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Book Review: Rodeo Queens and the American Dream

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Joan Burbick discusses the young women who promoted rodeos from the early 1920s until the 1990s. In the early years the person who sold the most tickets was picked as Queen. Other methods were later used to create an image of the perfect western woman.

The author writes well, especially when describing the land. But some readers will question her choice of words when she describes the rodeo more specifically.

For some people rodeo was an attempt to preserve ranch life. At times there were strong ties to local Indian groups. Eventually the rodeo changed dramatically and Corporate America used it to make money by sponsoring a huge sport and by creating images. Rodeo meant different things to different people at different times.

One thing that does recur frequently is the importance of horses to the girls and women. Most of those who became Rodeo Queens liked to ride; it was a way to escape what could be dull ranch life or to explore the land with friends. Anyone who has ridden in the open country knows what that means; it can hardly be understood by those who have not had the chance to do it.

The author concentrates on Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. She discusses Las Vegas and the absurd idea that American values can be promoted in that place. But she omits a great deal, such as the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain areas. Rodeos have certainly been promoted in both regions but she almost completely ignores them.

Any historian must also note a serious problem: the book has no footnotes. The author explains in her acknowledgments that she interviewed women who had been Rodeo Queens, but used only their first names or fictitious names to protect their privacy. Why is this kind of privacy necessary? If the women allowed the interviews, why did they want
themselves hidden from view? Have the interviews been saved? Will they ever be available for further study or research? No answers are given.

Joan Burbick decries the decline of the West. She notes well that one cause of the problems she sees is the Federal government, but she does not develop this part of the story. Shall we see another book?

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