

WASHINGTON RACING HALL OF FAME

Frances Irwin Keller

Trendsetter and horsewoman extraordinaire

by Susan van Dyke



Frances “Noonie” Gwendolyn Irwin was the youngest of four children born to Charles Burton Irwin, a man known to be “larger than life” in both size (he was said to have weighed between 400 to 500 pounds) and deeds, and his wife Etta Mae.

From her birth on October 6, 1901, in Horse Creek, Wyoming, she must have led an interesting life. Frances was not born in town, but in the ranch house on Johnnie Gordon’s LS Ranch, where her father worked as the ranch foreman while trying to earn a nest egg to build the family’s nearby Y6 Ranch (named for the six family members who each homesteaded a quarter section – a full section is a square mile or 540 acres – making up the original ranch in Meriden). The Irwins’ ranch, which eventually expanded to over 23,000 acres, was located 45 miles north of Cheyenne. Frances’ middle name, Gwendolyn, was the name of Gordon’s mother.

Daughter of a Legend

Frances’ father, widely known as “C. B.,” was born in Chillicothe, Missouri, in 1875. His family soon moved to Kansas where his family were farmers and also ran a blacksmith shop. They later migrated to Colorado Springs and then further north to Wyoming around the turn of the century.

C. B. married Etta May McGuckin in January 1894 in Sherman County, Kansas. The eighth of 15 children, Etta Mae had been born on November 23, 1874, in Rochester, New York.

Among C. B.’s many titles were wheat farmer, blacksmith, ranch foreman and Union Pacific livestock agent. The western entrepreneur was also a noted livestock

dealer, Wild West show owner (which featured the famous bucking horse Steamboat – who is pictured on the Wyoming vehicle license plates) and ringmaster (in 1975 he was inducted into the National Rodeo Hall of Fame for his work as rodeo producer and livestock contractor), champion steer roper (won the 1906 championship at Frontier Days), gambler, famous trick roper, civic leader, movie producer (president of the Cheyenne Feature Film Co. which produced the 1911 silent film *Round-Up on the Y6 Ranch**), posse leader, racetrack investor (among the original investors at Ak-Sar-Ben), twice leading Thoroughbred trainer by number of winners in North America and political hopeful (at the time of his death he was campaigning for governor of Wyoming under a slogan suggested by Will Rogers, “Popular government at popular prices.”).

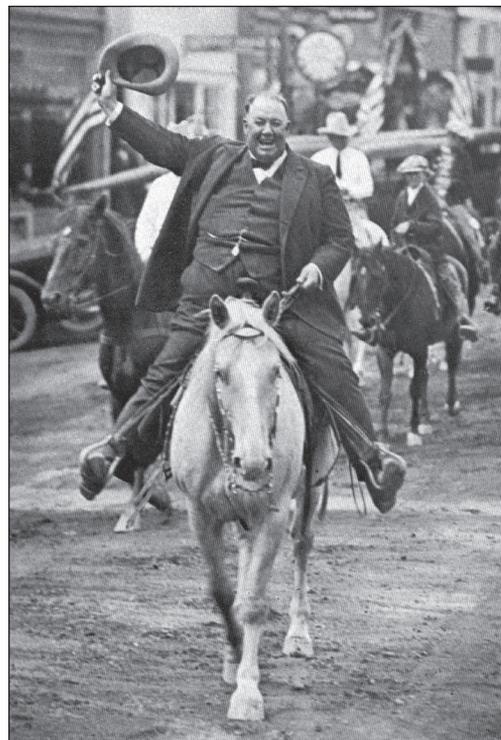
Irwin also was an early leader of the Cheyenne Frontier Days, where he later would be honored as a member of their Hall of Fame, and had been appointed to the Wyoming State Board of Child and Animal Protection.

