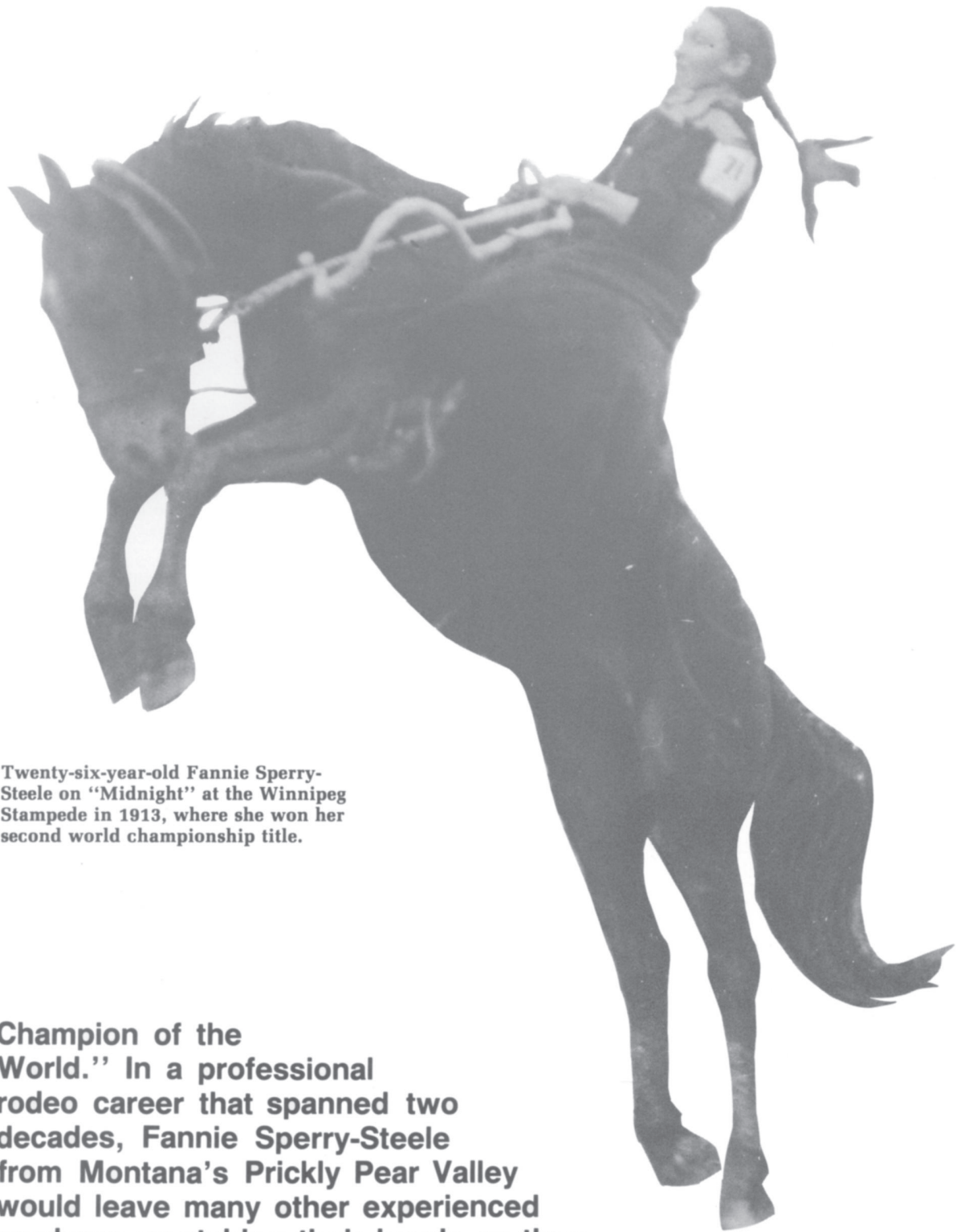


Fannie Sperry-Steele

Montana's Champion Bronc Rider

by Liz Stiffler & Tona Blake

An old friend of the Sperry and Hilger families in the Gates of the Mountains area along the Missouri River north of Helena, Brian O'Connell, remembers the first time he saw Fannie Sperry-Steele. It was 1906 or 1907, not long after the nine-year-old O'Connell had arrived at the Herrin ranch near Wolf Creek to live with his sister. Fannie had ridden over to the ranch intent on trading a gentle mare for an unbroken, nearly wild, horse that she fancied. The cowboys, who could not ride the horse, accepted the teenage Fannie's offer, helped her unsaddle her mare, and then asked her how she intended to get her newly acquired horse home. Much to the amazement of the smiling, confident cowhands and the young O'Connell, she replied, "Well, I'm going to ride him." The boys standing around the corral at the Herrin place that day may have heard about Fannie's riding talents, and they may have known that she had won a relay race or two, but they were unprepared for the rest of the scene. Flinging her saddle up on the unbroken horse's back and cinching it down, Fannie swung her slim frame into the saddle, eased the straining horse around the corral a few times and nonchalantly headed over the mountains for home. O'Connell and his older companions were impressed.¹ And well they should have been, because the attractive young woman who rode a horse they could not was destined to become the best known horsewoman in Montana and to be proclaimed the "Ladies' Bucking Horse



Twenty-six-year-old Fannie Sperry-Steele on "Midnight" at the Winnipeg Stampede in 1913, where she won her second world championship title.

Champion of the World." In a professional rodeo career that spanned two decades, Fannie Sperry-Steele from Montana's Prickly Pear Valley would leave many other experienced cowboys scratching their heads as they watched her break tough horses and ride even wilder ones. She became a legend in her own time, but her story has more to it than a recitation of her triumphs in the arena.

