

The Daring Dewar Sisters

Free-Spirited Trick Riders

Born on the prairies at the tail end of a time when the horse was king, the soon-to-be-daring Dewar sisters - Claire and Lois - got an early start on their horsemanship in Hoosier, Sask.

"Our father would put us up on the work horses at noon and night," Claire (Dewar) Roberts reminisces. "We'd hang onto the hames and they'd walk down to the well for a drink. We were only two and three."

At first, when the horses would lower their heads to drink, it frightened the sisters - but fear couldn't find fertile ground, and so their daring grew. "We used to put a plank up against these horses and crawl up the plank," laughs Lois. "They stood for it."

Their father, Stewart, enjoyed a rodeo background himself, having competed in bronc riding in the Calgary Stampede against greats like Pete Knight. The family owned a mixed ranch/farm operation. "We always had nice saddle horses," says Lois. "We always rode bareback," adds Claire. "Dad wouldn't let us shorten his (laced) stirrups."

Their brother Don travelled the rodeo trail and often brought home western magazines. "We saw the pictures of vaulting," says Lois. It wasn't long before the two youngest in the family of seven got inventive. "We used a double-handled surcingle," says Claire. On the wide-open prairie, they practised vaulting. "We also put straps on Dad's saddle and that was OK, as long as we didn't shorten the stirrups," adds Claire.



Lois (Dewar) Hansen (left) and Claire (Dewar) Roberts in summer, 2008

"Our brother Don (Don Dewar, placed in the CPA Canadian standings 13 times between 1946-1954 in saddle bronc, steer decorating and All-Around) saw us out in the field practising. He said, 'girls are getting paid for doing that at rodeos in the States.'"

A light bulb clicked on; that's when the two teenagers got serious.

Their mother was a big help. "She was our best critic," says Claire. "She'd watch us and she'd say, 'you've got to stand up straighter, or get your hands up further or point your toe.'"

Their first professional gig came in Rosetown, Sask. "We got \$15 dollars," says Lois, "between the two of us." The girls had but one horse and one outfit, which made for some quick changes in both the saddle and the outdoor biffy. "We were the same size," says Claire. "Wouldn't work now," laughs Lois. The next show was at Empress - and they were on their way.

They took a photograph of a trick-riding saddle to Riley & McCormick in Calgary in 1948 or 49. "They'd never even heard of one before," Claire explains. But they made us two with matching bridles and breast collars with our names on them." Claire glances at

Lois: "Do you remember what they charged us?" Lois pipes up: "Charged us \$150 bucks each."

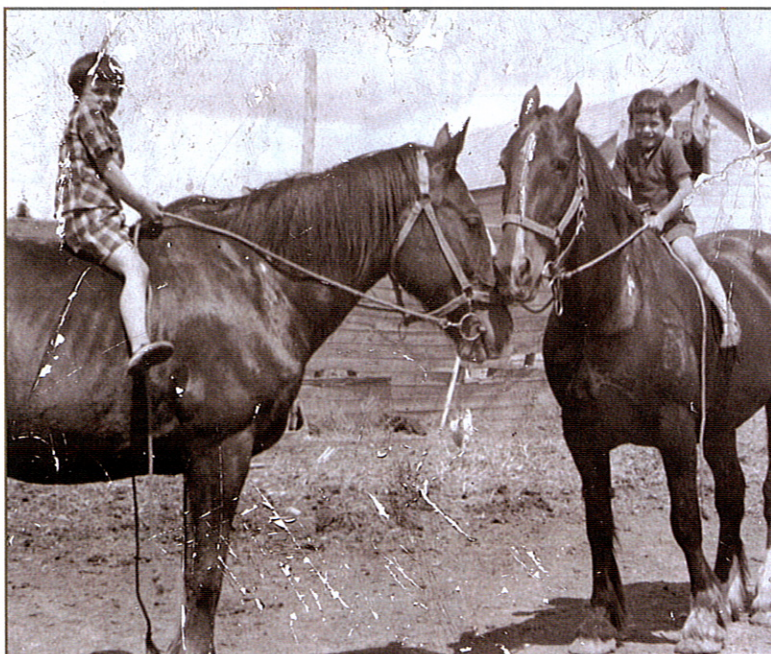
Soon the girls joined the fledgling Cowboys Protective Association, the forerunner to the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association. Unlike today, where competitors compete in a number of rodeos per weekend, the Dewar sisters landed smack dab in the golden era of rodeo – a time when competitors would pull into town and stay for the entire rodeo. "We all knew each other," says Claire. "It was like a family." Lois chimes in laughing: "... or a circus."

Perusing the photos brought a rush of memories for the sisters. "I really admired Alex Laye," Claire said with a smile. "Any girl would," agrees Lois. "He is so handsome – and he made all his own clothes." "So did Harold Mandeville," adds Claire. As I leaf through an early rodeo book, my eyes alight on a photo of Rocky Rockabar. "I used to have a crush on him," Lois says, a twinkle in her eye. Claire laughs, "We had lots of crushes."

Claire became their agent, negotiating contracts with stock contractors and the odd rodeo committee. "Harry Vold had central Alberta, Reg Kesler had southern Alberta, Jerry Meyers had Saskatchewan and Cliff Claggett had Manitoba," she says. "I'd write to them every year in late winter, early spring. Harry Vold hired us many times, and Jerry Meyers was very good, too; he hired us a lot."

