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Review of *Girl on a Pony* By La Verne Hanners

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Girl on a Pony. By LaVerne Hanners. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. Maps, black and white photographs. xiv + 208 pp. \$19.95.

This small book is written in a straightforward, unassuming, conversational style with the result that it's deceptively simple, seeming at first to be just another reminiscence of pioneer days, although in a somewhat unusual place. It's the story of LaVerne Hanners's childhood and young womanhood in the Valley of the Dry Cimarron of New Mexico, only a few miles from the border of the Oklahoma Panhandle and just south of the Colorado border. Here is a landscape of grandeur, of severe drought, of sudden, fierce hail and wind and snow storms, of walls of water unexpectedly racing down dry riverbeds, of great distances and sparse settlement. Hanners tells of the time between the two world wars when the people in that place made their living, such as it was, as ranchers. Her stories are of the exploits of the cowboys, of the strength and endurance of the women, of children growing up half-wild and daredevils, a miracle that any survived to tell the tale. (This aspect is best illustrated by the story of Hanners's younger brother Felix who, when the neighbors heard he was a POW of the Japanese, said it served the Japanese right!)

These stories all ring familiar even if the specifics are different from the stories we all harbor in our families; and the reader will recognize these people, their style of discourse, their sense of humor, their gritty hard-boiledness, and their courage and inventiveness in the face of the endless adversity that is pioneer life. But seldom have our stories been told with such gentle humor and such a lack of sentimentality.

Literate, yet told with an authentic voice, and full of dry wit, Hanners's narrative is woven seamlessly out of many anecdotes. Rather than telling them in a strictly chronological order, she groups them under headings such as "Cowboys" and "Calamities." She also spares us no truth, however unflattering in

today's light it may be to the people of that time and place. There are no apologies or even explanatory asides to animal rights activists or to feminists or any others who are bound to disapprove. This is how it was, take it or leave it. The narrative is illustrated with black and white photos and enhanced by poems written in the same low-key, straightforward, unadorned voice as her prose.

But as I read I began to see the resulting book as something more than it first appeared to be: a document yes, of which we have many, of "them days," but one told without bravado or mawkishness, as if it's all only to be expected after all. It's therefore all the more precious: it becomes a clear-eyed document of the invincibility of the human spirit.

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