



Cowgirl True

"Cowgirl is an attitude really. A pioneer spirit, a special American brand of courage. The cowgirl faces life head-on, lives by her own lights, and makes no excuses. Cowgirls take stands, they speak up. They defend things they hold dear."

--Dale Evans, Queen of the Cowgirls

Jill Stanford, who lived in Woodway Park and attended Edmonds Elementary and then Edmonds High until the middle of her sophomore year, was born to be a cowgirl.

The author of *Wild Women and Tricky Ladies, You Might Be a Cowgirl If...A Guide to Life on the Range*, and five other books, Jill discovered her inner cowgirl early on. Like most Edmonds area kids, Jill enjoyed going to the Princess Theater to watch Westerns featuring such stars as Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Unlike most of the kids, Jill was "totally horse crazy" and was transfixed by Dale Evans. "I liked the way she dressed (a REAL COWGIRL) and that she could sing and was always happy and mostly on horseback." Like a true cowgirl, from the beginning Jill refused to let anyone stifle her passion. Her second grade teacher, Mrs. Hatch, at one point told Jill that if she drew yet another picture of a horse, she would make her eat it. The outcome? Jill drew—and Jill ate! When her parents denied her request for a horse of her own, she took babysitting jobs to earn the money to rent a neighbor's horse, which she would ride not only around Woodway but "to Richmond Beach to swim the horse and me in the Sound, to Meadowdale, to Highway 99—all over the place!"

Unfortunately, early in her freshman year, Jill contracted polio. She was hospitalized at Children's Orthopedic in Seattle, spent two months in an iron lung, then convalesced at home. When she was finally well enough to return to EHS, she had to wear leg braces and use crutches. It was a challenge to navigate the multi-storied building, and Jill recalls having to go up the many stairs backwards on her fanny. To her it was simply an adjustment that had to be made; she wasn't going to let polio defeat her. A skeptical doctor told her she'd be "lucky to walk, much less ride horses," but with weekly therapy in a pool, daily stretching exercises, and determination, she was riding again a few months later. "My main goal in life at that point was to be NORMAL," she says. "When they say you can't, you show them you can."

During her sophomore year, Jill's parents decided to move the family to Portland, OR. Jill was heartbroken. She loved Edmonds. "I thought I'd died," she says. However, after a period of adjustment, she grew to like Portland. She completed high school there, studied textile design at the Portland Museum Art School, then majored in English at Lewis and Clark. She married and had a son, Chuck. She worked in Portland as an interior designer for 10 years, but she and her lawyer husband Roger increasingly felt that the life they led in an upscale area was "unrealistic." She thought that living on a farm would be "more in keeping with my beliefs about hard work and real life and the lessons that animals can teach" and would provide her son with "a taste of real life," so in 1971 the family moved to rural Aurora, OR.



Jill "absolutely loved it" there. She was back among horses. She began competing in Hunter-Jumper events, an English style of riding that involves lots of jumping and is modeled on horses and hounds chasing foxes. She rode and trained her thoroughbreds "every single day," teaching them to "jump and jump well." Polio had left her unable to run or participate in sports, but "horses became my legs," she says, and she began winning ribbons and trophies in competitions all over Oregon. She also participated in Western trail riding on occasion, herding cattle and staying out on the range for days at a time.

Her life was now "real" and satisfying but not quite complete. Polio had motivated her to be an overachiever. She was a successful stay-at-home mom and a horsewoman teaching her son the ways of the West, but she wanted to have a career as well. Facing life head-on, in 1977 she submitted an article to *The Horseman's Journal*. To her delight, it was accepted, and she "never looked back," becoming a writer as well as a rider. Soon she was producing a column for a newspaper, *The Senior Tribune*, published in Portland. From 1989 to 1994 she served as editor of that paper, which branched out to publish in cities all over the Northwest. It was called "the best senior publication in the U.S." and was included in the Senior News Wire Service.

In 1991 Jill left the world of senior publishing. Soon she was asked to run a publishing house called Culinary Arts while the owner went on an extended sabbatical. Looking through the owner's catalog, Jill discovered that there were no new books on cooking lamb. "So I wrote one!" she says. She published *Lamb Country Cooking* in 2007 and followed it with *The Cowgirl's Cookbook*, which consisted of recipes "fit for the home and the range" interspersed with stories about cowgirls. It became a best-seller. On a writing roll now, in 2008 Jill published *Going It Alone*, a book addressed primarily to women over 50 who, for whatever reason, find themselves alone. Jill herself had divorced in 1998, and much of the book stemmed from columns she had written exploring both the emotions and the practical problems that those newly on their own must confront, with an emphasis on sustaining self-esteem and rising above difficult and painful situations. In 2009 came *Getting Your Goat*, a cookbook specializing in recipes for cooking goat meat. In 2010, Jill published *Wild Women and Tricky Ladies*, which grew out of her own extensive research and featured stories about intrepid old-time cowgirls, like Bertha Blancett, who competed against men. Jill rescued these women from obscurity. "I've brought them back to life," she says. "They'll live forever." In 2012 she expanded upon the cowgirl philosophy in *You Might Be a Cowgirl If ... A Guide to Life on the Range*. In regard to that philosophy Jill says: "You can be a cowgirl in a high rise. The location does not matter. It is the spirit that does and it's called 'Cowgirl True.'" In 2013 she returned to the culinary scene with *Keep Cookin' Cowgirl*, a book already in its third printing.

Nor is the end of production in sight. Jill continues to lead an active life in Sisters, OR, a picturesque small town to which she moved in 2006. A cowgirl to the end, she maintains her independence. Her son and grandchildren live in the area—close but not too close. She gives talks on "The Girls of the Golden West" at various venues. Although she no longer competes, she still rides in the Deschutes National Forest on an older gelding that is very gentle and quiet. And although she has achieved her bucket-list goal of getting her name into the Library of Congress, the fire to write still burns. She's working on an additional book about cowgirls and has yet another in mind after that. "Stay tuned," she says. "I'm just getting started!"

For a billion-plus Chinese, 2014 is the Year of the Horse; for Oregon cowgirl Jill Stanford, every year is.