FANNIE SPERRY was born on March 27, 1887, the fourth child of Datus and Rachel Sperry. Fannie grew up with her two sisters and two brothers on a ranch north of Helena, Montana Territory. Her childhood was not unlike other Montana ranch children of that era. She learned the basics of ranch chores, experienced the rigors of an outdoor life in Montana, went to a country school, and raised livestock. But Fannie's life would take a turn that set her apart from her childhood friends. That turn, which would take her miles from home and bring her fame she could not have imagined as a child, began on the Sperry ranch with the influence of her parents, especially her mother.

Fannie's father, Datus E. Sperry, spent the first twenty-six years of his life in Ostego County, New York, where he was born in 1842. His father farmed in that rural New York county and pursued the trade of carpenter. Datus worked as a farmhand and learned carpentry skills before moving with his family to Michigan in 1868. In Michigan Datus secured employment as a gardener and caretaker on an estate near Detroit. He worked on the estate for several years and also met his future wife, Rachel Schroeder, who was employed as a seamstress. Datus Sperry and his brother Myles, perhaps in pursuit of western goldfield fortunes or just adventure, left Michigan in the early 1870s to establish a new life on the frontier.

The brothers turned north from the Union Pacific mainline in Utah and surveyed the opportunities in Montana. Staying on the east side of the mountains, Datus and Myles finally settled in Seven Mile Gulch, half way between the mining town of Silver City and Helena. Evidently spurning any urge to prospect for gold, the brothers established themselves as ranchers in the spring of 1872. Seven years later Datus wrote Rachel, asking her to come west and be his bride.

Rachel, whose given name was Ernestine Fredericka Henrietta, was born in Hanover, Germany, but grew up in Detroit where her immigrant family settled when she was an infant. Rachel and Datus may have discussed marriage when they worked for the same employer in Detroit or they may have remained in contact while Datus and Myles looked for a place to settle, for Rachel did not hesitate to accept Datus' offer of marriage. Carefully packing her sewing machine and a few other belongings, she prepared for her journey west. She indulged herself with a few cuttings of yellow roses, roses that Datus himself had cared for, to plant near her new home in Montana.

From Detroit to Chicago and westward, Rachel traveled the standard route so many other migrants followed in the days before the completion of the

Northern Pacific Railroad through Montana. She went by rail to Bismarck, Dakota Territory, where she boarded a steamboat, the *Montana*, headed for Fort Benton. The *Montana* docked at Fort Benton on June 23, 1879, and Datus was waiting. They married there the following day and spent their honeymoon traveling along the Mullan Road to Seven Mile Gulch. What Rachel thought of her first days on the frontier we can only guess, but the next few years proved that she could adapt to difficult circumstances and she met the challenges of her new life with strength and determination.

Rachel eagerly took on the roles of frontier wife and ranch helpmate to Datus and brother-in-law Myles. In 1881, when first daughter Carrie was born, she added new responsibilities to her life. Bertha in 1883, Arthur in 1884, Fannie in 1887 and Walter in 1889, filled out the Sperry ranch household.

For reasons no longer remembered, Datus and Rachel dissolved their informal partnership with Myles in 1884, shortly after Arthur's birth. Myles retained the Seven Mile Gulch ranch and Datus received the ranch stock and moved several miles east to the Nicholas Hilger ranch, which fronted on the Missouri River not far from the Gates of the Mountains area. Nicholas Hilger, a German immigrant who first settled in New York and held federal office in Montana Territory in the 1860s, had built a summer residence on his ranch property in 1869. Hilger and Sperry worked out an agreement that allowed the Sperrys to reside on the Hilger ranch, harvest several acres of hay, and winter their stock in return for the care of Hilger's stock. The arrangement was profitable for both parties, but Datus Sperry wanted a ranch of his own. Within a year he found one.

Four miles north of the Hilger ranch, smack up against a mountain named Bear's Tooth by Lewis and Clark and known locally as the Sleeping Giant, Datus and Rachel found an abandoned homestead. The only dwelling on the homestead was a dugout that had been scraped out of the mountainside, but Datus saw the promise of his own ranch in the land. He purchased squatter's rights, hired a friend and neighbor, John Synnes, to build him a house and barn, and moved his family to their new and permanent home "on a rather small creek bottom in the shadow of one of the West's most spectacular mountains."² Once again Rachel brought her yellow roses to a new home.

The Sperry ranch was predominantly a dairy operation, although Datus raised enough hay to sell the surplus at the haymarket in Helena. He also broke horses for sale and quickly earned the reputation in

1. Interview with Brian O'Connell, Helena, June 25, 1980.

2. Amelia Hilger, "Sperry Family History," unpublished MS, courtesy of Fannie Sperry-Steele and family, Fannie Sperry-Steele Papers, in private possession, hereafter cited as Sperry-Steele Papers.

THE SPERRYS AND THEIR RANCH



**Rachel and Datus Sperry
in 1879**

The Sperry ranch, nestled in a gulch below the Sleeping Giant mountain, as it looked in about 1900. Their ranch was a convenient stopping place for travelers who used a ferry to cross the Missouri near the Gates of the Mountains. The Sperrys' hospitality and Rachel's cooking had nearly as high a reputation as the Sperry girls' riding talents.



All photographs in this article appear courtesy of Fannie Sperry-Steele.

the area as an expert teamster. His draft horses and trained teams were always in demand. When logging operations began near the Hilger ranch, Datus found employment skidding the logs to the Missouri where they were floated downstream to Great Falls. But it was dairy production that brought the family most of its income. They sold their cream, butter and milk to residents of Mitchell, a small settlement six miles west of the Sperry ranch, and to settlers in the Prickly Pear Valley to the south toward Helena.

