

Saving a Nation: Cowboy Myth, Reality, and its Effect on American Culture

by: Sophie Dye

“Somewhere along the line, everybody wants to be a cowboy.” -Ford Pickup Truck Commercial

“Westerning is finished,” remarks the wise old grandfather to the young boy in John Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony*. “There is no place to go...Every place is taken. It’s all done now.” Steinbeck’s novel certainly exudes a feeling of doom for any subsequent generation – particularly if those generations still read and study historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. In this work, Turner defines the “frontier” as a place where less than two people live per square mile, and then goes on to state that the “perennial rebirth, [the] fluidity of American life, [the] expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish[es] the forces dominating American character.”¹ If both of these authors are correct, then so many elders who have said that American values and character are gone must be right, as well – and this lack of true American character can be blamed on the extinction of the frontier. Americans, however, have always been extremely adaptable creatures – a generalization with which Turner would certainly agree. In a society where the frontier has been closed many times over, Americans have found a way to hang on to that spirit of nostalgia – by living that experience vicariously through film and pop culture. Just as Turner believed the existence of a Western frontier helped form American identity a century ago, popular images of the American West have determined national identity since.

If the history of America’s western frontier is the nation’s story, then the cowboy must be its central character. Unfortunately, the cowboy is just as difficult to define as the frontier itself. Contemporary accounts of so-called cowboys offer a modern historian no help in defining the mysterious creatures. Some claim they were scoundrels. John Clay, an old ranch hand who actually lived and worked among these men described them as a “devil may care, immoral, revolver-heeled, brazen, light fingered lot who usually came to no good end.”² Others believed that cowboys were misunderstood and misrepresented gentlemen. Cowboy author Ramon Adams swore that “in spite of all that’s been wrote ‘bout ‘im [the nineteenth century cowboy], them who knowed ‘im best and lived with ‘im found ‘im to be good-natured and a rollickin’ whole-souled feller, quick to do a kindness and as quick to resent an insult.”³

If those who actually lived among cowboys had such a difficult time defining them, it is no wonder, then, that modern-day perceptions of the old style cowboy are skewed. To some, he is a corny, kitschy symbol that has come to represent a time when Americans were adorably idealistic and innocent to a fault. Those who still cling to this image are considered even more pathetic than the originals. People today tend to look at the rhinestone cowboy in the honky-tonks of Fort Worth with disgust. As a culture obsessed with realism (exhibited through the fascination with talk shows and “reality television”), Americans see these imitation cowboys as a mockery of times past. We look at the tight, embroidered jeans and the slick, expensive boots, and know that no one

actually riding the range could ever wear such a ridiculous costume and survive the journey.⁴ It is for this very reason that so many historians criticized old silver screen cowboys such as Gene Autry.

What these cynics and historians fail to recognize is the importance these heroic images hold. We can look at these costumes as a symbol of another time. The costume signified that he who wore it was a hero. Flamboyant dress and signature pieces were as important to the cowboys as colors and crests were to medieval knights. All great western heroes wore these outlandish costumes. From Buffalo Bill Cody's diamond studded gun holsters to the intricate embroidery on the shirts of Tom Mix and Hopalong Cassidy, extravagance represented honor and bravery in the manner of Ivanhoe and Launcelot.⁵ Americans today find themselves torn between their surface desire for historical accuracy and realism, and their deep-seated need for heroes and nostalgia. Thus, we are unable to accept any one definition of our great American hero – the cowboy.

Adding to the confusion surrounding the cowboy is the fact that historians are plagued by a lack of documentation concerning the “real cowboy.” Most cowboys themselves were illiterate, and few intellectuals of the day had much interest in them. As a result, “no class of men were ever so unfaithfully represented and in consequence so misunderstood and unfairly judged by people generally as the old time cowboy has been.”⁶ Until the late 1880's, the term “cowboy” was synonymous with “drunkard,” “outlaw,” and “cattle thief.”⁷ Etymologists who studied the origin of the word traced its meanings all the way back to the Revolutionary War where it meant not only cattle thieves, but Tories, and others held in equally low esteem as well. Cow boys – two words – were actually either mentally challenged persons or young boys, aged anywhere from thirteen to twenty, who were inexperienced horsemen and were usually working for their fathers or uncles on their first cattle drives.⁸ After these boys had successfully completed two or three of these jobs, the term cowboy was an insult even to them. More desirable terms for people who drove cattle were “cowhand,” “waddy,” and “hand.” Very gradually, “cowboy” came to be a perverse combination of the two above definitions. He was an outcast from society who happened to be skilled at riding horses, and also a wild outlaw; “someone hated and feared not only by his enemies but also by his friends.”⁹

