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Review of *Agnes Lake Hickok: Queen of the Circus, Wife of a Legend* by Linda A. Fisher and Carrie Bowers

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Agnes Lake Hickok: Queen of the Circus, Wife of a Legend. By Linda A. Fisher and Carrie Bowers. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. xxv + 385 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Agnes Lake Hickok rode horses, walked on slack wires, and trained various animals. If that was not enough, she was also a smart, diligent entrepreneur who became the first woman to own and operate a circus in the United States. The circus business brought her a busy schedule, some profitable opportunities, and wide acclaim as an entertainer who traveled with legendary performers P. T. Barnum and Buffalo Bill Cody. Although Agnes Lake Hickok did not necessarily invent circus shows, she certainly helped to popularize this form of entertainment in the nineteenth century and prepared the next generation of performers, including her daughter, Emma Lake, whose equestrian renown rivaled that of Annie Oakley.

Agnes Lake Hickok is primarily a compensatory biography meant to salvage the story of a German immigrant child who built a career managing and appearing in traveling shows. Agnes and her first husband, Bill Lake, performed steadily through the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, maintaining financial security and drawing large crowds even during the Civil War. Her second marriage, in 1876, to the celebrated Wild Bill Hickok catapulted her already well-known reputation into the realm of national attention. They were only married five months, however, before he was killed (although they had courted for nearly five years once they met in Abilene, Kansas, in 1871), so the authors point to Agnes Lake Hickok's own stamina and creativity during her remaining thirty years as justification for finally noting her place in history.

The completion of this book occurred under unusual circumstances when the original researcher, Linda A. Fisher, suddenly died following heart surgery. Her able research assistant, Carrie Bowers, took up the project

and sewed Fisher's thorough research and chapter drafts together in the first biography of a woman who has otherwise been ignored by historians. Using newspapers, census records, and sources from Agnes Lake Hickok's contemporaries as evidence, Fisher and Bowers filled in missing details about her life, thus rescuing her from obscurity and reductionist typecasts ranging from (at best) "a damsel in distress" and (at worst) "a materialistic shrew or circus performer unaware that she was past her prime." Tending to a subject who always lived bigger than life and consistently exaggerated her own biographical details, the authors have deftly sorted through the fabrications and fictions that Agnes Lake Hickok left behind in order to reconstruct a tale that also sheds some light on nineteenth-century economics and entertainment.

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