Although Fannie's father worked with horses and expertly raised them, an old and painful injury prevented him from riding. He depended solely on his wagon and team for transportation. It was Rachel, not Datus, who taught the children, especially Fannie, how to ride. Rachel also passed on to her

children a love of horses and a special sensitivity to their needs. Even as a toddler Fannie exhibited a fascination for horses. When one of the wild, maverick horses that roamed the hills behind the Sperry ranch wandered near the yard, Fannie ran to the house and emerged with a long scarf, eyeing the pony with a gleam that said: "I'm going to catch you for my own." She was determined to have her own horse, as her parents soon learned. A couple of years later, when Fannie's father exclaimed in disgust at a new colt, "It's a damn pinto! We may as well kill it!" Fannie was out to the barn before another word could be spoken. Datus and Rachel followed and found Fannie wrapping the little foal in a blanket to keep it warm. She boldly informed her father that the pinto would be her "horty" and she would take care

of it. By the age of six Fannie had gotten her way, she had a pony of her own.³

Rachel used a simple but effective technique to teach her children how to ride. She placed them on a gentle horse, instructed them not to fall, and let things take their course. If the child tumbled to the ground, she swiftly picked her pupil up, plopped him or her back into the saddle after a smart swat, and delivered a sterner command not to fall. By the time each was a teenager, the Sperry children had all become expert riders and had broken their horses. The bumpy wagon ride to school at Mitchell they endured as children gave way to each one's riding his or her horse. For Fannie it was the best part of the school day, especially when she and her close childhood girlfriend, Christine Synnes, would race the last part of the ride to Mitchell.

THE SIMPLEST fact of life for Fannie Sperry when she neared the end of her schooling at Mitchell in 1903 was her love of horses. At sixteen she wanted nothing more than to work with horses the rest of her life. Rachel did nothing to discourage Fannie's ambition and area ranchers knew how good a rider she was. And even Helena residents had heard of the Sperry women when a lawyer named S.A. Balliet, who had by chance visited the Sperry ranch, wrote an account for a Helena newspaper that lauded the talents of Fannie's oldest sister, Carrie. The paper's editor, who disclosed some of the cultural distance that already separated the city from the country even in the 1890s, refused to believe that the Sperry daughters shod their own horses. Balliet's description of "shoeing" horses became a "showing" of horses. But in truth Carrie, Bertha and Fannie all broke and shod their own horses. When Balliet described Carrie "rounding up her cows on a fat, sleek, wiry half trained horse, which was bounding and dancing in a manner that would interest the full fledged cowboy" and how "Miss Sperry set his back swaying with the motion of his body as gracefully as a rose nodding in the morning breeze," he could have been describing Fannie's talents.⁴

Fannie knew she had more than an average ranch girl's knack with horses. Area residents often commented on her riding, roping and other skills at roundups or when they watched her break horses in the Sperry corral. And Fannie vaguely knew that in the East large audiences paid to see "Wild West Shows" that exhibited, in a glamorous manner, some

of the routine western ranch tasks. It was at Mitchell, however, that Fannie first received any money for riding.

Riding a large white, bucking stallion before a crowd of anxious spectators in Mitchell that summer day in 1903, Fannie secured herself to the horse with only her left hand and, waving her right hand in the air, she thrilled the onlookers so much with her ride that they passed the hat and gave her the receipts. That was the beginning. She performed regularly in Mitchell and nearby settlements, and it was not long before she exhibited her horses and riding skills in Helena horse shows.

Fannie's first work as a professional came in 1904, not as an exhibition rider but as a racer. Under the sponsorship of the Capital Stock and Food Company of Helena, she rode in women's relay races in Helena, Butte, Anaconda and Missoula. These races, which were relatively new to horse shows, drew enthusiastic crowds wherever they were presented. "It is putting it mildly," the *Helena Independent* reported, "to say the sport they furnish is thrilling. They are known as the greatest horsewomen in the west, each having broken their own ponies. Miss Sperry does all this and she shows her horses as well. In fact, there is not anything a cowboy has to do in the rough and ready life of a big western ranch that these girls cannot do."⁵

Promoters copied the relay race from Buffalo Bill Cody's Pony Express Race, which he introduced to audiences all over the country in his Wild West Show. "It was easy to stage," as Cody's biographer notes, "and it had the interest of a race, as well as recreating a romantic episode."⁶ The relay race, as presented to Montana audiences, differed from the Pony Express Race in both distance and the type of horses allowed to run. Relay racers used only thoroughbred horses, which were never allowed in the Pony Express Race. Like Cody's creation, however, the relay race forced riders to change horses during the race.

The rules usually stipulated that riders change four times, riding each horse an equal distance. In some instances racers had to change their own saddles. Distances and minor rules differed from race to race. One of Fannie's races lasted five days with each woman riding four miles per day, "changing horses every mile in front of the grandstand."⁷ In another race they rode cow ponies two miles each day and changed horses and saddles each half-mile.

The possibility of spills and other accidents, of course, lent some excitement to the race, especially when the riders dismounted at high speed or leapt

3. Interviews with: Fleta Sperry, original Sperry ranch, July 16, 1980; Viola Nelson, Helena, September 17, 1980; Bea Kreiger, Helena, September 17, 1980; Fannie Sperry-Steele, Helena, September 17, 1980; Betty Hilger, Helena, September 17, 1980.

