

The Great 'Kemo Sabay' Debate

BY RICHARD W. O'DONNELL

Everybody knows The Lone Ranger — the greatest western hero of them all — used to shout “Hi Yo Silver” as he galloped by on his mighty stallion, in hot pursuit of outlaws.

And everybody knows Tonto, the Masked man's faithful companion, used to refer to him as “Kemo Sabay.” Of late, there has been a bit of a dispute over what Tonto really meant when he called the Ranger “Kemo Sabay.”

For years, most Americans thought the term meant “Worthy Scout” or “Loyal Friend.” Perhaps it still does. The verdict is not in yet.

Actor Clayton Moore, who played the Masked Rider on television for years, always insisted “Kemo Sabay” was an Iroquois term for “faithful friend.” However, there are six different Iroquois nations, each with a language of its own, and researchers have been unable to track down “Kemo Sabay” in any of them. They are still searching.

It has also been claimed “Kemo Sabay” is a variation of “quien no sabe,” which, in Spanish, roughly translated, means “he who doesn't understand.” Tonto reportedly is Spanish for “fool.” The theory is those who originally wrote and produced the show used the “Kemo Sabay” and “Tonto” names as a couple of inside jokes.

If so, nobody is about to admit it now.

Another theory is that “Kemo Sabay” and “Tonto” were a couple of names that just popped into the writers' heads when they were scripting the early radio shows,

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and the names just stuck. In all probability, this is true, as far as “Tonto” is concerned.

As for “Kemo Sabay” — that's a different story, so stay tuned.

The Ranger and Tonto, it should be noted, first galloped out of the west on January 30, 1933. The original shows were aired on WXYZ, a Detroit radio station.

All you had to do was close your eyes, use your imagination, and you were as far west as any cowboy has ever been able to make it. At that, the poor cowboy probably ended up with saddle sores. You were cozy and comfortable in a living room chair close to the radio.

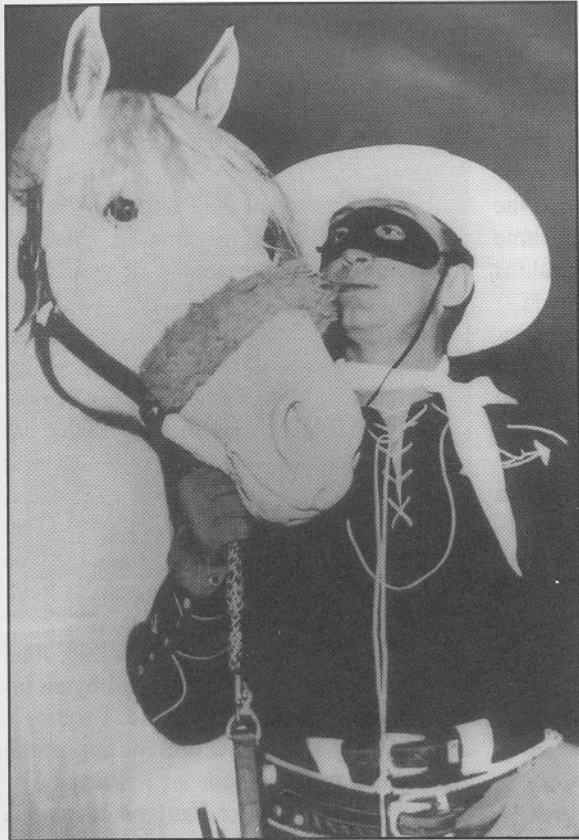
In no time at all, the Lone Ranger became America's favorite western hero. Three times a week, he chased the bad guys and proved that right was right, and it was wrong to be the wrong type of cowboy.

Next came *The Lone Ranger* serials. Every Saturday for fifteen chapters, the youngsters followed his adventures. There were two of them. Then there were three movies: *The Lone Ranger* (1956); *The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold* (1958); and *Legend of the Lone Ranger* (1981).

The Lone Ranger's comic strip was also a big success. And, of course, there was television.

For more than six decades, *The Lone Ranger* has been a stalwart defender of all that is good against all that is evil. He is the straightest shooter of all times.

