

Snake, Rattle, and Roll Transcript

Tyler: This episode of Lost Highways is being released by History Colorado as many of us are staying home in an effort to keep our community safe during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. To those of you out there who are unable to stay home, whether it's because you're working to keep people safe, provide healthcare, or provide supplies, thank you.

Underwriting: *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

[Music]

Tyler: In 1979, curator and historian Peggy Ford Waldo had just started working at the Greeley History Museum, when she stumbled upon a mysterious artifact, buried away in storage.

Peggy Ford Waldo: And hanging in our very tiny collections storage area was a dress made of the skins of rattlesnakes and it was just protected with a dry cleaner's bag.

Noel: A dress made of RATTLESNAKE SKINS. Naturally, Ford Waldo, who you might remember from some of our previous episodes about Dearfield and Native American Mascots, was curious.

Peggy Ford Waldo: It looks like a flapper dress. And of course, a dress made of snake skins with the hem of the dress being all the rattles of these skins intact, would have been in for a great time. You know, let's shake, rattle and roll.

Tyler: And it wasn't just a dress. Along with it was an ENTIRE flapper outfit made of snake skins and rattles, including accessories.

Peggy Ford Waldo: There was a pair of shoes that had been covered with rattlesnake skins and there was a headband with very large rattles glued all the way around it. And then there

was a necklace made of again, very large rattles. So, curiosity is whetted when you encounter something like this, because obviously it's quite unusual.

Tyler: The dress, and its creator would become one of the Greeley History Museum's most prized artifacts. And decades later, it would be discovered by a musician from one of Colorado's best-known bands.

[Music: The Lumineer's "Ho Hey"]

Neyla Pekarek: My name's Neyla Pekarek and I'm from Denver, Colorado. I guess most folks might be most familiar with my time with a band called "The Lumineers".

[Music continues]

I've been trying to do it right
(Hey) I've been living a lonely life

[music fades under Noel narrating]

Noel: Even if you don't know the Lumineers by name, you've probably heard their music.

[Music continues]

(Ho) I've been sleepin' here instead
(Hey) I've been sleepin' in my bed
(Ho) Sleepin' in my bed

[Music fades out]

Neyla Pekarek: I spent the better part of a decade with that band and then left a couple years ago to pursue my own music.

[Music]

Neyla Pekarek: So I went to school up in Greeley, Colorado, at the University of Northern Colorado and a lot of times we would just kind of explore the town. Greeley's not a huge town with not a ton to do, especially as college students. And we found ourselves in the - in the

historical museum one day, which wasn't super out of the ordinary for us. And so, we were really interested in all of that. (laugh) And, Rattlesnake Kate, is sort of the main event at the Greeley History Museum.

Tyler: The REAL story of Rattlesnake Kate isn't actually about the dress. It's about how she ended up with enough snake skins to make it. Neyla found it strange that this iconic Western Woman is somehow still reduced to the things she wore.

Neyla Pekarek: The one thing that's kind of left behind in this embodiment that's been preserved is her *dress* and that's in the Greeley Museum. And it's really stunning. And it's just a outrageous thing to see close up. You know, that you can see the hand stitching and the fact that she went back to this, like, traumatic place, you know, place of so much scary trauma to gather the skins of these snakes to make a dress is just insane to me.

[Music fades in]

Noel: The iconic rattlesnake-skin outfit is more than just an outfit. Peggy Ford Waldo has done tons of research on the life of the woman who made it: Kate Slaughterback.

Tyler: And Neyla Pekarek has made her the focus of not only her first solo album, but an entire musical theater production as well. You'll hear songs from the album throughout the episode, and the musical is set to premiere in February 2021 in Denver.

Neyla Pekarek: I also am from Colorado and I had never heard this story before. And that was kind of striking to me as well. And the more I learned about her, it just was full of this rich storytelling, just this sort of feeling of - of not having a voice all the time. And she was a person that really fought to be *exactly* who she was, even if it rubbed people the wrong way sometimes. And I often feel like I live in a world where I have to be a people pleaser to really, to be successful. And it doesn't always feel great. And so as I - as I sort of thought about her a lot, started writing about her a lot, and reading about her a lot, the more I found my own voice and the more I kind of had the courage to believe that I could do something different and put my own record out.

[Music fades out]

Noel: The dress, in many ways, is a symbol of that courage. It was a courage exhibited by many of the women who lived in the American West at the time.

Tyler: And you don't hear much about those women in books, movies, or TV shows. But Kate was different.

Noel: Rattlesnake Kate Slaughterback's life was larger than life. She couldn't be ignored.

[Lost Highways music]

Tyler: From History Colorado, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

Tyler: On this episode: Rattlesnake Kate Slaughterback. An archetypal pioneer woman with a mythical, extraordinary life, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a tall-tale to tell.

