

Two Cowboys

By Gaye Buzbee Jacobs

I'm a collector, much for the same reason I like cemeteries. And, sometimes a stroll through a local cemetery on a summer afternoon turns into more than a casual visit. I didn't exactly plan to stop there, but a short walk up the thickly wooded hillside drew me to an interesting gravestone. Not because I recognized the name, nor was I particularly interested in who it was. I wasn't sure why, but now I think I know.

Carved onto the gravestone was a horse and rider, and this: *Paul S. Carney "World's Grand Champion Cowboy 1939."* An intriguing inscription! I'm never surprised when a gravestone provokes my curiosity, but there was something unsaid and unimagined that made me want to take a longer look. So I did.

This man was certainly not related to me and I didn't know of anyone named Carney, but once my interest was sparked, I was caught. There was no good reason to ignore my curiosity. I admit that I am a cowgirl at heart, coming from a long line of westerners and horsewomen, so maybe meeting a random rodeo guy was the welcome interruption I needed that day. Even though his was not a name I recognized, maybe I just felt like having a little chat with any old cowboy?

Howdy, Paul. I see you were born in 1912 and died as a young man, which is so sad. You were a famous Rodeo Champion? Why is there no family around you? You seem to be resting alone, under a beautiful stone, surrounded by chunks of quartz. Who are you, Cowboy?

I noticed the next gravestone, which seemed to be designed as a twin, engraved with a bucking horse and a similar inscription: *Cecil Kennedy "World's Grand Champion Cowboy 1938."* Wait. Now I've found two professional rodeo cowboys? Who were these men? Were they related or just friends, and why were there no other Carneys or Kennedys around? Unusual. The truth is, I will seize upon any excuse to follow a mystery or chase down an errant ancestor, even if he or she is not mine. This is my best kind of fun, but only fellow genealogists understand this mindset, and that's fine.

Fun aside, these gravestones gave me no choice. Later that evening I thumbed through an old Foothills Inquirer Publication (collected 28 years ago) which listed all the burials in Evergreen's Bear Creek Cemetery and found both records. However, there were no other Carneys or Kennedys in the entire cemetery, just these two, which seemed odd. For several days I used every research skill I could think of, as these two cowboys led me from Kansas and Colorado to Greeley, Evergreen, Rocky Ford, the Grand Canyon, Canada, Morrison, and Boise. In the end, there were several surprising twists which framed the details of their lives and deaths, but I wasn't prepared for their very unbelievable connections to my own family!

Here is what I discovered:

- Both men grew up on small family ranches, one in Rawlins, Kansas and one in Galeton, Colorado, near Greeley
- Both men were contestants on various rodeos circuits all over the country
- Both men were award-winning rodeo cowboys throughout the 1920's and 1930's
- Both men evidently knew and competed against some of the most accomplished and famous rodeo personalities of that time
- Both men won contests riding "killer broncos" including *Hell's Angel* and *Whizzer White*, among many others
- Both men were named *World's Grand Champion Cowboy* in subsequent years
- Both men competed in the 1934 Rodeo at Wembley Stadium in London and returned home together on the ship *Acquintania*
- Both men died at relatively young ages
- Both men are buried, with matching tombstones, in a small mountain cemetery in the Colorado foothills

However ... most astonishing of all ... both men married the same woman!

As their life-stories began to merge, they seemed to revolve around a young woman named Lillian Katherine Fraser. She was born in Barnum, Colorado, daughter of a Scottish emigrant who worked in a Lakewood candy store. Somehow she became acquainted with a cowboy named Cecil Kennedy and they married in 1928 when she was eighteen. Cecil entered numerous rodeo competitions in and around Wyoming and Colorado, including a winning ride on the buckler, *Pine Bluff*, in an early rodeo in Golden. Tragically, their short marriage came to an abrupt end in 1938, when Lillian was widowed and left with a young son. Newspaper accounts throughout the west reported that Cecil was performing in southern Colorado, at the Arkansas Valley Fair Rodeo in Rocky Ford when he fell and was trampled to death by a "plunging mount." Lillian buried Cecil in Bear Creek Cemetery in Evergreen, Colorado.