4. Undated, unidentified newspaper clipping, ca. 1900, "Breaks Her Own Horses, Independent Montana Maid Who's At Home In the Saddle," Sperry-Steele Papers.

on their steeds and spurred them to full gallop. Fannie escaped serious injury, but Christine Synnes, who rode relay with Fannie from 1905 to 1907, had a close call in 1906. "In the relay race," a midwestern newspaper reported, "there was almost a serious accident, and this was the only real sensation of the day. Miss Synnes took her horse out of the chute during one of the changes before the blindfold was removed, and the animal plunged through the fence on the inside of the track and the young woman miraculously escaped with only a few bruises."⁸

AFTER FANNIE'S first season of relay racing she returned to the ranch to help Walter and her parents. Carrie had married Joe Hilger and left to homestead a new ranch nearby. Datus' health began to deteriorate, leaving much of the care of the ranch to Rachel, Bertha, Walter and Fannie. Fannie did her share of work, including using her superb shooting skills to protect the Sperry livestock from predators. But it was not ranch work that captured her imagination. As winter faded in 1905 and the snowline receded up the hillsides, Fannie could think of little else but riding again.

That spring, opportunity came a second time to Fannie Sperry. Walter R. Wilmot, a show promoter from Butte, rode out to the Sperry ranch and offered her a contract to ride in relay races throughout the Midwest in August and September. And Wilmot seemed determined to sign Fannie to a contract. Offering to pay her \$100 per week plus expenses, Wilmot promised that she would ride on the best thoroughbred horses and coaxed Datus and Rachel to approve the arrangement. Fannie's parents were not sure they wanted their seventeen-year-old daughter traveling east with a stranger. Datus put off Wilmot until he could discuss the proposal with lawyers in Helena. After assurances that Wilmot was genuine and his proposition was reputable, Fannie and the lawyers convinced her parents to consent. Fannie and her father signed the contract in June 1905.

Wilmot, upon Fannie's suggestion, also signed Christine Synnes. He filled out the team of four by making the same arrangement with Dorothy and Margaret Getts of Cascade, who had also ridden in relay races the previous year. Of the four, however, Wilmot wanted Fannie most. When newspapers reported on Wilmot's success at contracting with his

female jockeys and planning the summer tour, one noted that he had selected "several women riders who are already famous in this state for their horsemanship" and further claimed that Fannie Sperry was "a girl who has ridden every wild broncho on the ranch . . . and is yet to be thrown."⁹

The "Montana Girls," as Fannie and her cohorts were called by the press, planned to meet Wilmot in Butte in mid-August and travel to Des Moines with his wife and him. But Wilmot had other plans for Fannie. As Wilmot explained in a letter to Fannie, George I. Forsyth, manager of Butte's Columbia Gardens amusement center and park, had organized a wild west show and wanted Fannie and her friends to race there before going east. Forsyth wanted Fannie "to ride 5 horses against another girl inside the ball park at Columbia Gardens," and further he also wanted her "to rope and show a horse." Wilmot asked Fannie to be reasonable and "make him a price as low as possible."¹⁰

She accepted the offer to ride at Columbia Gardens and planned her arrival to coincide with the show. Once there, however, Forsyth talked Fannie into riding a bronc the day before the relay races. Apparently without any second thoughts, Fannie accepted the opportunity and Forsyth matched her up with an "outlaw" horse named "Tracy." As the Butte Miner reported the show, horse and rider gave Forsyth more than his money's worth.

Tracy was the feature of the wild west conclave at Columbia Gardens yesterday. There were other "raunchin cayuses" and some fractious steers, but compared with Tracy they were docile. If there ever was an imp of his satanic majesty incarnated in the disguise of a horse, Tracy is one. Tracy bounded into the limelight carrying Miss Sperry. Miss Sperry may be a broncho buster, and she proved she is game to the core, and can ride some, but she had about as much chance to ride Tracy as Jim Jeffries would have of earning a decision in a bout with a circular saw.

When Tracy came out of the chute, evidently, he ran about 150 feet and stopped cold in his tracks, launching Fannie over his head and to the ground. The Miner's account continued:

She made several revolutions in the air, and then struck the ground with a dull thud. Women screamed, for it seemed that the frail equestrienne had been dashed to death. But Miss Sperry arose gamely, and approached the black demon, who had become entangled with the bridle reins, and was savagely pawing up the dirt in an effort to extricate himself. It was

5. *Helena Independent*, July 10, 1905.

6. Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), p. 47.

7. Official Program, Minnesota State Fair, 1907, Sperry-Steele Papers.

8. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1906, Sperry-Steele Papers.

9. Undated, unidentified newspaper clipping, 1905, Sperry-Steele Papers.

10. Walter Wilmot to Fannie Sperry, June 27, 1905, Sperry-Steele Papers.



THE MONTANA GIRLS AND THE RELAY RACE

Relay racers Anna Pauls, Christine Synnes, Violet Keagle and Fannie Sperry in the summer of 1907 at the North Dakota State Fair in Bismarck.



This photo shows the action in the changing chutes during one of the relay races at the North Dakota fair. Waiting horses, held by handlers, were blindfolded until the racers had dismounted from their spent horses and mounted the fresh ones. It was in this exchange that critical time was gained or lost in the event and it was also when horse and rider were in the most danger.

a rare exhibition of grit, and two thousand voices howled their approval.¹¹

Fannie tried to remount Tracy, but men in the arena would not allow it. Instead they put a cowboy, Luke Redford, on Tracy and let the show continue. After Redford's successful ride, which gave the crowd additional thrills, Tracy broke from handlers, crashed through the stockade and sent a youthful spectator hurling through the air and to the hospital with bruises and a broken leg.

Undoubtedly many of those Columbia Garden spectators were in the crowd the following day when the "Montana Girls" displayed their racing talents. One of the Getts sisters won the race that day, but there is little question that where talk of horses carried the conversation in Butte, the name of Fannie Sperry was familiar.

