

# Cover Story: The Rise and Fall of TV Westerns

BY RICHARD A. VAN ORMAN

The 1950s marked the end of the B western and the rise of the television western. In fact, the last B western was released in 1954 and one year later *Gunsmoke*, the most successful TV western, appeared on CBS.

The great age of TV westerns took place in the late 1950s, considered by many to be the Golden Age of Television. Between October 1957 and April 1958 of the top 25 rated programs, 12 were westerns. There were seven westerns listed in the top ten. During this period the first four programs in popularity were *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, and *The Rifleman*. In 1959, 32 westerns were telecast in prime time. But it was ten years earlier that the merger of the western and TV occurred. In 1949 the *Hopalong Cassidy* series, based on



HOPALONG CASSIDY

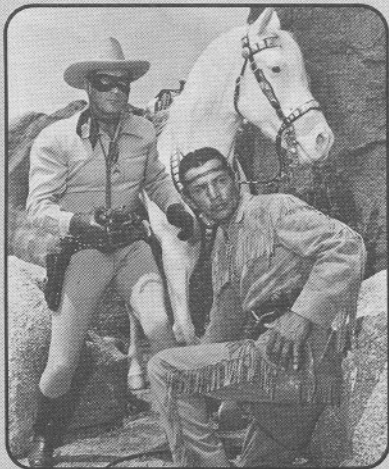
the Clarence E. Mulford books, appeared on television, and the following year it began its Mutual Radio run. Incidentally, years earlier a twenty-six year old extra named David Niven was offered the title role, but he turned it down and it was given to an actor whose career was on the skids, William Boyd.

In the 1940s Boyd had the good sense to purchase all 66 of his old Cassidy movies. These movies were shown on New York TV as early as 1945 and became a regular feature in 1948. Boyd and Edgar Buchanan, who played his sidekick, made a new series of Cassidy half-hour shows that ran between 1949 and 1951 on NBC and then, like the movies, were put into syndication. By the early 1950s Boyd had made millions not only through the sale of those films to TV, but especially from the lucrative merchandising of Hopalong Cassidy products such as clothes, watches, comic books, and bread. In fact, there was such a sale of Cassidy outfits that the supply of black dyes in the United States almost ran out! By 1951 the series was on 63 TV stations, 153 radio stations, and the comic strip, drawn by Dan Spiegle and Eugene Colan, appeared in 155 newspapers. The only other TV program that was as profitable in the merchandising of its products was Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett* series starring Fess Parker, also appearing in the 1950s.

Like Cassidy, *The Lone Ranger*, starring Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels, first showed up on TV in 1949. This series, unlike Cassidy, was one of many TV westerns that had first appeared on radio before making the switch to the tube. *The Cisco Kid*, *Death Valley Days*, *Gene Autry*, *Roy Rogers*, and *Red Ryder* were some of the others. *The Lone Ranger*

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THE LONE RANGER  
AND TONTO

was the creation of George W. Trendle and Fran Striker, who were also the creators of *The Green Hornet*. Trendle, the owner of Detroit's WXYZ, was looking for a show that would attract larger audiences to his station and he found it with this show whose hero, "the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains," combined the qualities of Robin Hood and the Cisco Kid. The show especially known for its exciting use of the William Tell Overture was the biggest hit ABC had in its early years.

In 1950, *The Gene Autry Show* turned up on CBS-TV and for the next six years Autry, his horse Champion, and his trusty sidekick Pat Buttram appeared for Wrigley's Spearmint Gum. One of the main changes that Autry made in the transition from movies to TV was to de-emphasize his singing while emphasizing action sequences — fights and chases. Autry said, "Television westerns drove me nuts. Too slow." Shooting someone, except for shooting guns out of the bad guy's hand, was still taboo. Cost cutting

measures were commonly used. For example, there were less long shots and more close ups. In 1951 a half-hour Autry show cost \$17,000.

Autry's Flying A Production Company also produced *The Adventures of Champion*, starring a former Red Ryder of the movies, Jim Bannon, *The Range Rider* featuring Jock Mahoney and Dick Jones, *Buffalo Bill, Jr.*, with Dick Jones, and *Annie Oakley*, starring Gail Davis, television's first western heroine.

These half-hour shows were typical of the early TV westerns in that the plots were simple and direct — it was good guys versus bad guys with action sequences gauged for commercial breaks.

