DeVere (1902-1981) and Helen (1907-1989) Helfrich

Known as the Dean of Rodeo Photography for his pioneering techniques, DeVere Helfrich was posthumously inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1991. Helen Grace Reed Helfrich, a gifted photographer in her own right, was DeVere's professional partner. She took most of the posed pictures, while DeVere took all the action shots. The two were the official photographers for the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association (PRCA) for over twenty-five years, until they retired in 1967.

DeVere Helfrich was born on April 16, 1902, in Lamonta, west of Prineville. His grandparents, Julius and Sarah McCoin, were early settlers in Oregon, homesteading a ranch at the foot of Gray Butte between Madras and Prineville in 1880. His uncle, Walter McCoin, owned the Crooked Creek Ranch near Redmond, where the young Helfrich worked with cattle and wild horses. After attending a year of college at University of Oregon, he worked for a bank in Bend, but he soon moved to a surveying job with the Central Oregon Irrigation District in Redmond.

In 1926, DeVere married Helen Grace Reed, who was born in Bend on October 29, 1907. Her grandfather was Oregon pioneer John Tuck, who settled near Redmond in the 1880s and opened Redmond's first public elementary school in the Old Oregon Hotel in 1906. Helen's family moved to Washington for a few years where her father built irrigation projects, but they returned to Redmond for most of Helen's youth.

In 1931, the couple moved to Tumalo, where DeVere was employed at the Tumalo Irrigation District. In 1933, they purchased a new and used furniture store in Redmond and soon moved the business to Klamath Falls. They bought an ice cream store in 1939 but had to close it in 1942 when wartime rationing made ingredients for making ice cream and candy scarce. DeVere took a job at a Keno sawmill, and then he, Helen, and their two daughters worked at Crater Lake Creamery until the war was over. DeVere also helped survey the air base and the Marine hospital in Klamath Falls.

DeVere Helfrich began working as a professional rodeo photographer in about 1939. He rapidly gained recognition for his action shots and won the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation's best picture of the year prize in 1941. He and Helen traveled the rodeo circuit for thirty years, driving thousands of miles and spending more than half their time on the road.

DeVere—who was blind in one eye—used a cumbersome Speed Graphic cut film press camera because it was easier to focus and compose photos, but it required him to get within thirty to forty feet of the subject, placing him in harm's way. Too often, rodeo photographers caused distractions that ruined the riders' events, but DeVere was always careful not to disturb the rider or animal. In turn, the cowboys liked and respected DeVere and always made room for him to climb on the fence when danger threatened. DeVere was hit twice—once by a horse used to pick up riders and once when he was rolled by a bull—but was never injured.

Helen Helfrich used a 1929 twin-lens Rollieflex camera until 35 mm cameras became widely available. During rodeos, DeVere would wake early to spend the day shooting action shots, developing the new negatives every evening. Helen would print the negatives late at night and rest in the morning, afterward displaying and delivering their latest photo prints and taking posed portraits of the cowboys.

Photographic film and equipment were expensive and in short supply in the 1940s, so every shot had to count. Not many photographers would risk their cameras, film, and bodies to get outstanding action photos, but DeVere Helfrich did. His photographs conveyed the thrill and excitement of the sport and were key factors in the growing popularity of rodeo.

One of DeVere's most famous photographs was adapted for use as the official emblem of the PRCA. The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum holds over thirty-seven thousand photographs that demonstrate the Helfriches' talents and photographic technique.

The Helfriches were also full partners in researching the history of early emigrant trails. The couple traveled the West by automobile, taking photographs, finding early records, and writing books. In 1964, the Klamath County Historical Society appointed DeVere Helfrich editor of *Klamath Echoes*, sixteen volumes on the history of communities in the Klamath area. Helen became assistant editor in 1968, and they published the journal annually until 1978. In 1984, they published a trail guide on the Applegate, Lassen, and Nobles emigrant trails.

Helen and DeVere Helfrich made significant contributions to the history of American rodeo and early immigration to Oregon through their outstanding photography and meticulous field investigations.

Written by Barbara Ditman

Further Reading:

DeVere & Helen Helfrich Biography File. Klamath County Museums, Klamath Falls, Oregon. www.co.klamath.or.us/museum/index.htm.

National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. *DeVere Helfrich: Rodeo Photographer*. https://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/research/cms/Exhibits/DeVereHelfrichRodeoPhotographer/tabid/422/Default.aspx .

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