The first recorded, positive use of the word cowboy appeared in 1883. In Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Extravaganza, he called his young star Buck Taylor the King of the Cowboys. This was actually an accurate term, since Taylor was in his late teens and was not an experienced cowhand. Prentis Ingraham spread this image in his 1887 book titled – very unoriginally – Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys. The book was a huge success, as was Buffalo Bill Cody's show, and the mythic cowboy was born. American culture actually corrupted the cowboy in reverse. Americans took a word that signified surly, dirty, thieving scoundrels or mentally challenged/ child laborers and made it mean dashing handsome men who were always lucky with the ladies. Eventually, the image of this courtly cowboy spread not only all over the nation, but Buffalo Bill Cody took it to Europe, where it became an instant success. The American Cowboy was now not only a national icon, but an international one as well. Buffalo Bill Cody may have been integral in circulating the heroic cowboy image, but he was nothing compared to the films and pop fiction to come.

By 1903, small nickelodeon theatres had been around for some time. They initially captivated their viewing public, but soon, audiences grew tired of paying to watch simple

scenes – even if they were moving. Audiences wanted to see actual movies with plots, no matter how simple. A man named Edwin Porter quickly put together a short film based on the most popular vignettes previously released – one and two minute tableaux of cattle round-ups and Indians scalping cowboys. This nine-minute masterpiece called The Great Train Robbery was an instant success. Though filmed in New Jersey, this particular movie gave birth to western film.¹⁰ The public's desire for these types of films was insatiable. Over the following three decades, Hollywood produced hundreds of these movies – often releasing two or three each week.

Nobody, not even the western film producers and stars themselves expected westerns to be so incredibly in demand. Americans quickly became obsessed with the Old West. Anything depicting the frontier or the people who resided there instantly piqued American interest, particularly when film began to boom as an industry – in the years immediately following the Great Depression.

In the late nineteenth century, Americans felt compelled to embrace the urban-industrial society springing up all around them. However, most of the country was poor and rural. Many children and teenagers growing up on farms in the South and West were embarrassed and dissatisfied with their lives, and desired to experience urban living. These youngsters thought that the rest of the country looked down upon them for their simple cowhand ways. Western movies restored their senses of confidence and self-identity. In the movies, the cowboys were the heroes; the simple way of life on the ranch was admirable, while the cities – which were always in the East – promised nothing but corruption.

The message of the western, however, was not something that affected only children. Adults, who were caught up in the economics and politics of the Great Depression, yearned for a simpler time, as well. In addition, these adults had grown up admiring a “cowboy” of their own – Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt wanted to embrace American industry, while at the same time preserving Thomas Jefferson's agrarian dream. He wanted society to move forward, but not lose all ties to the past. This generation – like its leader – found itself caught between the past and the future. They felt a need to preserve individual values.

The American West for these people was the last frontier of freedom and individualism. The West as a physical and spiritual frontier was an important symbol for Americans during the progressive era. To lose it or the idyllic existence it represented was to lose part of their past and to bargain away their future.¹¹

American writers cashed in on this need. A new group of writers was born, led by the most popular western writer of all time, Zane Grey. Like so many western film makers who were inspired by him, Zane Grey was not well respected or liked by his critics. His stories lacked originality; his characters lacked conviction and complexity. But the “unsophisticated” masses could not get enough of him. He wrote so many books that after his death in 1939, at least one of his novels was published every year until 1963.¹² When Hollywood began producing western films en masse, it was not long until directors began basing their movies off of Grey's books; his name on any movie marquee was enough to draw a crowd.

