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## Cowgirl Recalls Early Days

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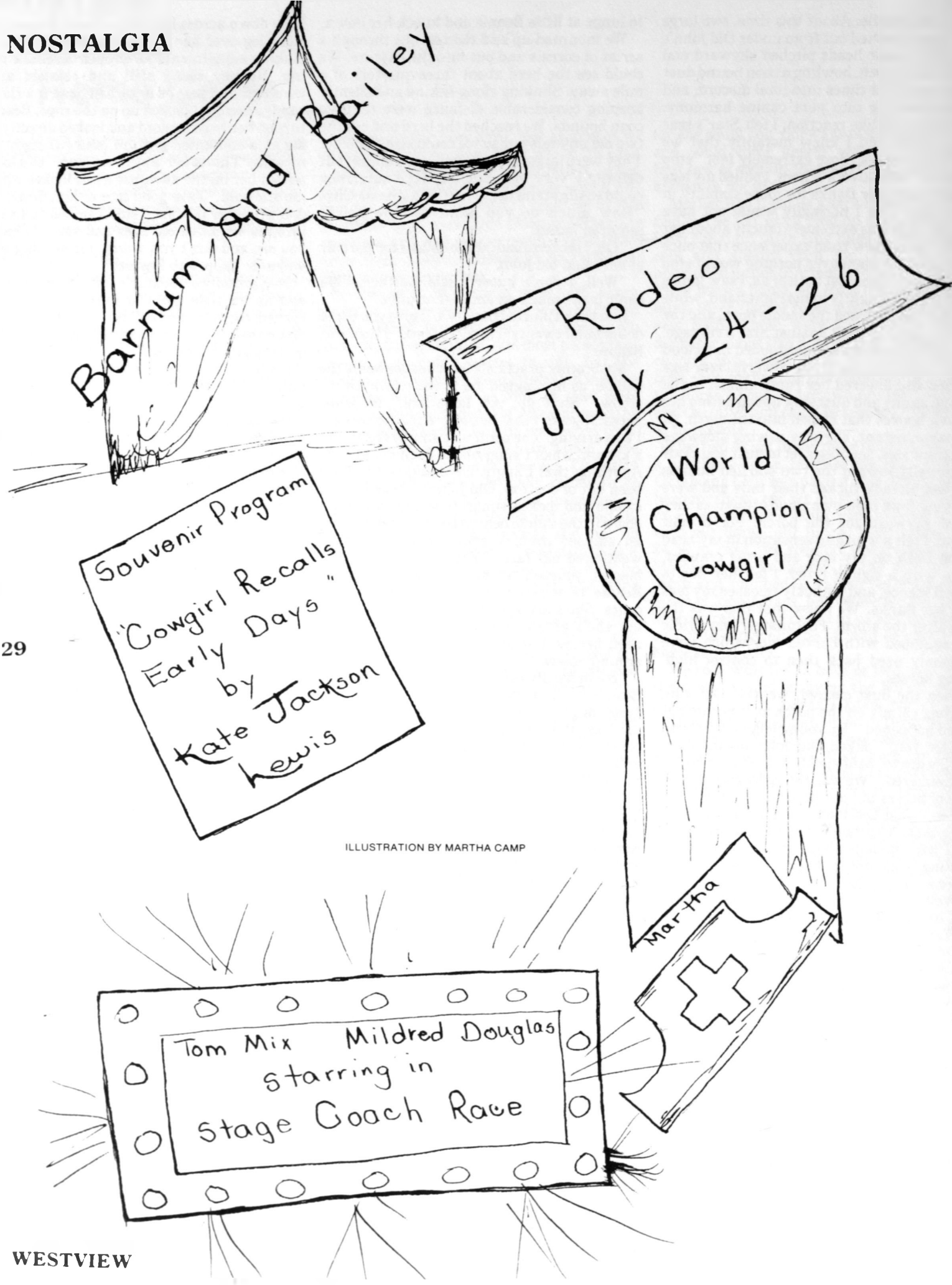


ILLUSTRATION BY MARTHA CAMP

—an article about the days of rodeoing that required tough cowgirls—

Visualize, if you can, a female champion steer and bronc rider, circus trick rider, movie actress, wild Angora goat trainer, and an expert trick shooter. Put all these talents in one package and you have a composite of 82-year-old Mildred Chrismon of Lawton, Oklahoma. The thrice-married woman uses the name, Mildred Douglas, for quick identification in rodeo references. "Since I won all my championships under my first husband's name, I still use it," she explained.

