

The Great American WILD WEST Show

BY CORINNE J. BROWN

Twilight descends as the house lights dim over two cattlemen who've lain down their bedrolls on the dusty range of Denver's National Western Events Center. Overhead, what appears to be a thousand twinkling stars magically fill the void, while below, the bright flames of a real campfire flicker next

to a chuck wagon, the camp cook sleeping peacefully nearby.

Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving await another morning on their long journey north, driving 5,000 head of cattle toward their destination in Montana. As the background music shifts from a dreamy cowboy lament to a joyful,



swelling crescendo, our heroes remount.

Suddenly, a wild-eyed herd of Longhorns explodes through an arena gate, while behind them whooping cowboys on horseback drive their charges forward. A blaze of spotlights brings on the dawn while the audience applauds and cheers, celebrating one of the great legends of western history, the recreation of the famed Goodnight-Loving Trail.

A slice of Hollywood? A wishful dream? Neither; just one of the memorable moments in a grand piece of entertainment known as The Great American Wild West Show.

Reviving a time-honored tradition, co-producers Don and Sharon Endsley of Drasco, Arkansas, have put the best elements of history and show business together in their multi-faceted production.

Drawing on historical resources, plus the talents of stunt men, actors, Native Americans, trick riders, and animal trainers, the Endsleys have succeeded in creating the kind of non-stop family entertainment that leaves audiences laughing, crying, and begging for more.

They are assisted by their grown son Tim and daughter-in-law, Mandy.

"To boil it all down," says Don, "we just want people to have fun. And we enjoy the show right along with them. After each performance, we invite the audience to meet the cast, shake hands, get an autograph. We want to make personal contact. People don't get to do that much anymore. Most celebrities are just too remote."

According to Endsley, some folks have waited patiently for up to three hours to meet some performers



J.W. Stoker performs his fiery routine.



Max Reynolds portrays Buffalo Bill in the show.

had to rely on celebrities to draw an audience. Instead, Endsley, a natural showman with a gift for narration, expertly mixes humor, pathos, and nostalgia with popular music, storytelling, and outstanding choreography. The rest of his success is simply "word of mouth."

From the poignant struggle of the Native American and the tale of *The Last Buffalo* to *The Great Stagecoach Holdup*, one vignette flows into the other with seamless timing and magical appeal. The single-handed rescue of the stagecoach passengers by the Lone Ranger on *Silver*, to the strains of the *William Tell Overture*, has to be one of the high points of the performance. From the outset, the entire production simply opens with a wild burst of energy and never lets go until the last act is done.

More than 100 costumes are needed for each production, all historically accurate and impeccably made. Stagecoaches and chuck wagons are painstakingly authentic, and even the rowdy cowboys and girls who make up the cast, including Wyatt Earp, Pecos Bill, and the gun-slinging Calamity Jane, are pure history brought to life.

But unlike the real Buffalo Bill, producer and showman, who relied on painted scenery and a few props for his shows earlier in the century, the Endsleys take advantage of every modern theatrical device. When performing indoors, they are able to integrate the latest technology in film, lighting, precision sound editing, and other special effects to help make fantasy into fact.

"I like to think of myself as the Andrew Lloyd Webber of Wild West shows," confesses Endsley with a smile. "And although I try to stay as authentic as possible, people still want to be entertained. There's the task ~ to blend reality and expectation. In fact, I rely very much on audience feedback. I build every show from the last one and customize as I go.

"In every western city we play,

of the show, such as the gifted Max Reynolds, an athletic Buffalo Bill or J.W Stoker, a famed trick roper who is still astounding audiences at the age of 72.

On the road since 1995, *The Great American Wild West Show* was actually conceived five years earlier in Texas. The idea started as a dream in Endsley's heart. He was then a retired PRCA rodeo announcer and sensed a void in America's entertainment menu. Over time, he'd watched stock shows and state fairs focus on action-packed rodeo competitions, measured by split-seconds, bucking stock, and the increased level of risk.

Though crowds enjoyed the short-lived thrills, he saw the audience experience was limited. He

believed there was room for more: an opportunity to teach something vital, engage peoples' imaginations, and help them remember and honor all that the West had been and still stood for.

Endsley wanted to explore the legends and stories that could inspire people world wide, as they once had, and set out to do so with a sense of purpose.