A few months later in a surprise ceremony in Chandler, Arizona, Lillian married Cecil's buddy, Paul Carney. They bought a ranch, *The Diamond Two*, and had two sons. Paul continued to rodeo, winning bigger and better purses. He was ruggedly handsome, and apparently earned additional income appearing in advertisements for cigarettes, claiming "*Less nicotine in the smoke means much more mildness to me. I'm glad I switched to Camels!*" Maybe he was the original Marlboro Man? Meanwhile, Lillian owned the Polo Stables at the luxurious San Marcos Resort in Chandler, Arizona, and began to raise quarter horses, as well as racing her thoroughbreds.

However, tragedy again befell Lillian and the three children in 1950, when Paul suffered an inexplicable, fatal heart attack at his company's construction job in Williams, near the Grand Canyon. Widowed for a second time, Lillian evidently decided to bury Paul in Colorado next to his good friend Cecil, her first husband. A large crowd attended his services held at Woods Mortuary in Golden. Lillian Fraser Kennedy Carney had lost two husbands, young cowboys, and laid them both to rest side-by-side, under the mountain pines.

Lillian and her three little boys relocated to Morrison, where she was appointed Postmaster in 1952 and worked to obtain her teaching certificate. In 1955 she married for the third time to Clint Merle Decker, a rancher from Yampa, Colorado (who was twelve years younger than she) and with her children, they moved to Idaho. She taught school, and they raised champion thoroughbreds on their ranch, which they raced at the nearby Les Bois Racetrack in Boise. Lillian and Clint were married for 47 years. When she died at ninety-three, her large family reported that she had led a long and adventurous life, she was a widely known and respected teacher, horsewoman, a beloved wife, mother and great-grandmother. She was buried in Minidoka, Idaho, and Clint was buried next to her in 2010.

While exploring their stories I eventually found their obituaries, uncovering another surprise! Finally, this answered the foggy questions that commanded my attention in the first place. It turns out that as youngsters, both Cecil and Paul were mentored by a rodeo producer, who saw them hanging around the early Greeley Spud Rodeos, gave them jobs, and became their life-long friend, guiding their careers. He was also responsible for taking them to perform in the London Rodeos, which must have been thrilling adventures for two kids who grew up riding horses on their family farms. He taught them to compete, and successfully compete they did, winning purses in Calgary, Greeley, Ft. Worth, Denver, London, Billings, and Madison Square Garden, to name a few. For more than two decades their friend raised brahma bulls and broncos for small rodeos, as well as both the famous Cheyenne Frontier Days and the National Western Stock Shows. He is credited with designing and building the first regulation rodeo shutes, still being used today. Like Paul and Cecil, he is honored at the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs and the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

This stockman owned the world-famous bucking bronco, "Midnight," who was the only horse no cowboy ever rode for the required ten seconds, as well as Midnight's stable mate, "Five Minutes to Midnight." His wife was my cousin, Cleta Buzbee Smith, a cowgirl and horsewoman and they were said to have treated Cecil, Paul, and other youngsters like sons. He was initiated into the Navajo Tribe and when he died in 1962 he was buried with Cleta in Platteville, Colorado, near their family ranch.

The inscription on his beautiful tomb reads:
"Acalthe Binantai, Mr. Head Cowboy. A kind and loving wife who worked diligently beside her husband in his many years of rodeo life. A trouper who will never be forgotten in the annals of the rodeo world."
 He was famous, he was my relative, and his name was Alva Verne Elliott.

Some believe that the lives of loved ones end in cemeteries, and they do. They are places full of sadness, tears, memories, and maybe even a few regrets for those who come to mourn. Yet, couldn't they also be a place to pause and be thoughtful, exploring ways to connect to our own histories? I like to think that the stones, both simple, involved or ornate, mark more than just names and dates. Each has a tale to tell if we are curious enough to listen, even on a summer day, in a quiet mountain cemetery. Possibly, Cecil and Paul, two buddies, were just waiting for a friend to stop by and say "Howdy, cowboys!"



Paul Smith Carney



Cecil Kennedy on Pine Bluff 1929



Cecil Kennedy, 32, of Denver and Flagstaff, Ariz., died Aug. 31 of injuries suffered when the bronco he was riding in the Arkansas Valley Fair at Rocky Ford, Colo., fell and rolled on him. He and his brother, Gale, who was present, had appeared in scores of western rodeos. The Associated Press.

Cecil Kennedy



Lillian Katherine Fraser



Clint Merle Decker



1929 Golden, CO Rodeo



San Marcos Resort
Chandler Arizona

Paul Carney's Endorsement c 1940



Clint and Lillian's Grave, Boise, ID

An Honor or Just A Coincidence?

