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## Introduction

**I**n the summer of 1910 Bertha Anger, dressed in a cowgirl outfit, stood on a float and waved to the crowds lining the streets. Anger had won the honor of reigning as queen over the first Pendleton, Oregon, Round-Up celebration, which entitled her to reign over its Westward Ho! parade and rodeo. In reality she really had very little to do with the rodeo; her only assignment was to look as regal as possible as her parade float bounced along Pendleton's rough streets. Yet Anger's new position as queen broke the tradition of hiring cowgirl athletes to promote rodeos, endowing Anger with the honor of being the first community-sponsored rodeo queen. Over time, the role of community queen that began in Pendleton evolved into a remarkable phenomenon, one that spread throughout the American West.

Anger's position as Round-Up queen, like the Round-Up itself, had been hastily put together. Only two months earlier several of Pendleton's leading citizens hit upon the idea of holding an annual booster celebration in Pendleton.<sup>1</sup> Settling on a theme for the new celebration was easy: It would focus on Pendleton's frontier past. It would be, according to Pendleton's

paper, *The East Oregonian*, a “mosaic of honest pieces rescued from such little corners of the Old West as still survive, these pieces, melded into a great, dignified, and very stirring spectacle.”<sup>2</sup> The new celebration would have a rodeo, featuring “bad horses and good riders” and cowboys and cowgirls. Native Americans, members of the Umatilla, Walla Walla, and Cayuse tribes on the nearby Umatilla Reservation, would also have a prominent role. And, of course, there would be a parade. But not just any parade—one that highlighted the heroic saga of American progress as it marched westward across the nation. Once the idea was announced the entire community worked to make the celebration come together. In only two months the Round-Up went from an idea to a reality.

But who would reign over the celebration? No community festival would be complete without a lovely young woman to preside over the events. Following the long-established tradition in America, young women served as festival queens and, in this capacity, acted as a symbolic representation for their communities’ values and expectations.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the Round-Up directors, pressed for time, followed the tradition of Pendleton’s Fourth of July goddess of liberty parade queens. The role of the new queen, following the goddess tradition, was limited to a parade appearance. The selection process for the new Round-Up queen—a ticket selling competition—also imitated Pendleton’s goddess of liberty tradition. Results from the first Round-Up queen competition came in too late to print the winner’s name in the paper, but there was indeed a first queen of the first Round-Up. Bertha Anger, wearing a cowgirl costume and surrounded by her royal court, waved to the thousands of spectators who witnessed the first Westward Ho! parade.

This book examines the history, evolution, and significance of the community-sponsored rodeo queen, from the introduction of this new phenomenon at the 1910 Pendleton Round-Up to the advent of Miss Rodeo America in 1956. The model for

community-sponsored rodeo queens that originated in Pendleton gradually spread to other rodeos throughout the West, providing young women with the opportunity to participate both in rodeo and in their communities. Because the first rodeo queen appeared at the Pendleton Round-Up and Pendleton continued to feature queens, that rodeo plays a central role in the story of rodeo queens. Across the West women selected to serve as queens embodied the ideals and values of their communities. The queens and their communities' values proved to be complex and dynamic. As the phenomenon of rodeo queens spread, each town determined its own criteria for selecting its queen according to local norms and standards. The ability to interpret which characteristics they felt were most important—the ones represented in their choice of rodeo queen—allowed each community to emphasize its own unique character.

In 1956 Miss Rodeo America made her appearance as the national representative for the sport of rodeo. The connection between community rodeo and rodeo queens underwent a significant change. In many cases local rodeos became affiliated with the Professional Rodeo Association circuit, opening the queen competition to young women contestants from outside the vicinity, undercutting the connection between local ideals and values and the girl selected to “rule” the rodeo. The advent of state and national rodeo queen titles also amplified this disconnection between local communities and their queens. However, by closely examining the role of pre-1956 rodeo queens, it is possible to explore the ways in which the rodeo queen position reflected the cultural perceptions of gender within and outside of specific communities. It would be a mistake to consider these women as passive participants in the rodeo queen phenomenon, caught in a web of demeaning feminine roles. Rather, the queens were active and willing participants in the complex and diverse manifestations that the position provided.<sup>4</sup>

Before embarking on the subject of community-sponsored rodeo queens, it is worth contemplating definitions of the word “community.” The most commonly studied form of community in western history is a group of people bound by the exigencies of their living together in a particular area.<sup>5</sup> “Community” can also refer to the interaction of diverse kinds of individuals in a common location, such as histories of ethnicity, race, gender, or labor in frontier areas.<sup>6</sup> But “community” can also mean a body of people scattered throughout a larger society who are bound by a common interest. As the history of the rodeo queen phenomenon unfolds, the concept of community expands to include all of these definitions. However, the common denominator for these various definitions of community remains constant: the rodeo queen. She stood as the symbolic representation of the community, whether the community was based in a fixed location, like Pendleton, among groups within a specific location, or a group of individuals, such as the community of cowgirl athletes who worked together to reinstate women’s participation in competitive rodeo. Moreover, each of these various communities held its own standard of appropriate gender roles and behavior.