[Lost Highways music fades out]

Noel: To understand how Kate Slaughterback ended up making that snakeskin dress, it helps to know where she came from.

Neyla Pekarek: So, you know, Rattlesnake Kate, she was born in 1893.

Peggy Ford Waldo: She was born in a small log cabin that was located about nine miles east of Longmont, Colorado. Her mother died when Kate was quite young. She died in - in 1896. And this left Kate growing up with her father, her two brothers. So here is this little girl, being around and being influenced by a lot of men very early on in her life.

Noel: Lindsay McNatt has been an elementary school teacher in Denver Public Schools for 16 years. She wrote a children's book about Kate Slaughterback for the DPS curriculum.

Lindsay McNatt: I didn't necessarily find facts about it. But I kind of imagine that he, you know, let her kind of come into her own and didn't hold her in that typical female role that we would have expected as far as, you know, taking care of the family, and cleaning, and cooking, and that kind of a thing. And she was just able to, you know, become an awesome marksman with her rifle and - and be able to know all of these things about taking care of herself, and living, and running a homestead on her own.

Peggy Ford Waldo: And to say that she was most likely a tomboy is very accurate. She loved to be outside. She loved animals. She herself mentions this many times in her conversations with other people and in her correspondence with a man from Iowa named Buckskin Bill.

Noel: A lot of what we know about Kate Slaughterback comes from their correspondence.

Peggy Ford Waldo: And in these letters, Kate writes quite a bit about herself. And of course, many things that she writes are true. A few things that she writes are, I would say, not so true.

[Music fades in]

Neyla Pekarek: She had, rumor has it, six failed marriages. You know, she wasn't very close with her family members. Her mother died when she was quite young. She was raised by her father and her brothers. So just really rough and tumble, I think, from the - from the get go, but also very resourceful. I mean, she ran her own farm. She built her own farmhouse. And every time she talks about hiring help, you know, they - nobody can do any of the jobs right. (laughs) You want something done right, you gotta do it yourself, kind of attitude.

Peggy Ford Waldo: Kate describes to her pen pal Buckskin Bill. She says that she's 36 years old. And she says she's five feet, four inches tall. She wears a size three and a half shoe. She says, I have great big, strong hands and I weigh a hundred and ten pounds. She says she's Irish and she has a temper. She has gray, blue eyes, the color of George Washington's. She occasionally smokes. She drinks occasionally, but she does not go on any benders.

Noel: Again, when it comes to the life of Rattlesnake Kate Slaughterback, it's somewhat hard to discern fact from fiction. But she told Buckskin Bill that she left home at a young age.

Peggy Ford Waldo: She said that she ran away, she stole some food, she stole some clothes from her brother. She disguised herself as a boy. And she walked the railroad tracks all the way to Red Cloud, Nebraska. She was hiding along the way, sleeping under bridge trestles, catching minnows in the little streams and eating them raw, drinking creek water, washing herself in the little creeks and streams.

Tyler: Neyla Pekarek says that she felt a strong connection with Kate Slaughterback, and drew parallels between Kate's life and her own on her album "Rattlesnake"

Neyla Pekarek: I mean, "Train song", that's - that starts the record. You know, a lot of folks, I put that out as my first single and they said like, this sounds like, you know, sort of your departure from The Lumineers and that's totally accurate.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Train Song" plays in the background]

Neyla Pekarek: And so I just sort of saw it's like both her embarking on an on, you know, new things for her life. And that's a lot of the sort of Western dream. You know, all these - all these folks moved west with these hopes of really amazing opportunities and a better life for themselves.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Train Song"]

Hear the train a comin'

I'm gonna climb on-board and

Let that iron horse take me away

New adventure full of

Possibility and

Big new landscape, just get me on that

Big tank engine

Rolling along

My one way ticket

To a better life and a better song

Bend the rails

I can't wait too long

To board my train

And move on

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Kate lived a few different places throughout the West before ultimately ending back up in Colorado.

Noel: While living in Colorado, Kate Slaughterback allegedly became a registered nurse...among other things.

Peggy Ford Waldo: Between 1914 and 1918, that's the war years, Kate states that she was a Red Cross nurse at FITZSIMMONS Hospital in Denver. Well, research into the records does not show that she really became a registered nurse. So more than likely she had some training, perhaps, as maybe, a licensed practical nurse at either Saint Joseph's Hospital, or perhaps at a hospital in Longmont. She also becomes interested in taxidermy and she takes correspondence courses and she becomes quite proficient at this skill.

Tyler: And she adopted a kid, Ernie.

Noel: But Peggy Ford Waldo thinks there's more to Ernie's story.