The year after Autry's show opened, *The Cisco Kid* was introduced, starring Duncan Renaldo as Cisco and Leo Carrillo as Pancho. This series, based on



CISCO KID



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O. Henry's short story, *The Caballero's Way*, did not show up on network TV but was sold to independent stations by Ziv Television. All of the 156 episodes were in color, and it was the first syndicated film series to become a hit. A successful comic strip depicting the adventures of "the Robin Hood of the Old West" ran until the late 60s.

Also in 1951, *The Roy Rogers Show* came to NBC on Sunday nights. The "King of the Cowboys" was supported by his "golden Palomino," Trigger, his "wonder dog," Bullet, his wife, "queen of the West," Dale Evans, and "his comical sidekick," Pat Brady. There was more violence in this series than in any other TV western of that time and some have said that this was one of the reasons, along with the homilies offered by the two stars, that the show was taken off the air in 1957.

In these early TV westerns the horse played a major role. What would Roy have done without Trigger or the Lone Ranger without Silver, or Autry without Champion, who had his own show for a year. Roy's debt to Trigger was demonstrated when, after the horse died, Roy had him stuffed and placed on display at his Apple Valley Museum.

In the TV westerns of the 1960s, the horse lost its preeminence. Who can recall the horse that Matt Dillon rode, who carried Palladin for six seasons, or name Bronco Lane's horse or Cheyenne's mount. Indeed, one of the main features of some of the later westerns was what little time the star spent on horseback.

If Boyd, Rogers, and Autry began the western craze on TV, Warner Brothers moved quickly to take advantage of it. At first Jack Warner, studio boss at Warners, was hesitant to get involved with the new medium; he felt that if TV could not acquire Hollywood films it would die. But he was soon convinced that there were profits to be made in tele-



DALE EVANS AND ROY ROGERS

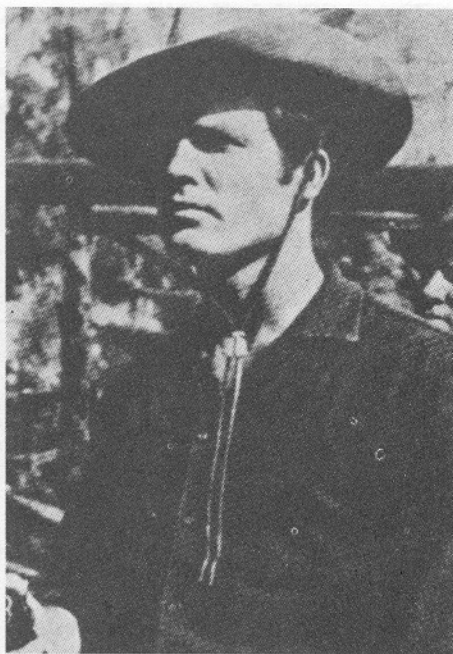
vision. In 1954 Warner Brothers and ABC-TV signed an historic agreement. For the 1955-56 season the studio would produce forty one-hour films for the television company. The title was *Warner Brothers Presents* and three series were shown in rotation. Each was based on a Warner Brothers movie of the 1490s — *Casablanca*, *King's Row*, and *Cheyenne*. A fourth series, *Conflict*, was a dramatic anthology. The first two were considered surefire hits, since they had been blockbuster movies. But it was the *Cheyenne* series that became the hit, and with it Clint Walker emerged as a new TV star. After a year the other three series were dropped.

By 1957 *Cheyenne* was so successful that Warners produced other westerns. *Maverick* appeared, starring James Garner and Jack Kelly as Bret and Bart Maverick, with an occasional appearance by Roger Moore as their British cousin Beau. This series was the first attempt at comedy on a TV western. On occasion the show expertly parodied other TV shows, such as *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, and even *Dragnet*.

It was followed by *Sugarfoot* starring Will Hutchins (in western parlance a sugarfoot was even more incompetent than a tenderfoot), *Bronco* with Ty Hardin, and *Colt .45*, featuring Wayde Preston.

These shows were such a financial bonanza that dozens of others soon followed. Some of these series lasted only a season, while others lasted for years. Two of these series dealt with Indians. *Brave Eagle* was the first TV series with an Indian as the leading character. Keith Larson starred as the Cheyenne chief. *Broken Arrow* was based on Elliott Arnold's *Blood Brothers* and featured John Lupton and Michael Ansara as Cohise. *The Outcasts*, a short-lived series on ABC in the late '60s, was a western that had a black in a continuing role. Practically all the other shows had white males in the main roles.

