

**VIVIAN GLADYS  
WHITE  
DILLARD  
1912-1999**



**RODEO  
BRONC AND  
TRICK  
RIDER**

Vivian White was one of the greatest cowgirls of her era but her highly successful career took a downturn after World War II when the “singing cowboy” Gene Autry became involved in rodeos. White continued success in the newly-created Girls’ Rodeo Association until her retirement.

Vivian Gladys White was born near Enid in November 1912 and grew up on the family farm near Ringwood. To learn extra money at fourteen, she signed up to ride a steer at Cleo Springs. Steer-riding led to buffalo-riding before she switched back to livestock. After eight years of exhibition steer riding, White expanded to competitive saddle bronc riding. From its start, bronc riding was not exclusively male, with women’s competitions being held in approximately one-third of all rodeos. Women were competing at the highest levels and, against men who respected their ability to do so.

During the 1930s and 40s, White rode her way to rodeo fame on saddle broncs and doing acrobatics on a horse thundering across the arena. In 1937 she won the ladies’ championship at the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show Rodeo. A week later, she earned the title of World’s Champion Ladies Saddle Bronc Rider at Madison Square Garden. In 1938 she took the trick riding honors at Cheyenne. In 1941, she won the world title at the Garden again.

Things changed in 1942 when, for the first time, there was no cowgirl bronc riding in either of the country’s biggest competitions – Boston Garden or Madison Square Garden. The reason – the “singing cowboy” Gene Autry. When Bonnie McCarroll was thrown from and trampled by her horse in 1929 and later died of her spinal wounds, some witnesses felt what they witnessed was too hard to handle and believed the sport was too dangerous for women. But the Rodeo Association of America made NO changes for the next thirteen years! Until 1941, women’s position in competitive bronc riding was prominent and respected.

In 1942, movie-star-turned-entrepreneur Autry quickly amassed a monopoly by taking control of the major rodeos. Using McCarroll’s death over a decade before as justification, Autry officially excluded women from the competitive elements of rodeo. Women’s position changed from competitor to peripheral roles in parades as rodeo “queens” to please the men in the audience, reinforcing the stereotype that a woman’s place was in the home – whether in the city or on the range.

It had actually started when Autry began writing and producing his own films. Women in western movies moved away from riding heroes to merely waiting to be rescued by heroic cowboys. This promulgated, at worst, an overly sexist narrative of women as “not too bright – and usually helpless”.

But Vivian White was determined to persevere. When the Girl’s Rodeo Association was created in 1948, White resumed her competitive career in the “all-girl circuit” rodeos. At the Fort Smith All-Girl Rodeo in 1949, White again won the world saddle bronc riding title. With the birth of her daughter, she finally retired to train trick and stunt riders for rodeos and movie studios while raising quarter horses and Black Angus cattle with her husband Cub Dillard at their ranch in Warner.

White was inducted into Fort Worth’s National Cowgirl Hall of Fame (1985) and Oklahoma City’s National Cowboy Hall of Fame (1991). She was never bucked off a horse in arena competition, declaring luck saw her through a rodeo career of eighteen years and included enough honors and titles to please the toughest cowgirl. Vivian White died in November 1999 at age 87 in Warner.