Peggy Ford Waldo: So looking through some archival photographs of Kate, there is one showing her in Casper in 1921 in which she appears to be quite pregnant. So the story probably got configured in some way to save face.

Tyler: It's complicated. And nobody really knows the truth.

Peggy Ford Waldo: So any rate, lots of little interesting twists and turns related to this. In 1923, Cate Holmes, that is on 640 acres in the Hudson area... Actually, she was able to purchase several parcels of land. She said that her father had left her \$12,000 when he passed away. He would have died in 1918.

Lindsay McNatt: And she would tell Ernie, her son, she'd say, you know, we earn our bread by the sweat of our brow. And she was a dirt farmer. So she didn't pay people to work the land. She did it all herself, so she would raise crops that she would mainly feed to her animals and then sell the milk and that kind of stuff. And she had, you know, cows, and turkeys, and chickens, and pigs and that kind of stuff.

Noel: Lindsay McNatt says that Kate was nothing if not strong-willed.

Lindsay McNatt: She continued to use a harvester even after it became illegal. So it was a - a two person harvester where one person was supposed to drive the mule and then one person was supposed to sit on the harvester. But the blades would cut. And if somebody got in front of it, it could actually cut their legs off. So enough people got hurt that they made them illegal. But she was just like, nope, I'm going to use it anyway, because that works really well.

Peggy Ford Waldo: She also really, I think, feels that she is living in the wrong era. She would have liked to have lived in the 19th century. She read lots of dime novels about the American West. She loves horses. She loves *the history* of the American West.

Lindsay McNatt: I remember growing up that I - I was fascinated with Laura Ingalls Wilder and that kind of thing. And in that in a sense, it almost does end up being a survival story, like being able to hunt for your own food and take care of yourself when you're sick and all of those kinds

of things. So, I think we're drawn to that strength and independence and - and just that idea of overcoming these obstacles that kind of come up.

[Music]

Peggy Ford Waldo: And of course, in the 1920s, the next big thing that happens that really brought a lot of fame to Kate was this incident in which she comes across a lot of snakes that are migrating across the field. This was October 28th of 1925. She and Ernie started out on horseback towards a lake where a few wounded ducks were left by hunters the day before. She had put the saddle on her horse, Brownie, she put Ernie in the back of the saddle and she brought along her 22 Remington rifle.

Tyler: What happened next would earn Kate Slaughterback the nickname "Rattlesnake Kate," and change her life forever.

[Music fades under History Colorado PSA]

History Colorado PSA: As the number of cases of COVID -19 grows in Colorado, History Colorado wants to hear from you about how the outbreak is changing your daily life. Tell us about what you're doing to navigate work and family needs. Has your place of work reduced hours, or been forced to close? What steps have you and your family taken to prevent the virus's spread? What will you remember about this moment? Help History Colorado document this important history in the making. We've set up multiple ways for you to share your stories, photographs, and videos with us. You can call us at 720-466-8215 to record your story, or you can email a voice memo, photo, or video to curator@state.co.us. You can get more information about how to participate at www.historycolorado.org/covid-19, or in the episode description for this episode. Thanks for doing your part to care for our community.

[Music fades in then out to Noel narrating]

Noel: Here are Peggy Ford-Waldo, Lindsay McNatt, and Neyla Pekarek describing the terrifying episode that turned Kate Slaughterback into Rattlesnake Kate...

Peggy Ford-Waldo: So this is the story.

[Music]

Peggy Ford-Waldo: Before she could get to the lake she had to dismount from her horse and open a barb wire gate and lead her horse through.

Lindsay McNatt: And as she was approaching the gate she saw a rattlesnake come out.

Peggy Ford-Waldo: So she had her rifle. She shot it.

Lindsay McNatt: But when that sound of her gun went, then three more snakes came out.

Noel: Then she shot another one.

Tyler: And another one.

Noel: And another one.

Lindsay McNatt: She actually described it as the sound like wind throwing through dry leaves, and it was just, like, the sound of all the rattles and the snakes starting to move.

[Music becomes more upbeat]

Peggy Ford-Waldo: And she knew that she couldn't kill them all with a rifle load and reload. And she looked for a stick or something to kill them.

Lindsay McNatt: And she was just terrified that Brownie, the horse, was gonna get spooked and throw Ernie, and then they would both be in danger. So she kind of ironically grabbed a no

hunting sign that was there, (laughs) and started using it as a club, and beating the snakes as they were coming towards her.

Peggy Ford-Waldo: She used it as a club for the next two hours as she was just kind of battling the snakes as they were coiled up. She'd hit them and they had dashed their heads into the ground.

Lindsay McNatt: And what we think is that, she had stumbled into a - like a den of migrating snakes that were headed to - to go wherever they were gonna winter. And big groups of those can sometimes have several hundred snakes in them.