Fannie, Christine and the Getts sisters raced at fairs and exhibitions in several states that summer. Fannie did not win every race, but she earned awards and set race records. She received one medal,

for meritorious riding, in a 24-mile race at the Minnesota State Fair in Hamlin.¹² That was the first of many medals Fannie would win in her riding career. Wilmot's tour introduced her to professional competition and the rigors of participating in a traveling show. Fannie seemed to thrive on the competition, but more than that the racing and the shows kept her working with horses—the one thing she pursued above all others.

The next summer, in addition to Wilmot's race tour, Fannie and Christine joined with Anna Pauls of St. Paul, Minnesota, as a three-member relay race team in the J. Ellison Carroll wild west show from Texas. Still called the "Montana Girls," even with the addition of Pauls, the three raced in Kansas City and Sedalia, Missouri, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Chippewa Falls and Stevens Point, Wisconsin. At Grand Rapids, Fannie set a new record for the four-mile relay, pushing her horses to a remarkable time of 8 minutes, 17 and $\frac{3}{4}$ seconds.¹³ It was with the Ellison show that Fannie began regularly exhibiting

bucking horses in addition to riding in the relays.

In July 1907, before Fannie began her race tour in August for Wilmot, she entered a bucking horse competition in Helena at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds. Defeating the other women in the contest, Fannie earned a gold medal as the women's bucking horse champion. She was beginning to earn a justified reputation as the toughest and slickest of the women bronc-busters, but Wilmot's relay races still brought her more money and more exposure on the nascent rodeo circuit. With Violet Keagle of Helena added to the "Montana Girls" racers, Wilmot scheduled his female jockeys into state fairs and exhibitions in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin that summer, plus one special relay race at an exposition in Winnipeg, Manitoba. For the first time, Rachel accompanied her daughter to the races in 1907.¹⁴ No doubt she felt the need to chaperone Fannie, but Rachel's own interest in competition and competitive nature probably were as responsible for her participation as anything. Fannie remarked many times that the woman she would least like to compete against was her own mother, suggesting that Rachel would be the fiercest of competitors.

Walter Wilmot, perhaps tired of the tour life himself, disbanded his relay team after the season ended in the late summer of 1907. The "Montana Girls" raced in several county fairs in Montana after their return from the East, but that was the last of Fannie's connection with Wilmot. Just as quickly as he had entered her life he departed. Wilmot moved to Ogden, Utah, and seems to have left horse shows and the young sport of rodeo behind him.

During the next five years, Fannie limited her competition to fairs and shows in Montana. She entered relay races and other contests but opportunities to participate in traveling shows did not lure her away from the Sperry ranch and Montana. Nevertheless, other performers in the relatively new sport of rodeo riding knew of Fannie's skill and daring. The number of women riders was especially small—"Prairie Rose" Henderson was the first woman bronc rider in 1901 at Cheyenne's Frontier Days—and Fannie Sperry's fame was considerable. It is not surprising, then, that Fannie would be one of the few women to be invited to participate in the first Calgary Stampede rodeo in 1912.

11. Butte Miner, August 14, 1905.

12. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1906, Sperry-Steele Papers.

13. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1906, Sperry-Steele Papers.

14. "Fannie Sperry Steele," *Hoofs and Horns*, 11 (May 1945), p. 5.

15. Guy Weadick to Fannie Sperry, June 24, 1912, Sperry-Steele Papers.

16. Guy Weadick to Fannie Sperry, July 11, 1912, Sperry-Steele Papers.

17. Charles W. Furlong, *Let 'er Buck* (New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), p. 185.

GUY WEADICK, the man credited with beginning the Calgary Stampede, wrote Fannie in the early summer of 1912, inviting her to perform in the Stampede's inaugural exhibition. Enticing her with his opinion that she "could win some big money,"¹⁵ Weadick promised her the best competition and stock in the rodeo world. In a second letter that summer, Weadick challenged Fannie's competitive spirit in the hope that her desire to win would bring her to Calgary in September, and added that "entries for the Ladies is free." Weadick informed her that there were "five Lady bucking horse riders entered. While we allow Lady contestants in the bucking horse event to hobble their stirrups if they so desire it is needless to say to you that any Lady riding the horse slick and clean will certainly be considered by the judges much better than those who do hobble their stirrups."¹⁶

Women bronc riders often "hobbled their stirrups" by tying them together with a cinch strap under the horse's belly, thus firmly securing the rider to the saddle. Some considered it a less competitive way to ride, because the rider's feet were not free to strike the horse's flanks and riders were not as apt to be thrown, although Fannie never derided her competitors who hobbled their stirrups. Others, including Fannie, thought hobbled stirrups to be too dangerous. She always wanted to be able to dismount during a ride if trouble developed. The entire issue of hobbled stirrups created controversy between riders and judges for many years and led to the death of several contestants, including Marie ("Buckskin Mary") Gibson of Havre. But Fannie never rode any way but "slick and clean." As Charles W. Furlong in *Let 'er Buck* wrote: "In fact in the entire history of the Round-Up [Pendleton] the women who have ridden slick can be numbered on the fingers of one hand—Bertha Blancett, Nettie Hawn, Fanny [sic] Steele and Tillie Baldwin."¹⁷

Guy Weadick had first been to Calgary in 1905 with the Miller Brothers' 101 Wild West Show, which included "Ballie" Buck, the Austin Brothers, the Knight Brothers and other great rodeo performers. In following years, Weadick went back to Calgary to perform and in 1908 he met H.C. McMullen there. McMullen, who was the livestock agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway in Calgary, listened intently to Weadick's dream of putting together a genuinely extravagant wild west show that would attract the best rodeo performers. Several years later, while Weadick was travelling in Europe with a troupe of performers, McMullen wrote him, telling that the time was right to promote his dream rodeo in Calgary.

