



Becoming WEST DESPERADO

Meet Instagram star **Shaley Gutzwiler**, a lifelong cowgirl who found a passion in sharing her western aesthetic with the world.

BY KAYCIE WILL

Once a year, glitter and glamour meet grit and cattle when the National Finals Rodeo (NFR) and Cowboy Christmas take over Las Vegas. It was there, in 2017, that Shaley (Ham) Gutzwiler first realized her hobby had become something more than just back-pasture photoshoots.

Rodeo was the only way of life Gutzwiler knew throughout her childhood. She'd attended countless NFRs, cheering on her pro barrel racer mother or watching the finals with her family. But this one felt different—she was no longer a supporter; she was working, too.

"That was the first year I did a photoshoot with Wrangler," Gutzwiler recalls. "I got invited to a few influencer parties, and I shot with a few other brands, too. When I look back, I'm always in shock."

How had a shy, small-town girl from Washington found herself modeling for major western brands in Las Vegas? That's a question she once asked herself, too.

Getting Started

Gutzwiler started riding horses at an early age and regularly attended rodeos as a child and young adult. When it came time to choose a college and find a career path, staying in the western world wasn't her first choice—in fact, it wasn't even on the list.

"I had only seen a very small sliver of what the western community really was," Gutzwiler admits. "My family was very hard-core rodeo. I didn't feel like that was the path for me, but I didn't know any other way."

By the time she finished an accounting degree, Gutzwiler had almost eliminated any trace of her heritage from her daily life. She had embraced other styles, leaving her boots and cowboy hat far behind.

However, after six months at home between graduation and her first job, she began to fall back in love with the roots that raised her. It was then that she began to reconsider what role she could play in the Western world.

While her social audience has grown to include nearly 150,000 followers, Shaley Gutzwiler has remained true to her cowgirl roots.

PHOTO BY MIRANDA CHENEY PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY SHALEY GUTZWILER



PHOTO COURTESY SHALEY GUTZWILER

West Desperado style pays homage to tradition by integrating age-old styles with the latest trends.

“At that point, I had seen both sides of the spectrum, and I knew I wanted to stay connected to the western life in some capacity,” Gutzwiler recalls.

When a job took her back to the city, Gutzwiler found creative ways to integrate the culture she loved into her daily life. The first step? Mixing western fashion with office couture.

“I started discovering stores online where I could shop all year round,” Gutzwiler says. “I bought a few staple pieces that I thought were cool—my first pair of bellbottoms, pretty much anything with fringe on it—and I started putting together outfits.”

From there, Gutzwiler began sharing her inspiration with others on social media, but

Channeling her inner Beyoncé, Gutzwiler has learned to get outside her comfort zone while developing her impact as West Desperado.

received criticism for what was then outside of the posting norm.

“It was before the big ‘influencer’ movement,” Gutzwiler explains. “I thought this needed its own page, but I didn’t even know what that was. So, I started West Desperado.”

After several months of consistently posting Western-focused fashion content, Gutzwiler started incorporating more of her own style on her West Desperado platform.

“I didn’t have a tripod, so I would just prop my phone up in my hallway closet and try to get a photo of my business casual cowgirl look before I went to work,” Gutzwiler laughs. “That’s just kind of where it all got started—just in the bedroom of my little Portland apartment when I wished I was back home riding horses.”

Gaining Traction

Six months later, West Desperado had over 5,000 followers—a significant number considering social media was not nearly as popular as it is today. Those early fans initially found West Desperado because of the fashion, but they stayed because they saw more than just outfit inspo in Gutzwiler’s content. What started with flat lays of western staples had begun to grow into a platform that helped others gain confidence in displaying their own style.

Not long after that came the 2017 NFR where Gutzwiler first realized her own potential as she began to see doors open because of her social media venture.

“One of my friends from back home said, ‘this is kind of big deal. You shot with Wrangler at this huge event,’” Gutzwiler recalls. “It really hit me and sank in that this was something real and it was growing.”

PHOTO BY THE PAPER TIGER PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY SHALEY GUTZWILER



“IT REALLY HIT ME AND SANK IN THAT THIS WAS SOMETHING REAL AND IT WAS GROWING.”



PHOTO BY ROCK AND ROLL DENIM, COURTESY SHALEY GUTZWILER

By Any Other Name

If you've seen 'West Desperado' in your social feeds or on a Rock and Roll Denim label, you may have wondered how Shaley Gutzwiler chose that name. The secret is in a song!

"The name came to me from a Ryan Bingham song I was listening to one night," Gutzwiler reveals. "It was originally supposed to be 'Desperado West,' but that handle was already taken on Instagram, so I reversed it."

And the rest is history. Now, Gutzwiler's nearly 150,000 Instagram followers can recognize her handle anywhere.