Neyla Pekarek: She talks about you know, these - these snakes were *springing* at her, and... it all just feels a little bit animated.

Lindsay McNatt: Hitting snake after snake and if they would kind of life, jump at her, she'd actually use the sign like a baseball bat, and kind of hit them away from her.

Peggy Ford-Waldo: And so finally, when all the rattling snot stopped after about two hours, Kate was then able to go back home.

Lindsay McNatt: Her hands were just like, covered with blisters. And... she had, like, a red, swollen face, just from you know, all the exertion, being outside for that long and - and fighting off the snakes for so long. And then they went out with some tubs and collected the snakes. And so they counted that she had killed one hundred forty snakes. And the neighbor went and told one of the newspapers down in Denver.

Tyler: Neyla Pekarek thinks it's fair to say that the way Kate described the story is maybe a little exaggerated.

Neyla Pekarek: But, you know, and I wonder about that, that, you know, if - if provoked. Sure. I - I would imagine a rattlesnake would - would defend itself. But the idea that these snakes were attacking her, I think is pretty far-fetched. Thinking about two hours, you know, that she's kind of slaughtering these snakes. I'm just picturing her, you know, towards the end of that, just being

exhausted. And she's kind of almost still looking like - are the - are there any more alive? Let me make sure they're all dead. And it's just kind of an interesting thing to me. And I mean, she was a woman that had a lot to be mad about.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "The Attack"]

Rattlesnake Kate, known as Kate Slaughterback

Got her nickname when she was looking for ducks and then a rattlesnake attacked

She saw just one snake, then two, then ten

Pulled out a .22 rifle and the massacre began

Before too long she had no bullets left

Grabbed a sign right out of the ground and clobbered them to death

Ahhh

She killed those snakes, she killed those snakes, she killed those snakes

Ahhh

It's a snake attack, it's a snake attack, a rattlesnake attack

[Music fades under Pekarek narrating]

Neyla Pekarek: You know, she was on horseback with her son and she said, you know, for *two hours* she was like, fighting off these snakes. And I thought a lot about, you know, if that was actually necessary, like at some point did she have the means to get through? But maybe she had just like, so much rage inside of her that she kept fighting. And it's something we've - we've thought a lot about as we've started to write this musical about her. And the idea of, you know, women with rage and women with anger, it's just been really interesting kind of through that perspective.

[Music continues]

Ahhh

It's a snake attack, it's a snake attack, a rattlesnake attack.

It's a snake attack, it's a snake attack, a rattlesnake attack

[Music fades under narration again]

Neyla Pekarek: You know, through the marriages she had, you have a lot of really bad marriages. She talks about one husband that ran off with I think was \$5,000, which by today's standards is probably like seventy five thousand dollars. I think she was just a really tough lady. And so it - it really got me thinking about that rage. And, you know, even now, I think it's - it's kind of an odd... and odd thing for - for women to express anger and rage.

Noel: Pekarek says that's a rage that she's familiar with herself.

Neyla Pekarek: And, you know, I was - I was in a band with - with all men. And we - you know, the majority of the people that worked for us were men. And so often I would watch, like my male counterparts, express anger, or rage, or frustration, and they were taken super seriously. And I just didn't always feel like I received that back. I actually had one conversation where we had just an outrageous tour ahead of us and we were trying to decide if we're gonna, you know, cut off, you know, cancel a few dates or something. And the manager said to me, oh, well, if you do this tour, think about all those pretty dresses you can buy.

[Music continues]

Rattlesnake Kate, alive and well
 Exhausted and passed out in that rattlesnake hell
 Returned the next day to claim her prize
 Those rattlesnake skins she would wear with pride

Ahhh

She killed those snakes, she killed those snakes, she killed those snakes

Ahhh

It's a snake attack, it's a snake attack, a rattlesnake attack

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Pekarek channeled that rage -- both her own and the anger that she feels Rattlesnake Kate must have felt -- on her album.

Neyla Pekarek: There's a song on the record that's called "Miffed" and I think Miffed is such a funny word for anger because it's so just sort of cute. (laughs) And one of the letters she was

talking about, she had been sprayed by a skunk and she described her feelings about it as being really miffed. And I just sort of thought about, you know, all these things that I had been thinking about in terms of her anger, and rage, and miffed was such a funny sort of way to - to soften that.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Miffed"]

I wanna scream

I wanna shout

You make me feel poisoned from the inside out

I can't eat

I can't think of sleep

Can you hear me, can anyone hear me?