The tradition of having a young woman serve as community representative can be traced to the earliest days of the American republic.<sup>7</sup> But the use of royal figures to preside over civic celebrations, contrasting sharply to the earlier rejection of monarchy in all its forms, has a more recent history. During the mid-nineteenth century, medieval festivals—replete with kings and queens—became a popular form of entertainment in the South. By the late 1890s the idea of a royal figure moved beyond medieval celebrations as individual communities adapted the role to fit celebrations that highlighted local interests. Particularly in the West, as new towns sprang up, celebrations featuring a local queen became a popular form of self-promotion.

The queens for the new festivals were selected as the most

ideal representative for the type of pageant being held. For example, the queen for the Wenatchee, Washington, Apple Blossom Festival had to meet different criteria than did the queen of New Orleans's Mardi Gras or the queen of a children's bicycle and dog parade. However, the role of queen to rule over a specific event became firmly established, as did the royal treatment she received: a coronation ceremony, presentation of a crown or tiara, and a formal ball. The queens, then, were highly visible and celebrated figures, albeit for only a few days. The selection of the queen addressed the idea of community identity, helping answer the question, Who are we and what do we represent?

Robert Lavenda notes that community festivals, especially those that deal with historical themes, disclose more about the aspirations of the town's middle class than they do about the actual history of the town.<sup>8</sup> For example, when Pendleton's town leaders decided to hold their Round-Up celebration, town leaders—merchants, professional people, and political leaders—decided who would be queen. The young women they chose to exemplify their town provided shining examples of the town leaders' middle-class values, which stressed a strong work ethic, high moral standards, genteel behavior, support of higher education, and a commitment to one's community through leadership. The directors of the Round-Up did not set out to find the most beautiful young woman in town; that is, it was not a beauty contest. Rather, they selected a young woman who, in her position as queen, would best represent the overarching middle-class standards and values of the community.

Queens selected by festival committees were not drawn exclusively from prominent families. Nevertheless, the young women represented families committed to upholding the strictures of local, middle-class values. How, then, could a young middle-class woman act as representative for all the diverse inhabitants of her community? Town leaders held the highest posts in

the Round-Up organization, but the act of staging a large-scale rodeo in a small town—Pendleton’s population ranged from 4,460 in 1910 to 11,774 in 1950—brought the entire town together.<sup>9</sup> Three weeks before the event, everyone in town was encouraged to get into the spirit of the celebration by wearing western clothes; newspaper announcements invited residents to watch the “matinees,” where local cowboys tested the bucking abilities of the new broncs; Pendleton residents registered the number of cots they could fit in their homes to rent to out-of-town rodeo spectators; and when the rodeo grounds and town were ready for the show, Pendletonians congratulated themselves with a community dance before the flood of visitors began.<sup>10</sup> The inclusive nature of the celebration allowed all people—not just one segment of the population—the opportunity to participate in the celebration. The process of putting the celebration together fit a pattern that had developed across the country. Community celebrations affirmed “the existence of an intricate web of human relationships connecting parents and children, old people and kids, men and women, tradition and progress—the individual, the family, and the community.”<sup>11</sup>

By taking an active part in an organization, the participants adopted the symbols associated with it and gained a sense of belonging by being recognized as fellow members.<sup>12</sup> The queen, then, became more than a representative of the town’s middle class. She symbolized the entire celebration and everyone who participated. And while the organizational structure, or ritual, of putting on the annual event perpetuated community standards and power structures, the Round-Up queen symbolized both the collective efforts of the town and the potential for upward mobility in a democratic society.<sup>13</sup>

The major focus of *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* is the relationship between rodeo queens and their communities. Within this larger theme two threads—rodeo history and gender history—weave their way through the

story. Rodeo became a spectator sport at a critical juncture in American history. In 1890, as the frontier era drew to a close, Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show played a large role in capturing the nostalgia for the disappearing frontier era. Cody's show, which built on a longer tradition of informal cowhand gatherings, "Sunday rodeos," and Indian powwows, formed the basis from which rodeo as a spectator sport emerged; it appealed to an enlarging middle class who had the time and finances to enjoy leisure activities. As soon as rodeo became a popular and profitable spectator event, town boosters quickly sought to create their own rodeos. In the Pacific Northwest alone, there were over fifty rodeos and frontier days celebrations by 1912.<sup>14</sup>

The connection between rodeos and cowboys has been well researched.<sup>15</sup> By and large, the world of the cowpuncher and the rodeo athlete was a male province. The first cowboys came from diverse ethnic backgrounds and performed a variety of tasks related to watching livestock. Many were seasonal cowboys—itinerant wage laborers in the agricultural business who moved with the seasons in search of work.<sup>16</sup> Some cowboys were fortunate enough to find steady work, but many others, called "waddies," were temporary hands hired for the intensive work during spring calving and fall round-ups.<sup>17</sup>

But ranch work was not just for men; women, too, worked cattle, broke horses, and roped steers.<sup>18</sup> The women who worked performed numerous chores on the ranch and were the wives and daughters of ranchers, and occasionally ranch owners; they were not itinerant wage laborers. As with every rule there are exceptions, of course, and several accounts exist of women working as hired cowhands.<sup>19</sup> This is not to deny the work of cowgirls but rather to emphasize the class and gender elements associated with cow punching: It was a male, working-class province. Wage-earning cowboys competed in the informal competitions held during round-ups. Women did not.