To date, Gutzwiler has partnered with Rock and Roll Denim to release four crossover collections including pieces that fit her personal style

In early 2020, a call came from Rock and Roll Denim asking Gutzwiler to collaborate on an exclusive collection.

"My mind was just blown," Gutzwiler admits. "This big international brand wants to put my name on some of the products that they're pushing. I wasn't out there searching for brand deals," she continues. "I just took what I had, put my own spin on it, and tried to help my audience."

That consistent, humble mindset has led to four Rock and Roll Denim x West Desperado collections and several other brand collaborations since then—not to mention gaining more than 150,000 followers.

"Brands see the impact that I'm making in the western industry with my audience," Gutzwiler says. "What I'm doing and what other creators are doing is making a difference. Brands want to use our image because we have a connection with our audience. It has been eye-opening to see people start recognizing that within the industry."

Leading a Movement

As Gutzwiler's audience grew, she began searching for ways to produce positive changes in the Western fashion space. One area that resonated with Gutzwiler and her West Desperado followers was improving body inclusivity in brand representation.

"I have a slender build, but I'm still a size six or up and a true size medium," Gutzwiler shares. "I know there are other people out there who are my size that love seeing influencers with real bodies of all different shapes and sizes."

Gutzwiler especially loves coaching others on where to shop and how to dress for specific body types, noting that everyone de-

serves to find western styles that allow them to look and feel their best.

"I get a lot of people asking for boutiques and brands that carry extended sizing," Gutzwiler says. "I know that can be hard because I wear a 36-inch inseam, and not all brands carry that length. Being able to give insight to my audience and pointing out that some pieces are going to work better for certain body types is important."

Giving good advice takes a village, and Gutzwiler has developed a sisterhood of other content creators with expertise in areas where she doesn't have personal experience.

"I know a lot of great gals in that extended size category who remain stylish so flawlessly," she continues. "They know where to find trendier pieces. I try to keep a network of people who have that knowledge, because if I can't know right off the bat, I can send my followers to someone who will give them the best advice."

By leveraging brand involvement and a network of fashionistas, Gutzwiler uses her West Desperado influence to help more people to find their own unique Western style.

Living Legend

Welcoming others into the world of Western culture comes naturally to this fashionista. To Gutzwiler, each piece represents a piece of her heritage and a lifestyle she feels honored to have experienced firsthand.

"It's important to me to remember the roots of what western culture is and the people who have put the blood, sweat, and tears into building this industry, even when we are trying to dress up cute and express ourselves," Gutzwiler explains. "Western culture starts with the way of life. Those rodeo cowboys, the ranchers and farmers, the people who are outside when the weather isn't good, putting in the work to make our lives better, to help others, to follow their dreams, have tenacity and grit in what they do. That always inspired me."

That perspective keeps Gutzwiler grounded while she embraces trends and new ways of styling traditional pieces.

"Think about the wild rag," Gutzwiler says. "The wild rag has a very specific purpose. Now, you can buy wild rags in every

Western At Work

Bringing a love for Western fashion into the office can be intimidating for those who work in corporate environments. As an accountant, Shaley Gutzwiler of West Desperado knows it can be difficult to find your stride with workplace fashion.

Gutzwiler suggests starting by integrating small elements—like a western belt or fun, cowhide booties—to build confidence embracing Western style in a new environment.

"Once I started showing up in the looks I wanted to wear, people became interested in it because it's not something that you'd typically find in a professional office space," Gutzwiler reveals. "I realized that people were more intrigued than judgmental, and that helped boost my confidence."

Once you've mastered the basics, try adding a western-themed graphic tee under a classic blazer. Shop for jackets with leather embellishments or jazz up your look with turquoise jewelry and a western bag (*find some of our favorites starting on page 76*). For Gutzwiler, adding elements like these into her work wardrobe helped her coworkers see her personality.

"It was my way of showing who I actually am, because everything else I was doing at the office is just sitting behind a computer all day," Gutzwiler laughs. "I'm kind of fun, funky, and cute in my own way."

Take a page from the West Desperado stylebook, and don't let a business dress code dampen your Western style!

kind of silk print. We wear them on our heads as headscarves, as a neckerchief, or almost as a necklace, but you can still turn around and tie it in a buckaroo knot and it serves a purpose. Same with the cowboy hat. They all started with their sole purpose of helping the people who were out there working."

Rather than cast judgement on people from other walks of life who've adapted western pieces into fashionable attire, Gutzwiler welcomes the opportunity to share her beloved heritage on her growing platform. West Desperado stems from deep roots of tradition, but it is Gutzwiler's inclusive approach that allows her to educate newcomers while still supporting longtime lovers of the Western lifestyle.

"I think it's a really beautiful thing that we have such a rich culture within the western industry that translates into the fashion side as well," Gutzwiler concludes. "It's always been really inspiring." 🌟