Weadick went to Calgary in the spring of 1912, trying to arrange financial backing for his show. He had

FANNIE AND THE THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP



It was as a fearless rider of bucking stock that Fannie Sperry made her reputation. Pictured here (clockwise) Fannie is shown in one of her early contests in 1907 in Helena, finishing her championship ride at the Winnipeg Stampede in 1913 and showing off her prize saddle she won at the Calgary Stampede in 1912.



nearly given up when A.P. Day, a Medicine Hat rancher who fancied bucking horses, pledged the best of his stock and \$10,000 if Weadick could get his idea off the ground. That was all Weadick needed. In short order he persuaded four Alberta ranchers to back the show. Weadick, with \$20,000 in prize money to dangle before prospective contestants, personally invited the best rodeo cowboys and cowgirls in the United States and Canada. The resulting Calgary Stampede in September 1912 was an unqualified success. The first large-purse rodeo, the Calgary Stampede was a milestone in rodeo history.

There was drama in the women's bucking horse competition from the beginning of the five-day rodeo. Goldie St. Clair, a Canadian cowgirl and an early favorite to win the contest, successfully rode one of the most dangerous horses in the bucking string. "Red Wing," the bronc St. Clair rode, had thrown to his death a cowboy named Joe La Mar in

practice rounds just one week before the Stampede. When Fannie watched Goldie's ride, she was certain that St. Clair would become the champion. But on the final day of the competition Fannie drew that same horse. The judges had the opportunity to compare the two riders. Fannie stunned the crowd with a performance that surpassed Goldie St. Clair's earlier ride on the beautiful but wild bronc. It was Fannie Sperry, not Goldie St. Clair, who won the title of "Ladies' Bucking Horse Champion of the World." Some who witnessed it later stated it was the "most spectacular ride ever seen by a slick riding cowgirl."¹⁸

"The thousand dollar prize for the world's champion woman broncho buster at 'the stampede' in Calgary this week," the *Helena Independent* reported on September 12, 1912, "was won by Miss Fanny [sic] Sperry of the Prickly Pear Valley."¹⁹ In addition to the prize money, Fannie also brought home a prize



Bill and Fannie Sperry-Steele's studio wedding photograph discloses nothing of their occupations as rodeo performers, but the picture taken three years later of Bill and Fannie behind the scenes at the Chicago Shan-Kive and Roundup shows rodeo cowboy and cowgirl in their classic riding garb.

saddle and a solid gold belt buckle. When asked by the Stampede officials if she had plans to spend her winnings on anything special, Fannie told them of the railroad land near her parents' ranch and that she was "going to buy a piece of railroad land for my father." No sooner had she stated her plans than the hat was passed and her new friends at the Stampede presented Fannie with \$800 for the land.²⁰

At the Sperry ranch, Datus and brother Walter asked questions of Fannie about the Stampede and the competition, but it was Rachel's story that had them most intrigued. Taking advantage of the chance to watch a large rodeo, Rachel had made the trip with Fannie to Calgary. There Mrs. Sperry had received an invitation from the Duke of Connaught to join the royal party in their box. The Duke, who was

18. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1912; "Guy Weadick Travelled Rocky Trail Before Hitting Paydirt in 1912," unidentified clipping, Sperry-Steele Papers; *Calgary Daily Herald*, September 5, 1912; Walt Coburn, "My Friend Guy Weadick," *True West* 20 (July-August, 1973), pp. 14-18.

19. *Helena Independent*, September 12, 1912.

20. Interview with Hallie Alexander, Helena, May 28, 1980.

21. *Ibid.*

FANNIE AND BILL



Governor-General of Canada, was a special guest at the Stampede. All of the Sperrys had seen rodeos, but Rachel's tete-a-tete with royalty was something extraordinary.²¹

After her success at Calgary, and to some extent because of that success, Fannie's life changed. Of course she became much more of a celebrity in Montana than before the Stampede; as a world champion she was in demand at fairs and horse shows. At a county fair in Deer Lodge, not long after her return from Canada, horse breeders paid her to exhibit their bucking horses. It was at the Deer Lodge fair in 1912, too, that she met a man who was as interested as Fannie was in rodeo—and also very interested in her.

BILL STEELE had moved around the West for several years before taking a job as a cowpuncher at a ranch in the Deer Lodge valley. No doubt, he had seen Fannie Sperry ride before she visited that county fair, but after their meeting there he ardently courted her. Steele, at thirty-four, was ten years older than Fannie and his life had already been punctuated with frequent moves, at least one business enterprise in a distant state, and a previous marriage. In short, Bill Steele had had much more worldly experience

than had Fannie Sperry. Yet, he was the first man who had interested Fannie in marriage, and within a few months they married, on April 30, 1913.

Described by those who knew him as a talented and handsome "show person," Bill competed in rodeo events only occasionally and was best known for his talents as a rodeo clown. Evidently, old riding injuries prevented him from being competitive, although he often won third or fourth place in the events he entered. For several years, however, Bill Steele and Fannie Sperry-Steele, as she was known professionally from then on, lived on the rodeo circuit. At first they worked with some of the larger shows staged by Weadick and C.B. Irwin, but later Bill thought he and Fannie could do better on their own.

The Steeles' first rodeo together was in C.B. Irwin's wild west show in Cheyenne, Wyoming, on July 4, 1913. Irwin's troupe played Cheyenne and then moved on to cities in the Midwest. It was at the next stop in Sioux City, Iowa, that a near tragic accident cut the tour short for Fannie. Drawing a wild horse named "Big Sandy" for a bucking contest, Fannie rode the horse to the ground as the steed stumbled, pinning her under the beast. "She arose from the ground immediately and stood uncertainly on her feet for a moment," as *The Sioux City Journal* described the fall, "then fainted in the arms of her husband."²² A badly sprained hip and back knocked her out of competition for several weeks, but she gamely entered Guy Weadick's extravaganza in Winnipeg, which he billed as the "World's Greatest Frontier Days' Celebration." She rode well in Winnipeg and won her second women's world bucking horse championship.