[Music fades under Pekarek narrating]

Neyla Pekarek: But yeah, it's - you know, it does have a lot of rage in it and there's a refrain in it. You know, can anyone hear me? And I often felt that way, like, didn't... If I - if I got mad, I often feel like I'm throwing, like, a temper tantrum. Whereas again, I'd watch my male counterparts ask for exactly what they needed and - and raise their voice and get mad and be taken totally seriously. And so, yeah, I just... it was something I thought a lot about in terms of rage, and anger.

[Music continues]

I wanna shout

You make me feel poisoned from the inside out

You think you own me

But I'd pick lonely than waste my time

Being picked on by you

[Music fades out]

Noel: Lindsay McNatt:

Lindsay McNatt: And so she did then took some of the snakes that she had killed and she made kind of her famous dress. So, she took four of the biggest snakes that she could find their

skins, and made the bodice of a dress. And then she used 43 snake skins to make the skirt. And she kind of styled it after like a flapper dress. And she would wear it to special parties. And - and she was very protective of it. And, you know, this story had gotten around. So people wanted to see the dress that she had made and hear her story. And she made a belt that matched the dress and a bracelet and shoes. And so she would wear this whole outfit.

[Music continues]

Ohhh

Can you hear me?

[Music fades out]

Neyla Pekarek: There's a song on the record that's called The Perfect Gown. There was something interesting about this woman who was kind of summed up after, you know, running her own farm, going through all these hardships in terms of her marriage and divorces. And, you know, that the rattlesnake encounter, all these things, is also summed up by what she wore. And I certainly felt that way so often, you know, in an interview or something, my bandmates would be asked like, when did you start playing the guitar? When did you start writing songs? How did you get so good at this craft? And *if* I got asked a question so often, it would be like, how do you choose your outfits for the shows? But I worked *so hard* to learn how to play the cello and how to sing and how to write songs. And I always felt really overshadowed by that. And again, just not being taken very seriously, I think is a big theme on the record in general.

[Neyla Pekarek's "The Perfect Gown"]

The perfect gown

Does it flatter her?

The perfect gown

Does it make you matter?

The perfect gown

Will it make them take you seriously?

The perfect gown

Will it be your mark on history?

But I'll hide, yes I'll hide

I've got everyone fooled
 And I'll smile, 'cause that's what we do
 They'll never know I'm more than just a gown

[Music fades out]

Pekarek: You know, not - not feeling heard all the time, smiling. (Laughs) That's what we're supposed to do. And just kind of being summed up, no matter how hard we work, and how hard we try. Just often, you know, being held back by, kind of physical appearances.

[Music continues]

The perfect gown
 Will hide your defenses
 The perfect gown
 You won't need your head
 The perfect gown
 Will it help you sleep in your bed

[Music fades out]

Noel: Soon after the attack, Slaughterback began to realize just how remarkable her experience had been. Here's Peggy Ford Waldo.

Peggy Ford Waldo: Again, she was thinking this was quite an adventure. So she contacted some people from the Fort Lupton newspaper. Reporters came out and she strung all of these snakes that she had killed on to a piece of wire and she had her photo taken. So, this was a documented event that happened, and that was reported on in the papers.

Tyler: And, knowing how difficult it was just to survive in rural Colorado at the time, she used the publicity to her advantage.

Peggy Ford Waldo: Times were hard. Kate was resourceful. And so, she was then able to make a little cottage industry out of selling the tanned rattlesnake skins. They could be made into belts. They could be made into hat bands. With her taxidermy skills, she could mount the rattlesnakes in a coiled position and use them as the base of lamps, or use them as ashtrays.

Tyler: She even started CATCHING rattlesnakes, milking them for the venom, and selling it to researchers.

Peggy Ford Waldo: At one point she got tired of the snake business, feeding them and doing this. And so one day, instead of milking the snakes for the venom, she just got out a shovel, she took the tongs, she put each snake on the ground, chopped off its head, put the head in a box with a note that said, Here, extract the venom yourself. I quit. and mailed it off to California.

Neyla Pekarek: She said she really hated rattlesnakes, but it kind of became this, like, burden to bear. (laughs) Because it really - it... She was able to monetize it. And I think you kind of had to in those days, you know, living out in the rural, rural Colorado, where nothing grows in the winter, of course, and barely grows in the summertime. You know, just kind of anything... I think she - she really was that kind of entrepreneurial mind, you know, either by necessity or... I don't think she really had a choice. It was, you know, either you make this money and you're able to - to survive another winter or you don't.

[Music fades in]

Noel: And the more the story was told, the more mythical it became.

Peggy Ford Waldo: So it's always going back to the source to find the truth of this woman. And I think probably we won't always know the truth.

Tyler: Neyla Pekarek says she relates to the feeling of suddenly finding fame when she hadn't planned on it.

