

THE TANTLINGERS' TALE ★

BY JANE CANNON



In the glory days of the Wild West shows, Edith Tantlinger rode a fast pony into the performance ring and dazzled crowds with her sharpshooting and roping abilities. She shattered glass balls and clay pigeons with her repeater rifle then dismounted to boot-dance with a spinning lariat.

In a separate act, Edith's husband, Vern, shot objects out of the air while riding his favorite mode of transportation: a bicycle. Vern would stand on the spokes and sometimes shoot as many as six balls at a time while the bicycle balanced precariously atop two stools. An expert roper, Vern also delighted audiences with his skill at throwing boomerangs.

For nine consecutive seasons, the couple traveled the continent with the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show,

which was based in Oklahoma. For most of those years between 1903 and 1909, Edith kept a diary.

Edith's diaries and a scrapbook containing letters, programs, performance contracts and newspaper stories featuring interviews with the couple in their

later years were acquired from a rare book dealer after the Tantlingers' death and are part of an extensive diary collection owned by the University of Oklahoma Libraries' Western History Collections.

In hastily scrawled notes inside thin, dime-store daybooks and journals, Edith details the ups and downs of life on the road, mostly accomplished by way of rail. Relived is the grueling schedule of twice-daily performances in dusty show rings, sometimes muddy arenas and flapping tents erected in pastures and baseball parks.

“Shot well enough... Missed more than I hit.”

“Crowds were nothing extra,” she notes on the first night of a three-day run in Alexandria, Louisiana, adding: “Arrived rather late on account of a breakdown... the flat car broke down. Dolly hurt in the introduction (of the first show).”

But by the second night’s performance, she records, “The wedding of Nora Turner and John Goodrich took place in arena on horseback. Vern, Miss Allen and I went down to supper with them after the show.”

In Thebodeaux, Louisiana, she reports “very few people, poor afternoon house,” but adds a cryptic aside: “A certain wedding skirt was christened in wine by a mere accident.”

After a “run of 72 miles,” the show sets up in Texarkana, Texas, but the performers “get a nice rest” on Sunday, although Edith says, “As it was getting dusk, a bunch of boys were pinched for shooting ‘craps.’ ”

A few days later in Cuero, Texas, she writes of “threatening weather and high winds... very bad night. We loaded in the rain... horses could hardly pull through the mud to the show.”

In Corpus Christi, however, the sun is shining, the crowds are good, and after a late show, she and Vern have a “very nice supper” at a local restaurant and buy some pottery cups as souvenirs. She marvels at “the beautiful homes on the cliff overlooking the bay” and searches for “drawn work” that illustrates the scenic beauty. Local artists, she



★ Expert roper, rider and sharpshooter Edith Tantlinger kept a diary that gives visitors to the Western History Collections a charming glimpse into turn-of-the-century life on the circuit with the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show.

adds, “ask a very high price for it.”

In a journal detailing the next year’s performance run, Edith catalogues injuries, mishaps and one major disaster. In Gulfport, Mississippi, Lon Seeley, “the man who throws steers, single-handed and alone, was shot dead” by a local policeman who mistook him for a robber. As he fell, she notes, Seeley fired off a round from his own gun, also killing the policeman.

Days later and on down the road “a southern fire-eater shot a showman in the leg.” Not too long after, Edith writes, “. . . another showman in charge of the ammunition was blown up by powder and torn to pieces.”

Still, the shows go on, and in between, Edith records even the minutiae of “everyman’s” daily life: “Sent laundry out to colored woman who did laundry for Annie Oakley,” she says, and “bought a fat chicken, and made chicken and noodles for Vern on Sunday.”

On a train en route to Chicago, she reports: “Everyone’s drunk.”

Proud of how well her husband consistently hits his targets in the show ring, she is matter-of-fact about herself. “Shot well enough,” she says, or after one show: “Missed more than I hit.”

“Lot of soreheads,” she reports of a nasty crowd in Fayetteville, Tennessee, and in an account of an exhibition in a Mexican bullfight ring, she describes how they were chased from the arena and nearly mauled after cowboy Bill Pickett successfully downed a bull with his bare hands.

The couple spent nearly 35 years performing together, even after the popularity of Wild West shows waned. They turned to carnivals and rodeos for their livelihood and appeared in some early Western movies.

In a newspaper interview toward the end of their lives, Edith notes, “how happy we’ve been,” and Vern tells the reporter his take on Edith: “Why, she’s the best pal a man ever had.”

★ Life on tour wasn’t easy for Edith and Vern Tantlinger, who entertained audiences throughout the country in dusty show rings, often-muddy arenas and open-air tents erected in pastures and baseball parks.