This charming lady isn't all of that now, but she is still a dynamo of energy. During last year's Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, she renewed her friendships with remaining members of the "Wild Bunch," early rodeo performers. Yakima Canutt, whom Chrismon saw last in 1917, she remembered well because he was selected top cowboy and she top cowgirl, at the 1917 Pendleton Round-up.

Chrismon began her colorful career when she was a student in an exclusive New England girls school, although she said she had been riding horses since "I was knee high to a grasshopper." Daughter of a Pennsylvania University professor, she used her Saturday allowance to rent a horse for one hour from a livery stable. The other half dollar was spent for lunch, and then she walked the three miles back home.

When a Wild West Show came to town, the teenager rode a streetcar to the show's site where she was soon a participating performer. When her father found out what she was doing, he objected but gave in to her pleading.

"Later," she recalled, "he became my best fan. He thought I was perfect."

Fears? Chrismon doesn't have any. "I was absolutely unafraid to try any stunt."

How did the venturesome person break into rodeo? "After I married at age 21, my husband and I joined a small circus where I did side-saddle trick riding. Later I did a lot of other stunts for Barnum and Bailey. In July, 1916 I heard about a rodeo at nearby Kansas City. I'd never been to a rodeo before, but I entered and won first money.

"The entry fee was \$10 and I competed with nine girls. The third round I drew a lazy horse. When a man hit him, he started to buck, throwing me forward until my four-inch belt caught on the saddle horn. Everytime the horse bucked, his head came back to hit me in the face, breaking my nose and splitting my lip. The judge asked me if I wanted another horse. I rode again, this time coming out a champ and winning first money."

Her memory still sharp, Chrismon recalled dates and contestants she met in various rodeos, pausing now and then to comment on one of them.

"I began rodeoing in 1916 and rode until 1926. The cowgirls against whom I competed from 1916 to 1919 were the real old timers—good riders, too. First, there was Lucille Mulhall, my especially good friend from Guthrie, Oklahoma. She promoted rodeos with Homer Wilson, first publisher of the Wild

Bunch magazine.

"Lucille roped steers and handled stock in the arena. She even snubbed bucking horses. For me she never cut one loose until I told her I was ready. Lucille lent me her 'White Man' horse to trick ride on. At this time, I had never trick rode so Lucille told me what to do each time I passed her as I went round the arena. Three contestants made a team so I came out third.

"The Bucking horse riders I contested against were Prairie Lilly Allen, Prairie Rose Henderson, Fox Hastings, Bonnie McCarroll, who was killed when thrown from a bucking horse in 1919; Mable Strickland, Ruth Roach Salmon, Vera McGinnis, Mayme Stroud, Margie-Rose, Smith-Wright, Florence King Randolph, Katie Wilks-Canutt, Clyde Lindsey, Ruby Dickey, Maude Tarr, and Mabel Baker. Fannie Sperry Stelle rode only in bronc riding exhibitions."

The venerable cowgirl went on to say, "I'd rodeo as long as the season lasted and then go back to the circus for the winter months. The next rodeo was at Cheyenne where I was named World Champion Cowgirl. My next stop was at Pendleton. There we had the best bucking horses I ever rode. I won that show, too.

"After my husband went to World War I and didn't return, I quit performing and took up nursing," the octogenarian continued. "Then I was asked to do a bit part in a Tom Mix movie called STAGECOACH RACE. I did parts in four movies, but I didn't like pictures, so I went back to riding bucking horses.

"In 1919, I went to Garden City, Kansas where the boys rode steers. I decided I'd like to try one. The boys got me a surcingle and I made a successful ride, though he wasn't a fighter like the bucking bulls today."

Queried about changes in rodeo over the years, Chrismon reminisced, "Cowgirls don't ride broncs now; they do only barrel racing. Cowboys used to rope and tie steers just as the modern cowboys rope and tie calves now."

Does she think barrel racing is too tame? "No, it requires good horsemanship. Some of the girls handle their horses exceptionally well. Being able to handle a horse's head is so important!"

What about clowns? Were they needed in the early rodeo? "Well," the soft-voiced lady replied, "they weren't needed so much then as now with all these fighting bulls. Then, it was mainly for entertainment, though sometimes a steer acted up. The clowns didn't use barrels then. They depended altogether on their quickness. I remember Red Sublet; he was a nut. So funny and so fearless."

In 1919, Chrismon entered the bucking horse event at Cheyenne, hoping to win the world championship again. "But I just didn't draw the best horses." She did receive the honor of being the first cowgirl to conquer the famous Two Step. ■