

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

*By Barbara Ditman*

Known as the Dean of Rodeo Photography, DeVere Helfrich has been described as the greatest rodeo photographer of all time. Helen Grace Reed Helfrich, also a gifted photographer, was DeVere's professional partner. They were the official photographers for the Rodeo Cowboys Association (now the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association) for over twenty-five years, until they retired in 1967. Through their photography and field investigations, the couple made significant contributions to the history of American rodeo and early immigration to Oregon and California.

John DeVere Helfrich was born on April 16, 1902, in Lamonta, west of Prineville, to John and Minnie Clara (McCoin) Helfrich. His grandparents, Julius and Sarah McCoin, had homesteaded a ranch at the foot of Gray Butte between Madras and Prineville in 1880, and his uncle Walter McCoin owned the Crooked Creek Ranch near Redmond, where the young Helfrich worked with cattle and wild horses. After a year at the University of Oregon, DeVere worked for a bank in Bend before taking a surveying job with the Central Oregon Irrigation District in Redmond.

In 1926, DeVere Helfrich married Helen Grace Reed, who had been born in Bend on October 29, 1907, to Lou & Bessie (Tuck) Reed. Helen's grandfather was Oregon pioneer John Tuck, who had opened Redmond's first public elementary school in the Old Oregon Hotel in 1906. Her family lived in Washington, where her father built irrigation projects, but they returned to Redmond for most of Helen's youth.

In 1930, DeVere worked for the Tumalo Irrigation District and in 1933 purchased a furniture store in Redmond, which they soon moved 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 Kalpine Plywood Company on the Klamath River, and he, Helen, and their two daughters worked at the Crater Lake Creamery until the war was over. DeVere also helped survey the air base and the Marine hospital in Klamath Falls.

DeVere began working as a professional rodeo photographer in 1939 and soon gained recognition for his action shots. He won the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation's best picture of the year prize in 1941 for his photo of Gene Pruett on Colonel Dean at the Prairie City Rodeo in Oregon. His photo of Bill Ward riding Sea Lion in the 1956 San Angelo, Texas, rodeo was adapted as the official logo of the Rodeo Cowboys Association.

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The Helfriches traveled the rodeo circuit for thirty years, driving thousands of miles and spending more than half their time on the road. Gasoline was in short supply during the war, but a Klamath Falls gas station owner and other friends collected unused gas ration coupons so they could travel on the rodeo circuit.

DeVere, who was blind in one eye, used a Speed Graphic cut film press camera. Nothing in the Graphic is automated, and using the camera required DeVere to get close to his subject. He turned this to his advantage, saying, "I like to work 30 to 40 feet from the action. The photographer has to be in time with the horse, not just the rider." His photographs convey the thrill and excitement of the sport and were key factors in the growing popularity of rodeo.

Cowboys complained to officials about photographers and tried to keep them out of the arena because they caused distractions or got in the way, but DeVere Helfrich was always careful not to disturb the riders or the animals. The cowboys liked and respected him and 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 took most of the posed pictures, using a 1929 twin-lens Rolliflex camera until 35 mm cameras became widely available. In the 1950s, the Helfriches set up a small trailer as a darkroom, which allowed them to produce photos while traveling. During rodeos, DeVere would wake early to spend the day photographing the action, developing the new negatives every evening. Helen printed the negatives late at night and rested in the morning before displaying and delivering their

latest prints and taking posed portraits of the cowboys, officials, and individuals.

During the winter off-season, the Helfriches printed photographs for the next season and produced postcards in bundled sets to sell to the cowboys and rodeo fans. They made poster-size prints, which Helen colorized by hand, for display in store windows to advertise the rodeos.

The Helfriches were also full partners in researching the history of early immigrant trails. While traveling to rodeos, they followed immigrant routes, using settlers' diaries to locate and map the trails. After retiring from the rodeo circuit in 1967, they became known as authorities on the Oregon and California Trails. In 1970, DeVere was appointed the historian for Trails West, a Nevada group that marks immigrant roads.

In 1964, the Klamath County Historical Society appointed DeVere editor of *Klamath Echoes*, a journal about the history of communities in the region. Helen was named assistant editor in 1968, and they published the journal annually until 1978. They also published *Rodeo Pictures* in 1966 and wrote or edited several books, including *Emigrant Trails West* (1991) and the 1848 diary of Oregon pioneer Richard May.

DeVere Helfrich died in Klamath Falls on September 1, 1981, and Helen Helfrich died on July 30, 1989. DeVere was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1991. The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma holds over thirty-seven thousand of their photographs, and the Shaw Historical Library retains many of their annotated maps, notes, records, and other photos.

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