Neyla Pekarek: I had had, you know, a really strange ride in the - in the years that I'd been with the Lumineers. You know, just a huge shift of identity. And in terms of like, I was living, you know, kind of apartment to apartment, crashing with friends. I had tons of student loan debt. No idea what I was going to do. And, you know, around, this is around like 2010. And by 2012, we were nominated for Grammys. We were traveling to Europe. We, you know, we got to play at the White House for President Obama. We opened for U2, like all this crazy stuff in a short

amount of time, and... And Kate experienced a little bit of that, I think, in her in her rattlesnake encounter. She was written about in all kinds of papers all over the world. And she had a really interesting relationship to that bit of fame that she experienced, where I think she wanted people to understand, you know, this thing that she did. But she also loved her privacy. And I think, you know, she kind of spent the rest of her life trying to capitalize on that one afternoon.

Tyler: Rattlesnake Kate's legend continued to grow. And even beyond the rattlesnake incident, her life often seemed unbelievable. Here's Lindsay McNatt.

Lindsay McNatt: You know, she had just so, so many crazy experiences that happened to her. So, she was struck by lightning when she was out working on the farm one time. And Ernie was still pretty young when that happened. And she was, as she reached for her gate, and when the lightning struck the gate, it went into her. And she was unconscious for several hours, I guess, and Ernie was freaking out, but she was OK and recovered alright.

Noel: But some of Kate's stories were less exciting than that: stories about the kinds of hardships you'd expect for a person living on their own in the West at the time.

Lindsay McNatt: Her mailbox was three and a half miles from her house. And so she'd have to kind of travel far to - to get supplies or to - to get that and everything. So, on one of her trips that she was doing, she fell off of her horse and got kicked and she broke her arm and her collarbone.

Neyla Pekarek: Yeah, and Brownie is the perfect sort of example of the worlds colliding of Rattlesnake Kate. So she had a horse named Brownie, and I- In those letters she writes, like, *most* affectionately for Brownie, like the way she talks about Brownie, she doesn't talk about her son that way. She does talk about family members that way. But you can just sort of hear her voice melting a little bit every time she talks about that horse, 'cause she loved that horse and they were kind of, you know, best pals. And a lot of people feel that way. You know, even with their dogs and stuff, but especially with horses, you know, people really have that connection. And, you know, also just the survival part of - of what - what a horse meant to, you know, a person of the West. And, you know, traditionally to a cowboy. But, in this case, to - to Rattlesnake Kate.

Noel: Again, Pekarek found the story plenty relatable to her life in the 21st Century.

Neyla Pekarek: Brownie, I had to write a song about Brownie. I knew because I just thought she's such an important part of this story. And Kate was so alone in so many ways. But then she had this horse that she kind of, you know, talked to and talked about. And so, I had had a pretty sad friendship breakup with a friend. And it was really traumatic, almost more probably more so than a lot of my failed romantic relationships. So we were just so close and we just kind of grew apart. But I wrote this song kind of as - as a friendship breakup song, and just this idea of like, you know, your person, or in this case a horse, that you put all your faith in, as you know, you're the one most loyal to me. And then you get kicked (laughs) in the clavicle.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Brownie"]

Brownie my love, Brownie my love

Don't bite the hand that feeds you, don't kick me when I'm down

Brownie my love, Brownie my love

You're my best friend, but it's time to say goodnight

Ahhh

Brownie my love

[Music fades out]

Tyler: All of these experiences created a romanticized, Western mythos around Rattlesnake Kate that has appealed to people across the country, both at the time, and in the modern day.

Noel: Peggy Ford Waldo says that years after the initial attack, in 1932, that mythos made its way into the hands of a man named Floyd Gibbons. Gibbons ran an adventure magazine called the Elgin Adventurers club.

Peggy Ford Waldo: And so he asked her to send photographs of herself wearing the dress and other photographs of her at her farm because he thought people would be interested. So, again, a few years from... seven or so *years* from when this story first happened, by the 1930s, people were interested in it again.

Tyler: At some point, that story made its way to Colonel Charles D. Randolph, who had given himself the nickname "Buckskin Bill", the self-proclaimed "Poet of the Plains."

Peggy Ford Waldo: Floyd Gibbons is promoting her story through newspapers. So, he was a - a big reader of dime novels and wrote a lot of, you know, dime novels, and poetry, that sort of thing. So a story like Rattlesnake Kate's would have definitely, you know, intrigued him.

Neyla Pekarek: Buckskin Bill was *fascinated* by the West. And he loved these old western stories, and he would write these stories about Kate and Buckskin Bill on these adventures together. There's this outrageous one where he writes about how they had to, like, fight these pumas out in the west (laughs). And like, just these outrageous stories. I don't think that he was a person that actually went on those adventures, but I think he was really fascinated by them as, as people still are. I mean we're *still* fascinated by the wild west.