The sedentary workers of the early twentieth century welcomed Zane Grey's escapist fiction. These office clerks and other urban dwellers did not have the time or means to do much traveling, and Grey's works provided them with a wonderful escape into the wilderness. Burton Rascoe, a writer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* explained that Grey "brought about the vicarious wish-fulfillment of millions...of imprisoned men to whom a new Zane Grey novel was a splendid escape into a wild, free land of limitless horizons, where justice triumphs over evil, the wages of courage and uprightness are true love and genuine happiness, and where man may breathe in freedom."¹³ This overwhelming national feeling is what made the 1920s and 1930s such a perfect time for the explosion of western films.

This feeling brought about the explosion of the ubiquitous B Western and its hero, the singing cowboy. Most notably there was the original singing cowboy – Gene Autry. Though children had always cheered for Autry's predecessors like Ken Maynard and Tom Mix, it was Autry with whom they first truly identified. He was younger than his contemporaries, and always looked kindly. One fan remarked that Autry had always seemed like a big brother to him and his friends. He had the self-assuredness of an adult, but "seemed...in need of winning parental approval." This quality of Autry's was illustrated in each of his movies in what author Ray Merlock calls "the obligatory Autry rejection scene." The scene consisted of Autry's being rejected either by his father, the community, or – worst of all – the girl.¹⁴ In each of these scenes, Autry was cast aside through no fault of his own, but as the result of some sort of horrible misunderstanding. Merlock gives an example:

Yodelin' Kid from Pine Ridge (1937) has an exceptionally fine Autry rejection scene. His father...exclaims, "I have no son," when fellow ranchers insist Gene has fled from a skirmish with moonshiners accused of stealing cattle. In actuality, Gene has saved his unconscious father's life and was only riding away to find water for the wounded man. The rest of the film involves Gene's earning his father's respect...¹⁵

These common misconceptions even further endeared Autry to his young fans. They, too, knew all too well the pangs of injustice felt when they were wrongly accused by adults. Autry's ability to redeem himself by the end of the film gave the youngsters hope. They felt that they, too, would be able to rise above any unjust charge.

Autry saw how much these children looked up to him and how strongly they identified with him. When he saw that the kids would imitate his every move and hang on his every word, the beloved singing cowboy decided to wield his power benevolently. Autry was dedicated to lifting the morale of these youngsters, while giving their morals a boost, as well. In order to be a member of Gene Autry's fan club, one had to subscribe to and follow his Cowboy Ten Commandments, which championed patriotism, tolerance, obedience, and stated that "a cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage."¹⁶

It has been said that these silly cowboy movies saved a nation. Kids would work hard every week to save enough money to go to these movies once or twice a month. Due to the extremely low budget of these movies (they often consisted mostly of stock footage), they came out all the time. Gene Autry himself put out ninety films in twenty years, and

Roy Rogers put out 105, half of these in the 1940s alone.¹⁷

As the popularity of the western began to grow, the image began to change. Cowboys like John Wayne (who actually got his start as “Singing Sandy Saunders,”¹⁸ a singing cowboy) were much tougher than the singing cowboys of the 1930s and 40s. Wayne changed the face of the American cowboy. He made them gritty, dirty, and crass. He proved that cowboy actors did not have to be pretty and did not have to sing, and he lost absolutely no popularity for this. In twenty years – between 1949-1968 – a John Wayne film received a Top Ten place in the box office polls every year but 1958, and about half of these were Westerns. His cowboys became closer to reality, and were even more believable because he did not become famous trying to portray real historical figures like Wyatt Earp or Jesse James accurately, and failing.

Film critics have had plenty of problems with western films, such as the triteness of script and simplicity of plot, among others, but Western historians have had even more complaints. Perhaps no family and no single moment has been portrayed so many times in western film as the Earps and the shootout at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. Directors often try to pay attention to detail. For example, in the 1993 movie, *Tombstone*, director George P. Cosmatos includes such details as portraying Doc Holliday’s girlfriend as Hungarian and Virgil’s wife as Irish, and having Holliday shoot McLaury from underneath his horse. All of these details seem to give the movie more historical accuracy, but the glorified portrayal of Wyatt Earp is enough to make most historians cringe. Despite insignificant specifics, *Tombstone*, along with the majority of movies about the Earp brothers, is overwhelmingly inaccurate.