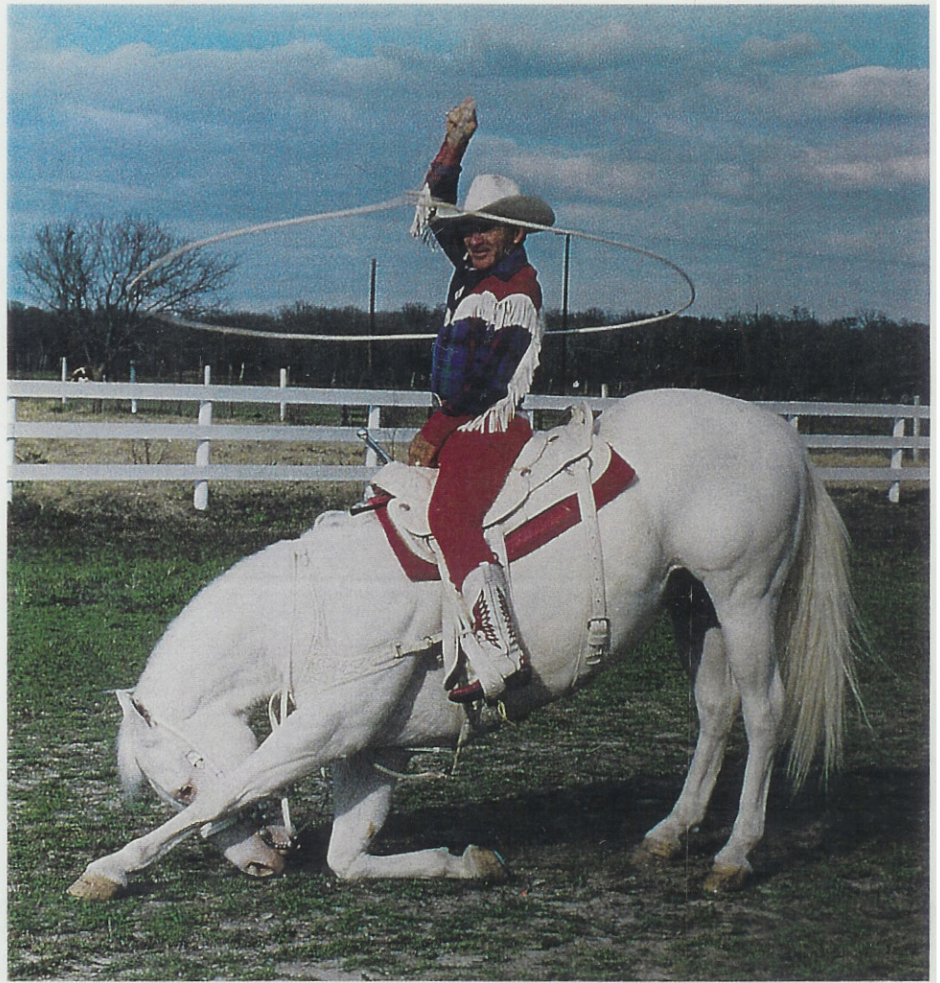
The Endsleys' first show, a mere 40 minutes, quickly outgrew the standard Houston venues and had to be booked at the giant Astrodome. Then Endsley decided to make the production even bigger and better, and take the message all across America, whose communities gladly received them.

Surprisingly, the Endsleys never

we try to tailor our acts to reflect the legends and tales of that region's past. In New Mexico for example, instead of Black Bart, we'll tell the story of Billy the Kid. People everywhere tell us our shows are a cathartic experience. This might be one of the reasons why."

Because of the scale of the production, The Great American Wild West Show can only play the largest houses, and bigger state fairs. One year, a special arena was constructed right in the middle of Hartford, Connecticut, in the center of the downtown city park, right in front of the state capitol. "That was a first," states Endsley. "In every direction, skyscrapers could be seen towering behind the audience."

The basic show maintains a core group of actors, including two Navajo Indian families who have made the production their full-time occupation. On the road six months out of the year, numerous other acts are subcontracted as needed. Performers and their animals, and often spouses and children, willingly trailer to the many locales where they are booked. The Endsleys' estimate they put 100,000 miles a year on their caravan and,



J.W. Stoker performs one of his Wild West show rope tricks.



J.W. Stoker and Don Endsley

although they sometimes have to rehearse at midnight to prepare all the technical details, they love every minute of it.

"We get fan mail," says Mrs. Endsley, who is the sound and cue manager for all the productions. "And over and over, our fans tell us, it's about memories ~ the ones they've had for years and the new ones we have made," she notes.

In a new book titled *America's Wild West Shows* by historian Paul Redden, a professor at Mesa State College in Grand Junction, Colorado, the author reminds us that throughout history, cultures are judged by the kind of entertainment they prefer.

Since the mid-1800s when artist George Catlin created the very first touring show to introduce Indians to easterners, America has responded enthusiastically. In a tradition contin-



J.W. Stoker performs at the show's opening along with Dementa Risenhoover and Vicki Taylor.

ued up to this day, the West remains a constant draw, the cowboy still its favorite hero.

Inexhaustible in his appeal, he is interpreted in Endsley's Great American Wild West Show on horseback, through music, and even on film, especially in the closing act, *Ridin' High Across the Silver Screen*, a homage to the singing cowboy and the silent film star as well.

With luck, you too, may see for yourself the unforgettable entrance of the Electric Horseman, J. W. Stoker, rigged up in a custom-made, battery-pack operated light suit that outlines horse and rider as they parade in total darkness. Or laugh along with comedian Old Timer Taylor Bill, Brother Taylor, and his sidekick *Arbo*, a comic pony.

You might gasp as the fastest stagecoach in the West reels around

the arena pulled by six horses at top speed, or hold your breath as Buffalo Bill, standing on the backs of two snow-white steeds, guides them through a giant burning hoop of fire. In fact, if you can catch up with this production, in Denver, again at the National Western, January 8-24, 2000, or somewhere in America, just pick your favorite moment and make it your own.

No matter what your age or where you come from, this is one experience that is guaranteed to make you feel the West, not just see it. Thanks to the Endsleys, the Old West will not be forgotten, but will grow in the hearts of Americans where it belongs. 🐾

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