General “Black Jack” John J. Pershing (the only person, while still alive, to rise to the highest rank ever held in the US Army – General of the Armies), cowboy artist Charles Russell, humorist and actor Will Rogers, France’s Baron de Rothschild, cowboy actor Tom Mix, Tom Horn, actor Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and his equally famous actress wife Mary Pickford, either ate at the Irwin dinner table, worked on the Irwin ranch or both. Horn, a cowboy who worked for Pinkerton Detective Agency (founded 1850) and who was supposedly a “hit man” for the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (cattlemen vs. sheepmen), had been employed by Irwin, who sang

The leading Thoroughbred trainer by wins in North America in 1923 and 1930, western entrepreneur C. B. Irwin was a man large in deeds, reputation and girth.

“Life is Like a Mountain Railroad” to Horn just prior to Horn’s hanging in 1903 for a murder he probably didn’t commit. Irwin entertained presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft in much more civil circumstances.

Irwin, who was known to race his horses hard after they had been turned out all winter to toughen on his Wyoming ranch, set a national record for wins in 1923 when his horses won 147 races and earned \$104,054. That record was not surpassed until 1936 when National Hall of Fame trainer Hirsch Jacobs saddled 177 winners. Irwin also led the ranks in 1930 (with 92) and was second in 1926 and 1927 (in the latter year, only two behind another Hall of Fame trainer, Sam Hildreth, with 70). The Wyoming horseman, who had stables at Tijuana and Ak-Sar-Ben, also ran a few horses at Longacres, including Miss Cheyenne, a tough daughter of Thunderer who won 34 of her 191 starts (1930-1934) and accomplished the feat of starting 14 times in 17 days!



Writer and Cowgirl Hall of Fame rider Reba Perry Blakely wrote in her article “*Lord Prim – The Grey Ghost*,” which appeared in the July 1974 issue of *The Washington Horse*, Irwin’s “iron-clad rule” was ‘If he couldn’t beat them, buy them or hire them.’ This applied to racehorses, bucking horses, jockeys and cowboys – a singular-minded resolution that won him world-wide fame.”

In an article written by Mike Donohoe that was printed in the February 1946 *The Washington Horse*, “. . . C. B. ‘Cowboy Charlie’ Irwin, the big man from Cheyenne, whose motto ‘run ‘em, godammit, run ‘em’ brought joy to racing secretaries, passed along, but left behind, a veritable dynasty of trainers, jockeys and racing officials who keep his ideals alive.” Among them was his youngest daughter Frances.

Wild West Frances

By 1912, the Irwin Brothers’ Wild West Show was a part of the entertainment scene in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, New York, California, Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and in Canada.

While still a young girl, Frances “did rope tricks from back of Blondie, the show steer.”

Laura Hillenbrand, in her best-seller *Seabiscuit*, cites that at the Irwins’ Wild West Shows, “The headliners were Irwin’s windblown daughters, Frances, Joella [Waldron] and Pauline [Sawyer], all fearless horsewomen.” Among the others on the Irwin payroll was “Silent Tom” Smith, who was Irwin’s foreman, farrier and training assistant and, according to Hillenbrand, “who worked mostly behind the scenes, but occasionally came into the ring to hold relay horses for Irwin’s daughters.”

In August 1916, Frances was among the “cowgirls” performing at the 12-day New York Stampede, an event put on by Guy Weadlick at the Sheepshead Bay Speedway. Among the others competing were future Cowgirl Hall of Famers Lucille Mulhall and Flores La Due, along with cowboy and actor Hoot Gibson and the famous black bulldogger Bill Pickett, who was elected into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1971.

According to filmmaker Shirley Morris, who in her 2008 documentary *Oh, You Cowgirl! A True Story About America’s Unsung Heroes* which profiles early 20th century cowgirls and includes the Irwin family, part of the fascination and what motivated her to pursue the Irwins was how C. B. encouraged his three daughters to become not only champion riders, but overachievers in every area of their lives.

“This family really should have a very special place in Western history, because it was not just one member of the family that was outstanding; it was the entire family,” said Morris.

