“I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart”--Patsy Montana (1935)
Added to the National Registry: 2011
Essay by Suzy Bogguss (guest post)*

While I was busy signing autographs at the 1989 Nashville “Fan Fair,” a record label rep brought Patsy Montana to my booth. I nearly fainted and I did start to cry. Every female singer that ever bought a fringed coat, western hat, or pair of embellished boots has paid tribute to Patsy, whether they know it or not. She was a true pioneer for women in the country music field, and her gutsy choices and “why not me” attitude paved the way for many of us.

Patsy was a legend and she had been such an inspiration to me. I had always hoped to meet her. I’d recently won the Best New Female Award from the Academy of Country Music in California, where Patsy lived at the time. I guess the word got around to her that I’d covered her monumental song.

For years, I’ve told Patsy's story on stage. I would explain how she became the first female country singer to sell a million records when she wrote and recorded “I Want To Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” in 1935--the middle of the Depression! One might think that since cowboys were all the rage in those days, the title was the reason this song was so popular. But I would tell you, it’s the second line of the song that made all the difference. The second line is the insight into who Patsy really was.

Patsy was born Ruby Blevins to a family of poor farmers in Arkansas. As the youngest child of 11 and the only girl, she had a lot to prove, but also the advantage of the older boys pushing her to learn. In everything she did, Ruby was a quick study and ready to go.

She moved with her brother and sister-in-law to Los Angeles when she was 18 and studied violin at the University of the West. There, she won a contest that led to her own show on KMIC radio. She changed her name from Ruby Blevins to Patsy Montana and this was the beginning of her many years in radio, as well as the origin of her yodelin’ cowgirl stage persona. When she landed a position on the famed National Barn Dance in Chicago, they rebuilt the band around her unique talents and sparkling personality. She had an undeniable charm and confidence, but she was exceptional because of her musical skill. Patsy was one part sweetheart and one part tomboy, and it was just the right combination to attract loyal fans.
Her true nature shines in the second line of her iconic song “I Want To Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart.” She didn’t write “I’ll wait here for my dearest companion to come back from the roundup.” What she said was, “I want to learn to rope and to ride!” She wanted to be right alongside her love, doing the things that he was doing! She was looking for adventure and the freedom of the cowboy lifestyle.

In later years, an interviewer asked her if she thought of herself as a feminist and she replied that she didn’t see herself that way at the time, but looking back, she guessed maybe she was.

Patsy became my good friend. She encouraged and supported me and was my special guest for several more Fan Fairs. We would sing together like we were old pals around a campfire. Sometimes she would call me on the phone to spout off about some crazy thing the country music business was doing, or remind me that The National Barn Dance was the model for The Grand Old Opry but, “they let the jazzier guys in too!”

Ruby Blevins WAS the cowboy’s sweetheart Patsy Montana. She was a hard-working troubadour who yodeled and actually could rope and ride! She had a charming wit, a whole lot of pluck, and she loved her job. My friend was still touring until she was 85 years old and that’s such an inspiration to me. Patsy blazed a trail for the rest of us. If that isn’t the definition of a feminist, I’ll eat my Stetson hat.

*Suzy Bogguss is a CMA-winning and ACM-winning singer and songwriter. She has achieved six top ten country singles and three gold albums. In 1989, she recorded a wildly popular cover of Patsy Montana’s “I Want To Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”*