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Review of The Cowgirls

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The Cowgirls. By Joyce Gibson Roach. Preface by C.L. Sonnichsen. Afterword by Elmer Kelton. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1990. (2nd Edition.) Notes, bibliography, index. xxiii + 259 pp. \$15.95.

If this book suffers from anything it's too much enthusiasm for its subject. Joyce Roach sets out to prove that the cowgirl is our "foremost genuine American heroine," and while this is at least arguable, she tends to overstate her case at the expense of the early suffragists (cowgirls, not they, were the "advance guard of the feminist movement") and in particular at the expense of other western women: "Other frontier women were more or less forgotten with the passing of the frontier. The life of the farm woman, for instance, was never heroic, just miserable . . . and she disappeared from our consciousness." And, "Farm wives walked behind

a plow, where horizons were blocked by a horse's rump and days were spent trying to keep from stepping in something." While amusing, statements such as these distort and beg the question of *whose* heroine it is we are looking for in the first place.

Still, *The Cowgirls* is a worthy study of a loosely defined group of women who not only survived but flourished in the gun-slinging Wild West. Under the rubric of clothes, horses, and guns Roach explores the history of cowgirls first as ranchwomen and cattle rustlers on the nineteenth-century frontier then as women of the wild west shows and rodeos, where they first received national and international recognition. Roach provides a rich kaleidoscope of details about this genre—one can just imagine the spectacle of an "all-girl" rodeo in the 1940s—as well as some fairly obscure facts, such as why cowgirls have generally favored long hair: "The consensus is that it is more feminine, looks better under a western hat, and adds an element of the dramatic when blowing in the wind." Finally, Roach covers the treatment of cowgirls in dime novels, fiction, movies, cowboy songs, and in the humor of the West.

The first edition of this book (1977) won the author the Spur Award from the Western Writers of America. This second edition includes an afterword by Elmer Kelton, who contributes a contrasting, homespun version of the cowgirl. Overall, I would recommend *The Cowgirls* as a useful survey about an important part of Americana, as told in the tradition of good-humored Texas tall tales, though I would agree with the author that those who read the book for pleasure will probably be the most satisfied.

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