Not only did Frances “know horseflesh like her father knew horseflesh,” her sister Joella was, according to Teddy Roosevelt, the finest horsewoman he ever met and



Mrs. Florence Evans-Dibble in her stage coach “The Valiant,” in front of the glamorous Waldorf Astoria Hotel, just before embarking on her journey to attempt to break the “coach-and-four” record of 12 hours and 18 minutes from New York to Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1936. About 20 years earlier, a young Frances Irwin had ridden her horse into the New York landmark. Photo courtesy of Waldorf Astoria archives.

she would later become respected as an accomplished artist.

In her 1,120-page historic, but fictionalized story, of C. B. Irwin, *Prairie*, Anna Lee Waldo wrote about a Wild West show held in Spokane when Frances was ten.

“The first event began with Frances in a red bolero, white satin shirt with spangles, and pants with angora chaps, riding a big brown horse and carrying a big American flag.

“The three Irwin girls and several Spokane girls were in the first race,” in which Frances, the youngest cowgirl competing at the show, won the race by a half-length. “The young equestrian (with the hip length blond hair) was not only beautiful and charming, but she was a skilled athlete. From that day forward she was a favorite with the Wild West and rodeo enthusiasts.”

A few years later, at the New York Stampede – held at the New York Speedway – Frances was cut up pretty badly (with deeply lacerated legs) while practicing for an event after the horse she was riding sideswiped the fence and Frances was thrown. Nevertheless, even though bandaged so tightly she could barely walk and with the need to be helped to mount each day, Frances continued to compete throughout the nine-day competition and was named the all-around cowgirl and best individual performer, for which she was given a silver plaque and \$500 prize.

According to *The Blood-Horse* correspondent Alex Bower in the September 21, 1946, issue of that Kentucky trade journal, equestrian Frances “once rode a horse into the Waldorf-Astoria” – probably the most famed and elite hotel of its day, not only in New York, but worldwide.

Warren Richardson, of Cheyenne, knew the Irwin family for over 30 years. “Charlie was proud of his charming daughters, to whom he furnished the best horses money would buy for their performances that for years delighted thousands.”

After the early death of C. B.’s only

son Floyd, at age 23, in a freak accident while practicing steer roping for the 1917 Cheyenne Frontier Days, the Irwin Brothers Wild West Show was disbanded.

First Marriage

Frances attended the University of Nebraska, where she studied accounting and met and married her first husband, Joseph E. Walters, on March 20, 1920, in Falls City, Nebraska, while still attending college. They had one son, Robert “Irwin” Charles Walters, who was born in 1924 (and died in 2007). A non-horseman, the senior Walters was a business administration graduate who later worked as secretary for the senior Irwin at the Union Pacific and then moved to California to keep track of the family’s racehorses. The Irwin family also had a winter ranch in San Ysidro, which lies just north of Tijuana and the U S-Mexican border.

Leading Trainer

Some might think that trendsetter, fellow Washington Hall of Famer and four-time Longacres leading trainer (1972-73, 1976, 1978) Kathy Walsh was the first woman to ascend to that title at the Renton oval. But that honor goes to Frances, although Ruth Parton was the first woman to saddle a winner at Longacres, at the track’s inaugural 1933 meet, and was a highly successful conditioner during the track’s early days.

After C. B.’s death in an automobile accident in March of 1934, the Irwin racing stable was trained by R. Liehe. Among the eight who served as pallbearers of his 8’ x 3’ x 32” casket were the aforementioned cowboy humorist Will Rogers and Union Pacific Railroad President Carl R. Gray.

By the following year the Irwin stable had been turned over to Tom Smith, who had worked alongside C. B. in both his racing and Wild West Show ventures, to train.

During the third season of racing at Longacres – in 1935 – with Smith as trainer and Frances as manager, the Mrs. C. B. Irwin stable won 14 races: five with Lirolele, three with Instigator, three with Gerard, two with

Color Bell and one with Ysix. All had future Hall of Famer Ralph Neves in the saddle. Among Instigator's tallies were firsts in the inaugural running of the Renton Handicap (with Smith's Oriley taking second) and in the second running of the Seattle Handicap. Smith won at least three other races during the meet under his own name.

