 83.