Fannie and Bill spent the winter of 1913-1914 on the Sperry ranch. Datus' health, which had been poor for several years, worsened and Fannie and Bill helped out with ranch chores over the winter. That spring the lifelong asthmatic illness that had plagued Datus took his life. The Steeles remained at the ranch through the spring and into early summer, but the rodeo season found them leaving the Sleeping Giant behind as they took their own, small wild west show across Montana. They travelled with one or two extra performers, their own chuck wagon and a string of rodeo stock, much of it captured in the hills behind the Sperry ranch. In 1914 they planned to perform at small towns and major cities across the state as they made their way to the Miles City Round Up. Their route took them west to Elliston and Deer

Lodge, then north to Great Falls and Fort Benton, heading east to Miles City.²³

They camped as they travelled. With Fannie remaining in camp, Bill usually went on ahead to their next stop to find a suitable location for their show—sometimes a large corral, a fenced area on a rancher's property, or the fenced corner of a lot near town. He posted advertisements in town that notified everyone that the women's bucking horse champion of the world—Fannie Sperry-Steele—would perform the next day. The Steele show was a straight-forward affair, with none of the theatrics of a Miller Brothers or Weadick exhibition. Fannie would display her skills on broncs and fast horses, and Bill Steele would offer twenty-five to fifty dollars to anyone who could ride one of his oneriest horses for a stated time. A Helena area cowboy and friend of the Steeles, Johnny Sandich, often showed up at the Steele shows, took Bill's challenge and almost always went home richer.²⁴

In the Steele show Fannie also displayed her remarkable shooting skills. From some distance with a fine-sighted rifle she shattered china eggs that Bill held between his fingers. When that feat thrilled the crowd, Fannie went one better by knocking off the ash of a cigar that Bill held in clenched teeth. She rarely missed, although in one performance she misjudged the bullet's trajectory from a new rifle and nicked Bill's index finger as she exploded a china egg. Bill nonchalantly used another finger to hold a second egg, to distract the audience from Fannie's miss, but she just as expertly nicked the uninjured finger. By now the blood running off Bill's hand could hardly be ignored. They abruptly shortened the act. Fannie's accuracy with her new rifle improved and the act remained a standard part of their show for the next decade.²⁵

In Miles City in 1914, Fannie again proved her skill at riding broncs when she handily won the event and earned the title of "Montana State Lady Bucking Horse Champion." It was also in Miles City that Fannie and Bill organized their new "Powder River Wild West Show," a small version of the Irwin and Miller Brothers' shows. Leaving Miles City on August 4, the Steeles' troupe performed in Hysham, Melstone, Roundup, Musselshell, Flat Willow, Straw, Harlowton, Two Dot and White Sulphur Springs on their way home to the Sperry ranch. There the entire crew of the "Powder River Wild West Show" parked in the Sperrys' yard for over a month before the troupe left for Oregon and the Pendleton Round-Up in late September.²⁶

22. *Sioux City (Iowa) Journal*, July 8, 1913.

23. Fannie Sperry-Steele, personal journal, summer 1914, Sperry-Steele Papers.

24. Interview with Don Brown, Augusta, Montana, October 3, 1980.

25. Interviews with: Bob Dedrickson, Lincoln, Montana, June 17, 1980; Otto and Jennie Eder, Helmsville, Montana, January 10, 1981.

26. Interview with Fleta Sperry, original Sperry home, July 16, 1980; Fannie Sperry-Steele, personal journal, summer 1914, Sperry-Steele Papers.

Fannie Sperry-Steele

THE WORLD'S CHAMPION LADY SLICK BRONK RIDER

WINNER OF 1st PRIZE—BRONK RIDING, FIRST 4 DAYS OF CHICAGO ROUND-UP.

WINNER OF 3rd PRIZE—LADIES' RELAY, AT NEW YORK STAMPEDE.

Open for contract dates for the remainder of this season and all of next. RELAY HORSES AND BUCKING HORSES. Address

W. S. and FANNIE SPERRY-STEELE, Mitchell, Mont.

On their own with a small touring show, the Steeles emphasized Fannie's championship honors and tough bucking stock in ads they placed in national entertainment periodicals. They also practiced for long hours on their shooting act, trusting the best target rifles and Fannie's skill to amaze audiences without a slip.

The group travelled by train from Helena, after performing two more shows in White Sulphur Springs and Townsend. The Pendleton show was one of the biggest, although it was then only six years old. It drew the biggest names in rodeo, and in 1914 Fannie met her toughest competition there. She was up against her, by now, familiar adversaries: Lucille Mulhall, Vera McGinnis, Peggy Warren, Blanche McGaughy and Bertha Blancett. That year Pendleton also attracted Art Accord, Yakima Canutt, Bill Hart, Buffalo Vernon and Homer Wilson. Fannie rode well, placing second to Bertha Blancett, in the bucking contest and second in the relay race.²⁷ Her total winnings, at \$125, were considerable but far less than the \$400 she won at Miles City and her prize monies at Calgary and Winnipeg.