Historians also often have a problem with the fact that movies generally portray cowboys as nineteenth century American Robin Hoods. The movies make them out to be fun-loving gentlemen when in fact, cowboys were cold-blooded murderers. This generalization, however, is not always true. Some famous cowboys actually were gentleman outlaws. For example, director George Roy Hill does not treat the subject matter in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* very seriously. The most widely remembered scene in that movie is a humorous one – one where Paul Newman and Robert Redford ride a tandem bicycle to the tune of Burt Bacharach’s *Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head*. Yet the movie is not a completely inaccurate one. Neither of these two members of *The Wild Bunch* approved of bloodshed, and there is no record or recollection of Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid ever killing a man before their final shoot-out¹⁹.

This said, historical accuracy was never supposed to be a strong point of the western genre. These films and books were never meant to give an accurate portrayal of the West in American history. “The real concern,” according to film historian Jon Tuska, “has never been to depict the West as it once was, but rather to interpret its spirit and give it a new meaning. The Western has represented an enduring myth and they have been part of a living tradition bound up in the articulation of that myth.”²⁰ Each Western representation gives us a glimpse into the time in which it was created – not the time in which it was set.

Even though John Wayne, for example, was about as far from Gene Autry as one could be, he still upheld the basic principles of what a hero should be. Following advice his father had given him as a young boy, Wayne never started any fights, but he always finished them. He did not treat the traditional hero as an object of ridicule; he simply

roughed that image up a little and made it his own. Turner maintained that the frontier defined American culture and exemplified American values. According to countless associates – including Jimmy Stewart, Elizabeth Taylor, Harry Carey, and Maureen O’Hara – so did John Wayne. According to his good friend and biographer Ronald Reagan, “there is no one who more exemplifies the devotion to our country, its goodness, its industry, and its strength than John Wayne.”²¹ John Wayne hated war – but he loved his country, and he loved the men fighting for it. Although Wayne’s reputation as a soldier was a strong one, one must understand that to Wayne’s fans, he is the quintessential cowboy. Each and every film Wayne makes is, in one way or another, a western.

Wayne often played a different kind of Western hero – “one who fought America’s current enemies instead of Indians, and from airplanes and landing craft instead of on horseback.”²² When audiences watched these war movies, when the GIs overseas saw Duke in person, they saw their cowboy hero, just in different clothes. Each of his characters, whether Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* or Mike Kirby in *The Green Berets*, possessed the same characteristics that Wayne’s fans loved about his western characters. They were the types of characters who would sacrifice themselves for the good of their loved ones, ones who would never start a fight, but would always finish it, ones who would always manage to bring little Debbie home at the end of the film. Just like in Wayne’s classic westerns, the cowboy always won.

In addition, Wayne was sensitive to the problems plaguing the nation in regards to Vietnam. During one scene in *The Green Berets*, Wayne’s character Kirby looks down at his rifle and says, “funny thing – feller takes one of these into battle, and by the Grace of God he comes out in one piece, he carries a strange sense of guilt all the rest of his life.”²³ He understood that all Americans – especially the soldiers themselves – were torn between their own, personal morals and loyalty to their nation. *The Green Berets* showed the nation that even if America was in a war they did not agree with, it was a soldier’s patriotic duty to be the best soldier he could be. He may feel guilt, but he should feel pride, too. Wayne’s being the ideal American made the old West seem to be the ideal period in American culture. “The West,” Wayne once said, “The very words go straight to that place of the heart where Americans feel the spirit of pride in their Western heritage – the triumph of personal courage over any obstacle, whether nature or man.”²⁴

The impact of the western film and western imagery on politics reached all the way to the early Eighties. There exists a common thread in the majority of books about the 1930s “oaters.” The authors always looked back wistfully to the days when they would save all their money to watch the western double feature at the local theatre. One said that there was nothing like “watching the marvelous flickering antics of Tom Mix and William H. Hart as they foiled robbers and villains and escorted the beautiful girls to safety – waving back from their horses as they cantered into the sunset.”²⁵ This young man was former president Ronald Reagan.