Dick Powell's *Zane Grey Theater* took its material in its early seasons from the novels of Zane Grey. But as this source was exhausted, stories from other western writers were used. *The Rifleman* was the



**TY HARDIN: BRONCO**

story of Lucas McCain and his son Mark homesteading in New Mexico and featured ex-Chicago Cub Chuck Connors and Johnny Crawford. *Have Gun Will Travel* starred Richard Boone as the well-educated, dapper "gun for hire." This series was the model for a number of westerns with dapper leading men. One of the top songs in 1962 was Duane Eddy's "The Ballad of Paladin." *Bat Masterson* was another debonair character, as played by Gene Barry. *Wanted: Dead or Alive* was the story of bounty hunter Josh Randall played by Steve McQueen, who was one of the few stars of a TV series (James Garner and Clint Eastwood were two others) who became a major movie star. The pilot was seen in 1958 as a show in the *Trackdown* series which starred Robert Culp as a Texas Ranger. *The Deputy* was an unsuccessful attempt by Henry Fonda to make the transition from movies to TV. *Wagon Train* was one of the most successful westerns on TV in the 1950s and 1960s. It had big name guest stars, ran for 60



**RICHARD BOONE:  
HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL**



## COVER STORY

minutes, and covered in its stories the West from St. Joseph to California. Ward Bond and Robert Horton were the wagonmaster and scout. After Bond's death in 1960, John McIntire became wagonmaster. *Death Valley Days*, which first appeared on NBC's Blue Network in 1930, sponsored by the Pacific Coast Borax Company, came to TV in 1952. Among its hosts during its nearly 600 episodes were Robert Taylor, Dale Robertson, and Ronald Reagan, who left the series in 1966 when he ran for governor of California. One of the most unusual TV westerns was *Action in the Afternoon*, which emanated live Monday through Friday afternoons from the wilds of suburban Philadelphia.

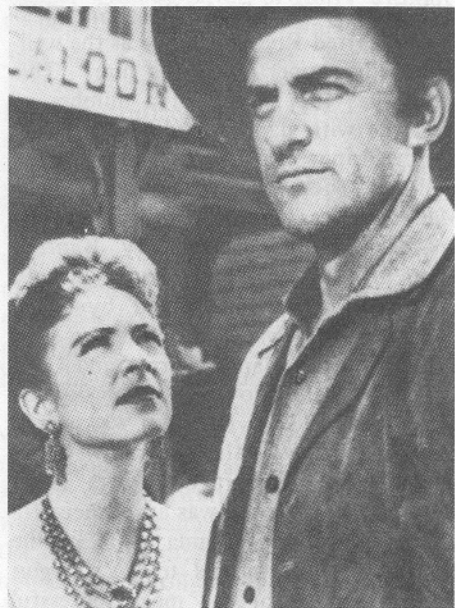
Many things encouraged this western craze. President Eisenhower furthered it by his interest in western novels. And psychologist Ernest Dichter saw in westerns a defense against the problems of modern life. Americans felt buffeted

by the world's problems, and they could find relief in westerns where the good guys (Americans) win and the bad guys (the Russians) lose. In Cold War America we were searching for heroes, whether Eisenhower or Matt Dillon.

The longest-running TV western was *Gunsmoke*, starring James Arness as Marshall Matt Dillon. This show began in 1952 on CBS radio featuring William Conrad as Dillon. On Saturday night, September 10, 1955, John Wayne, who had been asked to play Dillon, introduced the TV version to the American audience. As the earlier westerns had been made for kids, *Gunsmoke* was an adult western. While the program did not enter the top ten during its first year, it rose to eighth place in its second year, and between 1957 and 1961 was the number one program in the country. After it was extended to sixty minutes in 1961, it suffered a slide in the ratings, but after CBS moved it to Monday night in 1967 it made a comeback. When it finally left the air in 1975 it not only was the last TV western but it had run for twenty years, longer than any other series in the history of television.

The success of *Gunsmoke* was based on many things — the physical stature and heroic image of Arness (he is 6' 6"), the continuing high quality of stories about life in and around Dodge City, and the audience's interest in that small group of characters that became practically a family to the viewers — Matt, Doc, Chester, and Miss Kitty. One of the continuing characters on the series was Quint Asper, played by Burt Reynolds.