From Pendleton, the Steeles travelled to The Dalles, Oregon, for another rodeo. By early October, Fannie and Bill were back on the Sperry ranch. 1914 had been a good year. From May to October, they had averaged \$191.10 per month and realized a total of \$956.51 from their own wild west show.²⁸

They remained at the ranch over the winter, but the summer of 1915 saw them participating in H.C. McMullen's Rocky Mountain Park Stampede in Banff, Alberta. McMullen contracted Bill Steele to provide the stock for the show and Fannie was billed as a feature performer. The show itself, however, proved to be a failure. Poor weather forced the closing of the exhibition after two weeks. For Fannie the show brought bad luck, including a humorous incident in the show's opening parade. Riding a horse



named "Bonehead"—and Fannie later recalled that the horse was truly a "bonehead"—she led the cowboys and cowgirls in the procession and all went as planned until the band started playing and "Bonehead" charged through the marching musicians, scattering drummers and buglers right and left and tearing up sidewalk souvenir stands.

The rest of the season for Fannie and Bill was spent in Montana, where they took their show to communities from Boulder to Havre. In 1916 they participated in a grandly organized show, the "Passing of the West." Financed and promoted by Billings businessman C.L. Harris, the show travelled across the state by train and included many rodeo stars, including Ben "Pack Saddle" Greenough, Lucille Mulhall, Bert Smith, and Vera McGinnis. Again featured as a headliner in the rodeo, Fannie was under contract to ride either a bull or a bison—a very dangerous proposition—but the show managers fortunately dropped the idea.

Guy Weadick, who continued to promote extravagant shows in the United States and Canada, lured Fannie and Bill, after the "Passing of the West" show closed in July, to the first of the great rodeos to be staged in New York. But the New York Stampede, which was held at the Sheepshead Bay Speedway on Long Island in August 1916, failed to draw large crowds. A transit strike and an infantile paralysis

27. Layne Woolshager (Oregon Historical Society, Portland), to Liz Stiffler, December 8, 1980.

28. Fannie Sperry-Steele, personal journals, 1914-1915, Sperry-Steele Papers.

epidemic contributed to the low attendance, although the show received very favorable reviews, including some well publicized plaudits from honored guest Theodore Roosevelt. The *New York Times* reported that Roosevelt was impressed with the female riders but he was not keen on women riding bucking horses; he was fearful that they would seriously injure themselves.²⁹ Weadick lost money on the New York Stampede and the performers received little for their work—they were to be paid in gate receipts—but the rodeo left a lasting impression on New Yorkers. Rodeos in the metropolis would soon become very popular.

On the return from the New York Stampede, Fannie and Bill appeared in rodeos in Chicago, Milwaukee and Kansas City. In Chicago, at the Chicago Shan-Kive and Round Up, they performed with Bill Pickett, the famous black cowboy who introduced “bulldogging” to the sport, and Lucille Mulhall and others who had shared the arena at Calgary, Winnipeg, Pendleton and Cheyenne. This Chicago show was also the only time Fannie and Bill performed with Buffalo Bill Cody, and it was one of Cody’s last appearances before his death the following year.

The next year, 1917, was the last year that Fannie and Bill appeared in the large-scale rodeos. In July they performed in the Great Northern Montana Stampede in Havre, where Fannie met tough competition but still won the bucking horse contest. From the Havre exhibition, they travelled to Cheyenne’s Frontier Days rodeo and then went on to compete in the Calgary Stampede in early August. It was their final trek to the great rodeos. For the next several years, Fannie and Bill were content to travel Montana each summer with their small show.

IN 1919 they purchased a ranch on Jackson Creek, south and east of Helena, moving from a homestead on Tow’s Head Creek near the Hilger ranch, where they had lived since 1915. Their pattern of life until 1925 continued to be summers on the Montana rodeo circuit and the rest of the time at Jackson Creek. Bill, whose health would no longer support rough rodeo work, briefly took on the job of Watkins salesman in the Helena area. But as Fannie approached her twentieth year as a rodeo performer they both decided to leave the sport. She appeared professionally for the last time at the Bozeman Round Up in 1925. That same year they sold their Jackson Creek ranch and moved to Arrastra Creek near Lincoln, Montana.

At Arrastra Creek their livelihood changed but it still involved horses. Fannie and Bill Steele became dude ranchers and outfitters of backcountry hunting

RETIREMENT AND DUDE RANCHING



Fannie and Bill, two years before his death.

trips in the Lincoln area, and it was in this role that Fannie Sperry-Steele spent the next forty years of her life. Bill died in 1940 and Fannie carried on the business alone until 1965, when she moved to a small cabin her sister Carrie and Joe Hilger had built in 1903. Finally at age eighty-seven, in 1974, she left her horses and other animals behind, said goodbye to the ranch, and moved to a rest home in Helena, where she still can gaze out her window and watch the day’s light play against the slopes of the Sleeping Giant.

Born before Montana achieved statehood, Fannie Sperry-Steele has been a unique part of the state’s history. She represented the state and the best in the Montana traditions of independence of character, perseverance of effort, and undiluted grit as she performed in the rodeo arenas of this country and Canada. In the rodeo world she is a living legend and is honored as a member of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. But she is also a Montana woman and her life has been a testimonial to the truth that Montana’s women adapted to the frontier life, significantly influenced the state’s history, and lived lives that were distinct but as important as the men’s lives. *M*

²⁹ *New York Times*, August 19, 1916.



For twenty-five years Fannie Sperry-Steele ran a dude ranch and outfitter operation at Arrastra Creek on her own. In 1965, at age 78, she finally retired from a lifetime of work with horses.

Liz Stiffler and Tona Blake of Augusta, Montana, have combined their talents as writer and photographer, respectively, to search out, research and write about the history of ranching and rural life in western Montana. It was in that pursuit that they met Fannie Sperry-Steele and began work on a book-length biography. For help and support in their research the authors wish to thank the Sperry and Hilger families and the many friends of Fannie Sperry-Steele.