

Fannie Sperry Steele (1887–1983)

Montana's Lady Bucking Horse Champion

*F*annie Sperry was born in the Prickly Pear Valley in 1887. Her mother taught her to ride almost before she could walk. Soon she was rounding up wild horses and participating in neighborly competitions with other local ranch kids.

She made her first professional ride as a relay racer at the 1904 Montana State Fair in Lewis and Clark County. Inspired by Buffalo Bill's "Pony Express Race," the relay featured women riders who changed horses and saddles at top speed. Fannie and the popular Montana Girls rode relays throughout Montana and the Midwest in 1905.

In 1907, Sperry began participating in women's bucking horse competitions. At the Calgary Stampede in 1912, her ride on the bronc Red Wing earned her the title "Lady Bucking Horse Champion of the World." She won the title again in 1913.

Unlike most other bronc-busting women of the time, Fannie Sperry rode "slick." Female contestants usually rode hobbled, the stirrups tied together beneath the horse's belly for greater stability in the saddle. Hobbling was dangerous in the event of a tumble because the rider could not kick free, yet slick riding demanded extra balance and strength.



Fannie Sperry Steele on Dismal Dick at the Windham, Montana, Roundup, 1920. Image courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, 952-169.

Sperry married bronc rider and rodeo clown Bill Steele in 1913, and she rode exhibition broncs until she was in her fifties. She was the first woman in Montana to receive a packer's license, and with her string of pintos, she guided hunters on trips into the mountains.

Widowed in 1940, she continued to run the family's Helmville ranch until she was seventy-eight.



Fannie Sperry Steele with Little Daisy, 1940s. Image courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, PAc 2018-56.

The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's Rodeo Hall of Fame honored Fannie Sperry Steele in 1975. Among the 266 members, thirty-three are women and only twelve rode broncs. A quintessential Montana woman, Steele takes her place among the best of the best.



Fannie Sperry Steele at the Miles City Roundup, photograph by Edward F. Marcell, 1914. Image courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, PAc 2018-56.