

# Growing Up on the Road The Children of Wild-West Shows and Rodeos

KRISTINE FREDRICKSON

Texas Tech University

This investigation was undertaken as a result of the reminder offered in Elliott West's "Heathens and Angels: Childhood in the Rocky Mountain Mining Towns" (*Western Historical Quarterly*, April, 1983) that children constitute a neglected segment in scholarship on the American West. It was further inspired by the discovery of a transcript of a child's diary.

After it had been established that apparently there are no other diaries in existence, nor letters written by children in wild-west shows or rodeos, became clear that any information would have to be obtained first-hand from individuals who actually spent their childhood traveling the circuits.

The manifold purposes of the study (covering children up to the age of 18) were to inquire whether frontier conditions, as defined by Turner's hypothesis, were prolonged by the mobile lifestyle of those in the traveling entertainment forms recreating an earlier phase of western life, to record the roles of education and religion, to examine the nature of home life and the functions of family members, to explore the degree of self-sufficiency, and how the childhood experience affected later life. A comparison was also to be made between varying methods of child rearing prevalent in America in different time periods.

A great deal of interest in such a study was noted among those who agreed to participate as informants, revealing a realization that their contributions as children had significance in a phase of the history of the American West. Attitudes and assessments varied, depending on whether the informant was a man or a woman, even if the same experiences had been shared as brother and sister. Perceptions of roles and obligations as children also seemed to influence adult evaluations.

Of the ten participating respondents, eight were born in western states. All but two came from rural backgrounds, which included some element of wild-west-show or rodeo involvement. In only two cases was performing the single source of family income. Only one of the children traveled with non-relatives.

Life on the road began early, sometimes at birth. Within a matter of a few years the children had their own acts or performed with their parents. At the very least, they took part in the grand entry that opened the shows. Shortly, the youngsters entered children's competitive events.

Education stood out as important, and real and usually successful, efforts were made to ensure that it was not neglected. Travel itself was regarded by all as an educational experience and one that prepared them better for life.

Parental authority was always exercised, with the family unit operating as a team in all efforts relating to travel, performance and housekeeping. Quite often the children contributed significantly to the family income or were the principal breadwinners.

Negative aspects of the mobile life were voiced primarily by those children who were not part of an act and who accompanied their parents. Loneliness and feelings of desertion were cited. Former child performers sometimes felt the demands placed on them were far too great. Also, lack of sufficient regular income could make life uncomfortable at times.

Although some said their contribution to the continued existence of the Old West was not realized, there were those who felt that they definitely had contributed by their performances and lifestyles.

It is clear that these phases of sports as well as of entertainment history are untapped sources and that several further studies should be undertaken and encouraged.