[Music fades in]

Noel: Buckskin Bill's fascination with Kate sparked a written correspondence between the two western icons that would span nearly 40 YEARS. Though they never actually met in person, Bill became one of Kate's closest friends and confidants.

[music fades out]

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[Music fades in]

Tyler: Buckskin Bill -- also married and divorced five or six times -- reached out to Rattlesnake Kate after being captivated by her story.

Noel: As we mentioned earlier, a lot of what we know about the inner life of Rattlesnake Kate is comes from their letters.

Neyla Pekarek: He became kind of fascinated by her, and started writing to her. And they just exchanged letters over and over and they never met, which was really fascinating to me. His letters are just full of a lot of, kind of intimate details about both of their lives, that it's interesting to tell a stranger. But I think she found this outlet of someone that kind of made her feel seen and heard and understood in a way that she didn't always feel, I think, in her real life. And so, the more I read through those letters and especially reading from *her* voice and her perspective, the more I kind of felt that I just - I couldn't stop reading them and I read them over and over. And I - you know, I can't pinpoint the moment, but it was certainly during reading that letter exchange that I thought, this is more than just one song, this more than an album. I think this is like a whole thing. And I think people should know about her. And I also - just - yeah, I thought if I felt understood and seen by - by reading about this person, I imagine there's other people that feel that way, too.

Peggy Ford Waldo: This correspondence dates from 1931 to 1943. And then again from 1965 to 1968. So there may have been letters from 1944 to 64. But who knows? Were those destroyed or were just other things happening in both their lives, where they just didn't write to each other?

Neyla Pekarek: He was he was a writer and he was a poet. And so I think this idea of her was really fascinating. But, you know, at some point he gets married and he says to her, like, I've got a wife now. But you should keep writing me letters you sent them to this P.O. box so that my wife doesn't find out. And instead, Kate says, like, oh, no, I'll just write to you and your wife. And, you know, I sort of felt like, oh, I would be so devastated. And I don't - I can't really tell how she felt about it. But either way, she keeps writing. And I think, again, just the... It didn't matter to her that he was married as much as it mattered to her to keep having this confidant to write to. But

even after she had died, he was... he lived longer than she did. And he tried to get in touch, to - to write a book about her. And he had sort of fabricated a lot of stories that they *had* met and that they had kind of romped around the west together when - when she was a teenager. And like that definitely never happened. (laughs)

Peggy Ford Waldo: Well, I think they - they both would have understood each other very, very well. But she just didn't seem to get along all that well with being married to and having a man as the head of her household. She was the head of her household. She was the mover and shaker in her own life. And she never wanted anybody to tell her what to do or not to do.

Noel: The correspondence was convenient for both of them. They could feel a connection with each other, and keep each other company without the pressure of an in-person relationship.

Neyla Pekarek: And so as I read through those letters, I just, you know, it was interesting to me to - to see her kind of pouring her heart out to this stranger. And she asks him over and over to come visit. And I wonder how much of that, like if he had actually done it, how she would have felt about it, if, you know, that may have ruined the correspondence and sort of the mystery that kept some of that alive. You know, they didn't have an actual relationship and he didn't actually have to spend time with her. That was really attractive. And I think, you know, he - he sort of glamorized a lot of those qualities in her of being strong, and being brave, in a way that, you know, wasn't always great on its feet in person, but really fun to think about in sort of an arm's length way.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Whiskers"]

We're playing house, we're fading love
 We're making promises, the ring you gave me fits like a glove
 But it's not long before my spell wears off
 What once was charming is just aggravating and a little bit off

But oh, I know that this won't last

[Music fades out]

Neyla Pekarek: And in that way, I do think she felt pretty understood by him, like, oh, if you're - if you are my sweetheart, like, things would be great because you understand that. Like, I'm - I'm crazy. You know, she sort of is self-deprecating in a lot of the - the letters, you know, oh, I've been out in the sun and I - my skin's all weathered. So I'm not going to send you a photo until the winter comes again. 'Cause I don't want you to see me like this. And he kind of writes back like, oh, I don't care about that stuff. And, you know, but at the end of the day, she invites him over and over to come visit her and he never turns up.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "Letters to the Colonel"]

Saw you in the paper, you're too good to be true
 Had to write a letter, how I'd love to get to know you
 Forgive me if I'm forward, but you're perfect, it's true
 Give your secrets to the mailman, send them on through

Dearest Buckskin Bill, you flatter me just so
 I'm afraid you won't want me, weather-beaten and old
 How much, my dear, would you love me
 If I let you

Don't need a crystal ball to know you're my soulmate
 The letters you write warm me up enough to hibernate
 I'll terrorize the mailbox looking for your next hello
 I'm waiting on your post

[Music fades under Neyla narrating]

Neyla Pekarek: But yeah, I mean, in terms of - of him kind of understanding her, you know, just the fact that he wrote back every time, and they kept writing back and forth for that long period of time. It's just kind of interesting that, you know, it feels less personal, maybe, that it was him, and more that someone was - was interested in what she had to say, even if it was just like recounting what she did that day. You know, these are the things I did on my farm, and these are the chores I did today. And I'm gonna do this tomorrow. And it's a lot of the letters are kind of mundane, but it made me, me, me think, you know, she didn't have a lot of other people to talk to.