Another western series that followed even more closely the family theme was *Bonanza*. It first appeared in "living color" on NBC in September 1959 and told the story of the Cartwright Clan. Ben Cartwright (Lorne Greene) was the father of three sons Adam (Pernell Roberts), "Hoss" (Dan Blocker), and Little Joe (Michael Landon), and owner of the



AMANDA BLAKE AND JIM ARNESS  
GUNSMOKE



DAN BLOCKER, LORNE GREEN, PERNELL ROBERTS, MICHAEL LANDON  
BONANZA

Ponderosa Ranch located near Virginia City, Nevada. In 1961 the *Bonanza* theme music was in the top twenty and the next year the series was seen in 64 foreign countries and was dubbed in five languages. From 1964 to 1967 the show had the highest audience ratings in the Nielsen Survey. But important changes were about to take place. In 1965 Pernell Roberts left the series. Dan Blocker died in 1972. The series moved that year from its Sunday night spot to Tuesday evening. In January 1973 it was cancelled in the middle of its 14th season.

This western "One Man's Family" sparked other series similar to it, such as *The Big Valley*, *The High Chaparral*, *Empire*, *Lancer*, and *The Virginian*. But there was a difference. In these shows, unlike *Bonanza*, women had important

and continuing roles. The head of the Barkley clan in *The Big Valley* was Victoria, played by Barbara Stanwyck. In *The High Chaparral* Linda Cristal played the strong-willed wife of Big John Cannon (Leif Erickson). Two women also had significant parts in *Empire*.

Four days before *Gunsmoke* first appeared in 1955, ABC introduced *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, starring Hugh O'Brian. This series, like *Gunsmoke*, dealt with serious social issues as well as the typical western themes. During the first season Earp was marshall of Ellsworth; during the second he was transferred to Dodge, where Dillon also served. The series concluded with Earp and his brothers in Tombstone. The five-part finale told the story of the famous gunfight at the OK Corral.



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One of the best westerns to appear on TV was *Frontier*, produced by Worthington Miner. This anthology did not have a continuing cast of characters, nor much rip-roaring action; it simply told the stories of real people in the West. It lasted one year.

In the 1960s another group of westerns appeared. *Rawhide* starred Eric Fleming and Clint Eastwood and began every season with the start of a new trail drive and ended the season at trail's end. Audie Murphy was a Denver detective in *Whispering Smith*; that was also the title of a film that Alan Ladd had starred in in 1948. Another Series based on a Ladd movie was *Shane*, featuring David Carradine. *The Virginian*, based on Owen Wister's novel, was the only 90-minute western, although *Wagon Train* for one year was 90 minutes. James Drury and Lee J. Cobb starred.

A different kind of western appeared in 1965 with *The Wild Wild West*. James T. West (Robert Conrad) and Artemus Gordon (Ross Martin) were government investigators who were sent out during the Grant Administration to catch evildoers in the West. James West was a western James Bond. The villains, like those in the Bond films, were overdrawn and given exotic names such as Count Manzeppi and Dr. Miguelito Loveless. The equipment West used to combat crime could have been developed by Q. This series, more fantasy-comedy than western, lasted four years.

Other gimmick westerns in the '60s were *Cowboy in Africa*, starring Chuck Connors; *F-Troop* and *Laredo* placed emphasis on humor; *Tate* was about a one-armed gunfighter; *Branded* was based on *The Fugitive* TV show; *A Man Called Shenandoah* told the story of a man who had amnesia and was searching for his identity; and *Kung Fu* was an eastern western.

Another gimmick was the type of guns some of the heroes used. Bat Masterson had a specially-designed gun. The Rifleman had a modified Winchester, which he could cock as he drew it. And Josh Randall in *Wanted: Dead or Alive* used a "Mare's Laig", a .30-40 sawed off rifle that could be used like a handgun, but its bullets had a more damaging impact.

By the 1970s, the TV western was dying. Those that appeared in the early '70s were usually cancelled after a year or two. *Alias Smith and Jones*, imitating the successful film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, lasted two years, as did *Hec Ramsey*, featuring Richard Boone. *Nichols*, with James Garner and set in Arizona in the early 20th century, lasted less than a year. A modern-day western, *Cade's County*, starring Glenn Ford was on one season. *Dusty's Trail*, a slapstick comedy featuring Bob Denver, ran for 26 episodes in syndication.

Today the only TV westerns are reruns. Why have they disappeared from the TV screen? Perhaps there were too many westerns. Probably the viewers got tired of them because they were too cut to formula, or because of silly gimmicks, or because they no longer related to our urban lives. Besides, where are the actors today who could make it as western heroes? Tom Selleck? Maybe there were too many different types of westerns — anthologies, adult westerns, dude westerns, comedy westerns, contemporary westerns — that tried too hard to be all things to all viewers. But who knows. Just maybe they will return to TV, when the viewers get tired of cops, private eyes, prime time soap operas, and bloopers. Maybe then we can sit back again and watch that original and important American creation — the western. □

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