When Smith left to work for C. S. Howard in 1936, for whom he would condition Seabiscuit, *Kayak II, Mioland and a host of other top horses, it was he who advised the family to have Frances take over the job.

According to the previously mentioned *The Blood-Horse* article by Bower, Smith advised "Frances, you take the horses. You can train them as well as anybody."

But it would be four more years before Frances's name would appear in the "trained by" section of the charts.

In 1936 Liehe was back in control of the Irwin horses at Longacres and came away with 11 wins, six of which were won by the mare Translucent; nine had Neves aboard.

The following year the Irwin stable had eight wins at the Renton oval and all but one (credited to R. Luke) was trained by Liehe with seven having Neves in the saddle. Trainership of the Irwin horses at Longacres switched to T. Holloway in 1938, but the number of wins can't be determined due to the loss of the WTBOA copy of the July chart book. C. Lindseth was the trainer of record for the eight Irwin winners at Longacres in 1939.

Keller set out her shingle at Longacres in 1940, and became one of the first women, if not the first, to win a training title at major North American track.

Her initial Longacres winner came on the June 29 opening day when she saddled her mother's Shadytown to take the sixth race. A. Speery was aboard the gelded son of Jamestown for a five-length win in the \$1,350 claimer. In the first five days of the meet, Keller, assuming she was training all of her mother's runners (only winning trainers are noted on the charts of that era), had 13 starts and her record stood at 3-4-3.

Her first Longacres title coincided with her first Longacres Mile winner, Pala Squaw. Not only did Keller become the initial woman trainer to win the Mile, she did so in her first attempt and with the only distaffer in the 13-horse field. Three-year-old California-bred Pala Squaw, by *Bistouri, raced as the favored entry (\$1.50-to-one) with *Olimpo (who dead-heated for third with Mr. Grundy) as part of the Al Rosenberg-owned entry in the August 25 race. Ridden by 19-year-old apprentice rider Otto Grohs, Pala Squaw stalked the early pace for the first six furlongs before drawing off "under mild pressure" to take the sixth Mile by 1 1/2 lengths in 1:36 2/5, just one tick off the track record.

Keller had already saddled Pala Squaw to four other wins at the meet: the \$1,000 Red

Cross Handicap on July 9, when Pala Squaw defeated Horatio Luro-owned and Charlie Whittingham-trained Dandy by nearly a length; the \$1,200 Mt. Rainier Handicap on August 4; the \$1,000 Washington Handicap on August 11; and the \$8,000 Quickstep Handicap on August 18. In each win she was ridden by Grohs. And lest you think that five races in July and August was excessive work for the sophomore filly, she also ran third in the \$1,200 Independence Day Handicap on July 4; had another third in the \$800 Rainier District Pow Wow Handicap on July 21; and was second in the \$2,000 Speed Handicap on August 2.

By meet end, Keller had saddled 65 runners for her mother with a record of 16-18-4: Bartolozzi (three wins), Booter Billy (two), Drake (two), Edgar Boy, Escalante (two), Mullet, Shadytown (two), Storm Warning (two) and Wyoming Daisy.

Bartolozzi, a five-gelded son of *Sir Gallahad III out of the Man o'War mare Serenity, may have been Keller's first winner as a trainer. The fact is difficult to confirm as trainers needed ten or more winners to be included in *Daily Racing Form* year-end stats, but on April 18, 1940, Bartolozzi won a six-furlong race at Tanforan, listing a Mrs. F. Keller as trainer for Mrs. C. B. Irwin. The runner scored a second win just nine days later at the Northern California track for the same connections. (Author's note: I have accounted for 23 of Keller's 24 wins in 1940.)

Keller's second Longacres training title and Mile winner came along six years later when Amble In won his first Mile (his second came in 1948 for Washington Hall of Famer Allen Drumheller). Another state Racing Hall of Famer, the late Pete Pedersen, wrote after the race: "Mrs. Keller turned in the most astute job of the season when she fitted Amble In . . . for the \$20,000 Longacres Mile." Pedersen would later add, "The Longacres Mile came of age with the 1946 running."