"Jesse (Hyland) phoned Harry a couple of years ago and said, 'Harry, I've got the Dewar sisters on my list. Would you think they were ready for the Hall of Fame?' Harry promptly answered: 'You bet your boots they're ready for the Hall of Fame! They were the first trick riders!'"

As bookings grew, the sisters made more performances in parade outfits; in fact, today Claire is well known as a wedding seamstress. "We trick-rode in the (blue satin) outfits once for all the mayors from across Canada," adds Lois. "We were at Frank McMahon's place (McMahon Stadium). (His wife) took us into



Top: Claire (left) and Lois riding their father's field horses. They used to lean planks against these horses and climb up.

the house. The bathroom was fabulous, and she said; 'Make yourself at home with any of this makeup.' Our horses, they put them in box stalls – with hay up to here," she marvels, gesturing three feet off the ground. "Oh, it was so swanky," says Lois. "I ripped the back-end out of my pants and I went in and changed into yellow corduroys with green trim. Guy Weadick was announcing and he said, 'Oh, there must be some Irish, she's wearing the green,'" laughs Lois.

Their careers took off. "(In 1950) we were models for GWG," says Claire. "They gave us all the clothes to wear and asked us if we'd advertise for them, so we did for more than a year. We wore their clothes

Bottom Left: Claire performing "The Dewar Layout." The rider would slip her right leg through the hippodrome strap and anchor her foot in the hobbled stirrup. Her left toe was hooked in the back handhold.



Bottom Right: One sister in a Hippodrome Stand while the other performs a Cossack Drag behind their free-running horse.





22-year-old Claire (left) with Patches and 21-year-old Lois with Punky pose in their 'parade outfits.' "They were blue satin," says Claire. "We rode in the days when they didn't have stretchy material." Assiniboia, 1954

at all the rodeos. We were also contacted by Madison Square Gardens in New York in 1951. They wanted some pictures of us so we got these taken. We sent them down but we were too late; they hired somebody else."

The sisters constantly experimented to create new stunts. "We invented one I called the flag-stand vault," says Claire. "I'd put my hand on the horn, turn around and put the other hand between her ears, flip upside down with my head by her front shoulder."

Unlike today's shows that feature flagged "runways" and circling horses, back in the day the sisters would ride either in the arena or on the racetrack, performing across Canada and the U.S.

Lois was married briefly then she moved to Montana. "I never let rodeo interfere with my marriage," grins Lois. "That's why I've been married three times." She has three children: Kim, Lori and Kevin. She would often return to Canada to perform; and also rode as an outrider in the pro chuckwagon races, now denied to women.

Claire married Nelson Roberts in 1954, began their family and continued her career, even once performing when she was five months pregnant. As their children grew, they would often take them along. At a show in Saskatoon, the sisters raced down the track in the Hippodrome Stand – as their two-year-old children stood in front of them.

They still have one of their original trick riding saddles. "It was mine," adds Lois. "And I had Claire's name put on the stirrup fender, too."

"Shall I tell them why?" Claire asks, glancing at Lois. "Because she sold my saddle to some trick rider."

"I did." Lois confirms. "In North Dakota."

Lois had borrowed Claire's saddle, as one of Lois' students was using hers. "I let her borrow it," Claire emphasizes, still rankled by the memory. "And I never got it back."

Along with their trick riding, the girls were also avid barrel racers. Claire helped to found the Saskatchewan Girls Barrel Racing Association. Lois won two saddles – and a trophy – at the Old Timers Rodeo in 1981.

Ten years of death-defying drags, grandstands and possum bellies and, unfortunately, very few photographers captured this blazing duo as their trick riding days were coming to a close.

Lois moved to Claresholm and started cutting horse shows. "I also ran the barn for the big cutting horse futurity every October in Calgary," says Lois. "That started when Donna and Einar Brasso put it on, then the Stampede took it over. I was the barn manager for a long, long time and when I turned 65 I quit."

"I also put on two cutting horse shows at Heritage Park," she adds. "You think that isn't difficult getting a semi loaded with cattle into that place?" She grins.

Claire organized a horse show in Fisk, Sask. – and it's still going strong. Her husband, Nelson, would keep the home fires burning while Claire was on the road. "He was really good about it," she says fondly. "He's still really good about it." They have five children; Cheryl, Joni, Lane, Glenna and James.

Today, Claire and her husband live west of Airdrie, Alta., and spend some winters in Yuma, AZ. Lois summers in Claresholm and she, too, winters in Yuma.

In 1991, Claire went to Haiti to meet a young man she and Nelson had sponsored. She also met the young pastor and his wife who took in the abandoned children. Claire began to collect funds – and the fundraiser blossomed into the Heart to Heart Children's Home in Grand Goave, Haiti.

At a local copy centre, the three of us wait as the clerk scans the few remaining photographs of the sisters' high-flying career. "We talked about our lives," says Lois, "and there isn't one thing we'd change."

Afterwards, when I went back to pick up the photos, the young girl behind the counter, impressed by the duo, appears curious: "Who are these girls?"

I remind her of the two gracefully aging ladies who had been with me earlier. "That's them," I say. "The Daring Dewar Sisters – and they made a lot of history." ❧