Remember Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Byron White, a graduate of the University of Colorado? He was a football player who went on to the Pros, and his nickname was "Whizzer" because he was so good at whizzing past the opposing team, winding and jumping.

The nickname stuck.

Evidently there was a bucking bronco named after him, which Cecil and Paul rode in numerous rodeos,

Whizzer White!



Below is an article which refers to the first International Rodeo in London in 1924. Verne Elliott, Cecil Kennedy and Paul Carney participated in this rodeo and possibly they were on this ship. (A passenger roster is still to be researched.) Other accounts in the British press said "this genuine American rodeo caused great alarm to animal lovers." There were so many outraged attendees in 1934, that England went on to pass an anti-cruelty law and outlawed further rodeos in Great Britain.

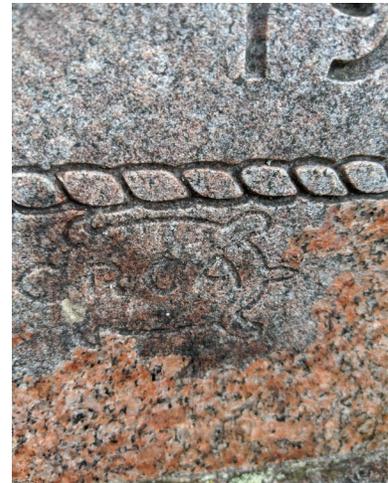
An Export? Rodeo Was, to the British

Willard H. Porter **The Oklahoman** (Published on March 25, 1984)

Of all the places American rodeo cowboys have traveled, in the near-century the sport has been in existence, the most unlikely one was London, England. With the help of the Britisher, Charles B. Cochran, the "World Championship Cowboy Contests" were managed and directed by Tex Austin, rodeo entrepreneur from New Mexico who once fought in Old Mexico's "foreign legion" against the dictator, Porfirio Diaz. When not assisting in Mexico's "liberation," for which cause he rode with the forces of Francisco Madero, Austin made his home at his Forked Lightning Ranch near Las Vegas.

His long-time dream to promote an international rodeo in London came true in 1924. Though the 15-day rodeo was not successful, it was an undertaking of considerable daring and a high old adventure for the 200 participating contestants. In the first place, the whole kit and caboodle cowboys, cowgirls, horses, cattle, equipment, costumes and a game plan had to be exported to London, to Wembley Dome where the contests were to be staged.

To do this, Austin booked passage on the **S.S. Menominee**, from New York to Liverpool, and wished his "children" well as the luxury liner put out to sea. But all did not go well, especially during days when rough weather took its toll. A special correspondent for the London Daily Express, aboard the Menominee to dispatch items of interest to the home paper, recorded the experience like this: *"Pitiable scenes were witnessed yesterday. The white-faced champions lay rigid in deck-chairs, muffled in rugs and blankets. Low groans broke the deathly silence. The heavy swells and pouring rains had conquered the redoubtable rodeo riders. Many have expressed the determination to settle in England in preference to the return voyage."*



**Cowboy Turtle Association's Logo
and
Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association's
Insignia on gravestones**

When Cecil Kennedy and Paul Carney were involved in professional rodeo beginning in the 1920's, there were issues among the participants which continued to become more and more serious.

Cowboys complained that prize money was uneven, and that judging was not always honest and fair.

In 1929 the Rodeo Association of America was formed, regulating the various events and venues, as well as advertising procedures and promotions.

Yet, even after the 1936 strike at the Boston Garden Rodeo, the performers felt that problems had still not been solved.

The cowboys decided to organize on their own, calling themselves the *Cowboys Turtle Association*, because they "were slow to organize but eventually stuck their necks out!"

Eventually the CTA became the *Rodeo Cowboys Association* (RCA) recognized as the largest sanctioning organization in the world, now known as the *Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association*. (PRCA)

Today there are more than 600 professionally sanctioned rodeos, the prize money in 2018 topped \$49 million dollars, and most are produced by local volunteer committees who also donate proceeds to charities.

Almost 200 performers have surpassed the million dollar mark in career prize money!

Rodeos are held all over the world, and there are television and media outlets dedicated to the sport.

**Note the small turtles carved on both Cecil's and Paul's gravestones,
signifying their membership in the original CTA and the RCA.**