[Music continues]

Don't need a crystal ball to know you're my soulmate
 The letters you write warm me up enough to hibernate
 I'll terrorize the mailbox looking for your next hello
 I'm waiting on your post

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Peggy Ford Waldo says that Rattlesnake Kate purposefully lived a 19th century lifestyle out on the plains. Her Luddite tendencies made those letters all the more meaningful.

Peggy Ford Waldo: A lot of people were beginning to embrace radio, and FDR's fireside talks during the 1930s and during the Depression era, but not Kate. So what would come into her home that would bring her communication and joy from the outside world? It would be, you know, this correspondence from her friend Buckskin Bill.

Noel: As many of Rattlesnake Kate's letters to Buckskin Bill indicate, a lot of her days were mundane. She did many of the same things most people trying to survive in the West did at the time. Here's Lindsay McNatt.

Lindsay McNatt: She, you know, would get up early and work ten to twelve hours, working outside, you know, working on the crops, taking care of the animals, having to kind of combat some of the different things that whether in that kind of stuff, would - would offer challenges.

Neyla Pekarek: I - I think a lot about, you know, she lived to be 71, and talks a lot about, you know, her neighbors dying of the flu or a cold or in childbirth. She helped deliver a lot of babies amongst the women in her sort of rural area. And she just, you know, kind of died. She - she did get sick and went to the hospital and - and died at around 71, which was a pretty long life for the time. And that, you know, nothing else got her first. She was struck by lightning. All these things that - that - she just - she couldn't really be crushed. You know, I think she was - she had this spirit about her that really carried her a whole lot longer in life than some of the folks in that, you know, in those really treacherous circumstances.

Lindsay McNatt: As a teacher, we kinda see how kids and people in general are - are always looking for themselves in - in stories and in pictures and that kind of stuff. And we - we connect to those stories through how we relate, and how we see that we're similar and different to the people that we learn about, and - and the history that we learn about as well. And so, bringing those stories to life so that - so that girls, as well, can find that connection and kind of have somebody that they could look up to or strive to be like, is so important.

Neyla Pekarek: One of the tasks I have for our musical, every musical has what's called the "I Want" song and it kind of informs us. It usually comes like three or four songs in. It kind of informs us why we're gonna sit in a theater for two and a half hours and watch this story. So like, it's like, "A part of your world" in Little Mermaid or "My Shot" in Hamilton or every sort of Disney movie or musical has one. And so I was tasked with writing our rattlesnake Kate "I want" song. And I ended up calling it "I Want Everything". And it's kind of this idea of - of being the kind of woman that is, you know, an entrepreneur or does have all these ideas and leadership and speaks her mind. But being, you know, but still being lovable and worthy of love.

[Music: Neyla Pekarek's "I Want Everything"]

All I want
 Is to meet my match
 You'll love me 'cause I'm funny
 You'll love me 'cause I'm free
 And I'll laugh
 The loudest at your jokes
 I'll be the cleverest

[Music fades out]

Waldo: One thing I do like about her is that, she didn't put on any kind of varnish, or any kind of airs, or any kind of high-toned, anything for anyone. She knew who she was. And She knew who she was early on. She said that she should have been a boy, that she wanted to grow up to become a farmer. And in essence, everything that she did in her life reflected that very early on of what she wanted.

[Music continues]

All I want
 Is a bright morning view
 Some coffee for two
 And an afternoon away from you
 Will you love me
 In spite of my flaws?
 Or because I'm odd?

Will my wild ways keep you in
 And hold tight for a while
 Let go for a while
 Embrace my own style
 Get life together

All I want
 Is everything
 Everything
[Music fades out]

[Lost Highways music fades in]

Tyler: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

Noel: Again, if you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, PLEASE become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount. Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state, where you can learn more about the stories we tell on Lost Highways.

Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor.

Tyler: The music for this episode was by both Earth Control Pill, and Neyla Pekarek, whose album "Rattlesnake" is out now and whose folk opera opens in February 2021 in Denver. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Tyler: And to our Advisory Group, which includes:

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Jason Hanson

Thomas Andrews

Jonathan Futa

Charlie Woolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and Cara DeGette

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black,

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

[Music fades out]