All but one of Keller's 17 wins that season (when she was tied with conditioner Larry Kidd) came from runners owned by the K & L Stables of Irving Levine. Her other winner, Navy Bomber, raced for her mother.

Amble In, then three and carrying three pounds of overweight (111 pounds), went off at 14-to-one odds in the \$23,860-valued Mile. A Kentucky-bred son of Fighting Fox, Amble In had been claimed at Santa Anita for \$8,000 the previous winter. In the 11th running of the Mile he was ridden by Noel "Speck" Richardson, who had recently returned to riding after an eight-year absence. *Mafosta, who had been Ireland's champion two-year-old colt in 1944 and more recently had been an impressive winner of the Speed Handicap, went off as the \$1.70-to-one favorite and set the pace for the first six furlongs before fading to sixth in the ten-horse field. Meanwhile, "Amble In came

again in the stretch and drew away to win in a wide margin," and set not only a new track record, but the West Coast acme for the distance with a 1:35 flat clocking.

A paragraph in the October 1946 *The Washington Horse* hailed Amble In's six-length win a "triumph for the West's premier horsewoman."

In 1947, when the "Highlights of the 1946 Season" appeared in the *Daily Racing Form's* annual turf review and it was found that the great Armed had performed a "similar feat at Washington Park on August 3," Ed Donohoe wrote in *The Washington Horse*: "Frances Keller, the Ambler's trainer, and Irving Levine, the owner, can take their bows now. Their merchant of speed shared top billing with Armed, probably the nation's best stake racer in 1946, weight for age. Hail forever - Amble In."

Keller also became the first woman to train a Washington (now Gottstein) Futurity winner. Among her other stakes wins at Longacres were the 1942 Independence Day Handicap with Campus Fusser (who won the 1941 Independence Day Handicap and Longacres Mile while trained by Drumheller) and the Spokane Handicap with Prince Ernest (who took the 1945 Mile for trainer Yorkie McLeod).

Conflicts of Interest

Frances' second husband, Mannie Keller, was one of the official judges (picked by



track management, but approved by the Washington Horse Racing Commission [WHRC]) for the first weeks of the seventh season of racing at the Renton track

in 1939 and was Longacres director of racing and racing secretary in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He had briefly been a contract rider and trainer for Frances' father. According to a report in the April 1946 *The Washington Horse*, Mannie "started as an exercise boy, and has been a jockey, groom, trainer, patrol judge, placing judge and clocker. There is virtually no job around a track, either on the backstretch, in the mutuels, or in the office that Mannie hasn't held. He brings a well-rounded experience along with a pleasing personality to his new position (as Longacres assistant manager)," wrote then-WHBA secretary and future Washington Hall of Fame breeder George C. Newell.

In early 1947, a storm was approaching high intensity over "the Keller situation."

Two years earlier, the WHRC, which was chaired by another future Washington Hall of



Keller's first training title coincided with her first Longacres Mile winner, Al Rosenberg's three-year-old filly Pala Squaw, in 1940, and came less than three months after her initial winner at the Renton oval. Six years later Keller saddled K & J Stable's Amble In to the first of his two tallies, and a new track record, in Washington's premier race, then in its eleventh running. Keller is at far left in each photo.

Famer, Frank Brewster, unanimously ruled that "neither the owners, operators, nor their families, or persons in a directorial capacity can run their horses on their own tracks . . . meaning Longacres and Playfair."

In a nutshell, this was supposed to mean that, as long as Mannie Keller was Longacres' general manager, racing secretary or other high-ranking official at the track, his wife Frances would not be allowed to train or enter horses at the Renton meet. Brewster and many others in the industry felt this rule was best for racing business in the state – that it helped to maintain racing's integrity in the view of the public.

The subject soon became "hot copy."

Editor Donohoe, while assuring all that he had the highest regard for both of the Kellers and the Washington Jockey Club (Longacres), asked the question of the day in his "Turf Topics" column in the July 1947 *The Washington Horse (WH)*: "Is Mrs. Keller going to run horses this summer in direct contradiction of the Washington Horse Racing Commission, or is she not?"