Reagan took office in a time of disillusionment in American history, and during his terms as governor of California and as president, he suffered through many controversies that would likely have ruined any other politicians. One possible reason for this was that Reagan “spoke of a time when individualism dominated relationships... reputation and community standing counted heavily in one’s favor... His voice, echoing an earlier time, restored lost American confidence.”²⁶ People heard in his tone the message of the

American cowboy, an image that Reagan embraced. Not since Theodore Roosevelt had a president attached himself so solidly to this image. Reagan once claimed that it was “the life of the cowboy that has shaped my body and mind for all these years,” and claimed that reading the old time hero stories “left an abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil...they lived by the standards of morality and fair play.”²⁷ Even though Reagan’s fifty-four film career included only a handful of Westerns – none of them very popular – the public was quick to embrace this image. It helped that Reagan was from a ranch town in the Midwest and was close personal friends with John Wayne – the quintessential twentieth century cowboy.

Before his political career, Reagan was able to spread his Western image through new and popular medium – television. His position as an on-screen announcer, actor, and advertising pitchman for the U.S. Borax Corporation’s western series Death Valley Days resurrected Reagan’s dwindling movie career. At the beginning of the show’s four-year-run, Borax officials surveyed a large group of housewives – the country’s new target consumers – for their opinions of the show and of Reagan himself. “The responses were uniformly positive, with the most common statement being that they would buy anything from him. Then the test audience stunned the researchers by volunteering that they would also vote for Reagan for public office, based on his manliness, sincerity, poise, and identification with the outdoors.”²⁸ During this time, historian Roderick Nash claimed that

America was ripe for the widespread appeal of the uncivilized. The cult had several facets. In the first place, there was a growing tendency to associate the wilderness with America’s frontier and pioneer past that was believed responsible for many unique and desirable national characteristics. Wilderness also acquired importance as a source for virility, toughness, and savagery – qualities that defined fitness in Darwinian terms. Finally, an increasing number of Americans invested wild places with aesthetic and ethical values, emphasizing the opportunity they afforded for contemplation and worship.²⁹

Lou Cannon of the Washington Post likened Reagan’s move from the Midwest to Hollywood to that of the miners in 1849. Reagan set California up to be a place for suburbia to flourish. “Americans needed the concept of the frontier because it ‘gave them something to conquer, something to settle, a place to strike it rich.’”³⁰

Historian Carl Becker noted that Americans are prone to cling to what he called ‘useful myths.’ These are stories and characters that – no matter how untrue – we hold onto in order to justify our patriotism. These myths give us a glimpse into our collective heritage, no matter how fuzzy. The cowboy is one such character. During times of great national struggle and uncertainty – in times such as the Depression, World War II, and the Seventies – Americans need a reminder of why they are Americans. They need to see characters of whom our founding fathers would be proud. In times in history where the general consensus is that there are no real heroes to look to for guidance, “audiences sustained many of their ‘faiths’ by identifying with such admirable and powerful symbols of straight-forward righteousness as seen in the B westerns.”³¹ In times of trouble, we look to our cowboys to save the nation.

Notes

- 1 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 4.
- 2 Paul Carlson, ed., *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), 3.
- 3 Buck Rainey, ed., *The Reel Cowboy: Essays on the Myth in Movies and Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996), 3.
- 4 Carlson, 2.
- 5 Jack Nachbar, ed., *Focus on the Western*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 11.
- 6 Rainey, 4.
- 7 Carlson, 5.
- 8 Wagner, 11.
- 9 Wagner, 12.
- 10 Rainey, 7.
- 11 Nachbar, 24.
- 12 Rainey, 38.
- 13 Rainey., 39.
- 14 Archie P. McDonald, ed., *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91.
- 15 McDonald, 91
- 16 Albert B. Tucker, *Real Cowboys: Cowhands in Western Movies*, 193.
- 17 David Rothel, *The Singing Cowboys* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1978), 42, 113.
- 18 William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 37.
- 19 Charles Kelly, *The Outlaw Trail: A History of Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)
- 20 Nachbar, 27.
- 21 McDonald, 116.
- 22 McDonald, 118-9.
- 23 Dir, Ray Kellogg, *The Green Berets*, 1968.
- 24 Reagan
- 25 McDonald, 141.
- 26 McDonald, 148.
- 27 McDonald, 151.
- 28 McDonald, 160.
- 29 Nechbar, 24.
- 30 McDonald, 153.
- 31 Rainey, 6.

