



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Harper Valley Rodeo

There's something about a rodeo . . . Maybe it's the action: prancing horses with beautiful girls astride, cowboys racing around the track at breakneck speed swinging a rope and chasing a calf, old men with weathered faces and sweat-stained hats who hug their saddles like they were born in them, cowboys flying through the air aboard wildly bucking broncos, steer-riding fools who hit the ground and roll to keep from being stomped to death — it's all there, and a lot more, at a rodeo.

A lot of us who live in Florida are so enamored with the oceans and golf courses we fail to realize that our state is one of the largest cowboy states in the nation. In fact, the other night sitting in the Silver Spurs arena at Kissimmee, I began to believe it was the largest. Everyone had on boots, cowboy hats and dirty jeans. And everyone smelled a little bit like horse. Why not? Central Florida is cowboy country — the best in the nation.

I hadn't gone just to watch the rodeo. In fact, I probably wouldn't

have gone at all had it not been for the invitation of an old friend, the country-western singer who was the featured entertainment during the half. Jeannie C. Riley became famous several years ago with a hit called "Harper Valley P.T.A." Suddenly she was on top in Nashville — and around the world. She's covered a lot of miles since then. Divorced and re-married to the same man, she's no longer the sassy, short-skirted Harper Valley girl. Now deeply spiritual, she's cut off half her income by refusing to sing in night clubs and honky-tonks, and spends half her time on stage talking about the answers to life — as well as doing a great job singing.

Jackie and I ate dinner with her before the show and then sat in the stands while she sang to the cowboys. Of course I thoroughly enjoyed the rodeo, but it was Jeannie who had my heart. I watched the expressions on the wrinkled, weathered faces of the cowboys as she sang. They clapped their hands and stomped their feet

to her belting country music. But in between songs, when she got personal and told how fame had been her downfall, how her life had crumbled and only Jesus could put it together, those same cowboys listened intently. Some with moist eyes.

I realized something. Just because a man can rope and tie a calf in 10 seconds, or can stay on the back of a bucking steer, does not mean he doesn't have empty spots in his life. He may be king of the cowboys, but unless his heart is fulfilled, then he's just as much a failure as the guy who falls out of his saddle in the chute. Cowboys, like all the rest of us, have problems. And when someone comes down the road saying she has the answer, they listen — even if it's a 115-pound girl from Nashville, Tennessee, who can barely stay astride her horse.

I understand that kind of thing. When I'm in trouble, I don't want someone trying to impress me, I want help. Jeannie C. Riley brought that the other night at the Silver Spurs arena. It was a great rodeo.