At the time, Frances Keller was "training her own and other stables' horses without knowing whether she can run or not."

Another holding the same point of view as Donohoe, and more than willing to put pen to paper, was Royal Brougham, the "Dean of American Sportswriters," who spent 68 years on the job with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

In the August *WH* magazine, Donohoe reported on how the 1945 ruling became moot: "We could have easily predicted that Mr. Gottstein's trainer and buddy, Messrs. Drumheller and Sutton, voted to grant a license, as that's the way it turned out. Chairman Brewster cast the only negative vote."

Evidently the controversial vote held, as Frances was allowed to train and enter horses during the Longacres season (which began on June 28), as noted by her victory with Happy Valley in the 1947 Washington Futurity.

The issue must have returned in 1948,

as the WHRC at first refused to approve Longacres officials for the season. It was later noted that "A compromise was worked out with W. J. "Doc" McKeon, who had been appointed as a steward at Longacres in 1946, serving a one-year stint as racing secretary in 1948, while Mannie Keller held the title of Longacres director of racing."

Though she had 17 wins that year, 1948 appears to mark Mrs. Keller's sayonara conditioning runners on the track, as her name was not found in future *American Racing Manual* yearly recaps.**

The Kellers would soon divorce, but only Mannie would remarry.

Later, Mannie Keller would serve as racing secretary, director of racing and steward at Playfair in Spokane until he retired in 1977. He also was the racing secretary at Lansdowne Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1955 and worked in various other racing capacities at tracks in California, Illinois, Nebraska, Ohio and Mexico. Mannie, who would later join Playfair's board of directors, died on August 15, 1984, at age 80, leaving his second wife, Peggy.

Return to California

In the May 1950 issue of *The Washington Horse*, this small note appeared: "Frances Keller, daughter of the famous late C. B. Irwin and a trainer of high repute in her own right (emphasis author's), has forsaken the training ranks. She is now manager of H. G. Bedwell's ranch near Santa Anita, where she will oversee the breaking of yearlings and boarding of horses."

In another small item, this time in the January 1954 *Thoroughbred of California*, it stated: "Mrs. Frances Keller, who enjoys the reputation of being a superlative hand at breaking yearlings, had 22 in her care at Santa Anita last fall. She turned all but five of them over to trainers in December, and took the five others, who were last foals, to Pomona for finishing."

Less than two months prior, on November 19, 1953, her mother Etta Irwin died at age 78 in California and would be buried alongside her husband in Cheyenne's Lakeview Cemetery.

Frances passed away on July 1, 1979, in Santa Cruz, California, at age 77, having outlived all of her three siblings. Though she could not come close to her father's fame, her intellect and her achievements proved a credit to her rich heritage. ■

*Another movie filmed on the Y6 Ranch was *Curse of the Great Southwest* (aka *Curse of the Southwest*, aka *Life on the Y6 Ranch*), which also contained footage of the 1912 Frontier Days celebration in Cheyenne. Among its list of stars was Charles Irwin. Both Frances and her sister Pauline appeared as extras.

**Due to the logistics of the time, author was unable to find the location of her wins in 1948.

Sources: *Seabiscuit*, by Laura Hillenbrand; *The Washington Horse*; *The Blood-Horse*; *The End of the Era*, Longacres Commemorative Press Guide; *Longacres Mile History Book*; *Prairie*, by Anna Lee Waldo; *A Rancher's Big Heart Goes the Distance*, by Candy Moulton in *True West* magazine, *Thoroughbred of California*.

Training Record

Year	Wins	Money
1940	24	\$23,770
1941	24	\$15,627
1942	23	\$21,375
1943*	—	—
1944	13	\$16,130
1945	22	\$36,950
1946	29	\$54,475
1947	20	\$50,365
1948	17	\$49,740

*No listing; also no racing in Washington and many other tracks, due to WWII. Keller's training records are from the *American Racing Manual*. At that time, a trainer must have a minimum of 10 winners in order to be listed.