When rodeo did become a sport in the late nineteenth century, women had difficulty breaking into this male domain. The problems cowgirl athletes faced were part of an overall struggle for women to enter occupations previously held by men, in that the women were neither welcomed nor integrated into their new professions.<sup>20</sup> Clifford P. Westermeier notes the difficulty the early cowgirl athletes faced, writing, “Though never particularly welcome as participants in the work, they [the women] carved a niche for themselves by sheer audacity, courage, and female persistence, and won the respect of all who have witnessed their daring and skill.”<sup>21</sup>

If queens were to be the best representatives of a pageant or public festival, then it only made sense that these rare cowgirl athletes would be selected. Indeed, the first rodeo queens competed in rodeos; promoters hired women as queens and gave them newspaper billing along with famous cowboys and bucking horses. The idea of women competing in the arena with cowboys, riding broncs and roping steers, was quite a novelty, one that rodeo promoters and town boosters capitalized on to attract paying spectators.

By the late 1920s rodeo had evolved into a more organized and professional sport. The Rodeo Association of America, founded in 1929, played an increasing role in deciding which events would be included or eliminated; who was eligible to compete, union or non-union cowboys or both; and whether women riders would be allowed to compete, and if so, in which events and in what capacity, open competition or exhibition. The changing dynamics of the rodeo, in large part shaped by perceptions of appropriate gender behavior, played an important part in determining whether to feature a cowgirl athlete or a community-sponsored queen to draw in the crowds.

This leads to the second thread in the rodeo queen story, the changing discourse of gender. The combination of gender history and the evolution of rodeo as a spectator sport helps

answer the question, Who will be queen of the rodeo? by explaining the shift from queens as women participants in rodeo to women who promoted rodeo. Cowgirl athletes at the turn of the twentieth century had benefited from trends that opened opportunities for women to become more active in the public sphere. During the 1880s a noticeable shift in attitudes toward women's traditional roles and restraints on "proper" activities for women occurred. Middle-class women began to move outside their domestic spheres, literally and figuratively, and challenge the distinctions between private, passive female mores and public, aggressive masculine ways.<sup>22</sup> Young women in particular challenged the restrictive virtues of "True Womanhood," characterized by piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>23</sup> Leaving the sanctity of the home, they entered professions and activities previously open only to men. The number of women entering new professions and activities—including rodeo—constituted a small percentage of the overall American population, only 8.2 percent of working women in 1900.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the diversity of areas that women entered and the rapidity of their advancement created national alarm.<sup>25</sup> Traditionalists maintained that marriage and domesticity were central to most adult women's identity and constituted their most important contribution to society.<sup>26</sup> Modernists argued that all society would benefit if women would think and act for themselves.

Bernarr McFadden, writing in 1901, identified the reform spirit of the times when he argued that women in civilized countries had been "genteled" into an abnormal and unhealthy state. Women, he argued, needed to adopt reforms in dress and attitudes toward the body—in terms of physical activity and sexuality—to save both men and women.<sup>27</sup> McFadden's voice was but one of many engaged in the debates over the proper role for women.<sup>28</sup> Susan K. Cahn writes that during the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of women engaged

in competitive sports was very small. However, the growing popularity among women to engage in sports encouraged athletic women of every class to confront “the contradiction inherent in being both ‘woman’ and ‘athlete.’”<sup>29</sup> Women who participated in sports continued to face accusations of being “unfeminine.” However, the persistence of women to continue in sports “contributed to the dynamic image of the ‘athletic girl’ who refused to be excluded from a domain of masculine privilege and pleasure.”<sup>30</sup> The insistence on participating in the masculine realm helped ease the hard lines of the gender binary, which required that women behaved in a manner unbefitting to their sex if they participated in activities considered to belong to men.

Exercise reform was one part of an overall shift in manners and morals, yet, as James R. McGovern writes, “The most significant area of changing manners and morals as they effected the American woman was the decided shift in her sex role and identification of more masculine norms.”<sup>31</sup> The manifestation of this shift, the “New Women” of the 1890s–1920s, challenged the distinctions between traditional gender roles and modern views. New Women self-consciously crossed boundaries of traditional behavior to express sexuality, individualism, and self-development. In her work on the New Women and society, Paula S. Fass uses the terms “traditionalist” and “progressive” to help define the kinds of contemporary sensibilities. The traditionalist position, she argues, closely reflected the middle-class values of traditional gender separation and domestic roles and passive behaviors for women. The progressive “voice,” seen as a positive force, challenged old values, institutions, and gender restrictions.<sup>32</sup>

In urban areas rapidly changing social conditions opened the doors of opportunity for young women in employment, living arrangements, recreation, and unchaperoned social interactions with men in dance halls, amusement parks, and movie