He does not swear, smoke or drink. He is polite to women, and always tips his hat. He respects everybody — even the villains — regardless of race, creed or color. He is a solid gold hero, pure of heart, and noble in purpose.



BRACE BEEMER as THE LONE RANGER

He is what Don Quixote hoped to be!

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"The Lone Ranger was really the Green Hornet's great-uncle, you know," said Fred Foy, who served as narrator of the famous radio show for several years. "Dan Reid, as everybody knows, was the Lone Ranger's nephew, but few people realize that Dan was also Britt Reid's father. And Britt Reid was the Green Hornet. That makes the Lone Ranger the Green Hornet's great-uncle.

"Both the Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet were created by George W. Trendle and Fran Striker, and were broadcast from WXYZ in Detroit, where there was a stock company of actors who appeared on both

programs. *The Lone Ranger* was on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and *The Green Hornet* was on Tuesday and Thursday nights. The Detroit stock company was busy five nights a week for years."

Foy, who lived in New England after he retired, was not the original narrator of the shows.

"There were three or four of them before I came along," said the long time announcer. "One was Brace Beemer, who became radio's most famous Lone Ranger. He took over after an actor named Earl Graser, who had played the part for seven years, was killed in a 1941 car crash. Brace, who played the part the rest of the way on radio, died in 1965. He was 62 at the time.

"Some of the regulars on the show were Paul Hughes—he played Thunder Martin, the ranger's old friend—Harry Golder and Ernie Winstanley.

Golder played a variety of parts, and Winstanley was Dan Reid. Two other performers on the show became Hollywood stars. One was the late John Hodiak. The other was comedian Danny Thomas. In his Detroit days, Thomas was known as Amos Jacobs."

George Trendle, owner of station WXYZ wanted to have a radio show "dedicated to youth," and decided on a series set in the pioneer days in the west. He hired Fran Striker, a Buffalo, N. Y., writer, to create the hero. Thus was *The Lone Ranger* born.

The first *Ranger* program went on the air as part of a three-station network joined with WOR in New York and WGN in Chicago. In short order, the show was heard

on hundreds of stations nationally.

The triumphant theme from the "William Tell Overture" filled the air as the hoofbeats of the great horse Silver could be heard. Then the orchestra faded, and the Ranger's shout of "Hi-Yo Silver!" came over the airwaves — followed by gunshots and more hoofbeats.

It was at this point that narrator Foy proclaimed: "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty Hi-Yo Silver! The Lone Ranger!"

A bit more music and then Foy would be heard again: "With his faithful Indian companion, Tonto, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains let the fight for law and order in the early western United States. Nowhere in the pages of history can one find a greater champion of justice. Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver. The Lone Ranger rides again!"

And the masked rider would shout: "Come on, Silver! Let's go, big fellow! Hi-Yo Silver! Away!"

The Lone Ranger and his loyal sidekick Tonto remained on radio until September 3, 1954. During that time, there were 3,234 broadcasts. One actor, John Todd, played Tonto in all of them. He might have known what the name really meant.

The definitive *Lone Ranger* episode is called "Bryant's Gap." On this program, the Ranger explains to young Dan Reid why he became a masked rider. The same episode also features the bitter end of Butch Cavendish, the villain who killed Daniel Reid, Sr., Dan's father and the Ranger's brother. In this particular show, the story of the great horse Silver is told, as well as the Ranger's meeting with Tonto.

The history of *The Lone Ranger* is fascinating. He was one of six Texas Rangers

dispatched to round up the notorious Hole-in-the-Wall Gang headed by Cavendish. At Bryant's Gap, the Rangers were ambushed, and presumably all of them were killed. The elder Dan Reid was one of them.

However, one of the Rangers, who also happened to be Reid's brother, survived. His name was John Reid.

"Over the years, there has been a bit of confusion about The Lone Ranger's real name," declared Karl Rommel of Lansing, Michigan, a long time collector of Ranger memorabilia. "I don't know why that has happened. From time to time, I will hear the Ranger identified by some other name. It happens every once in a while. For that reason, I want to make it crystal clear, The Lone Ranger's real name was John Reid. There isn't any doubt about that."

After the ambush at Bryant's Gap, John Reid was nursed back to health by an Indian known as Tonto.

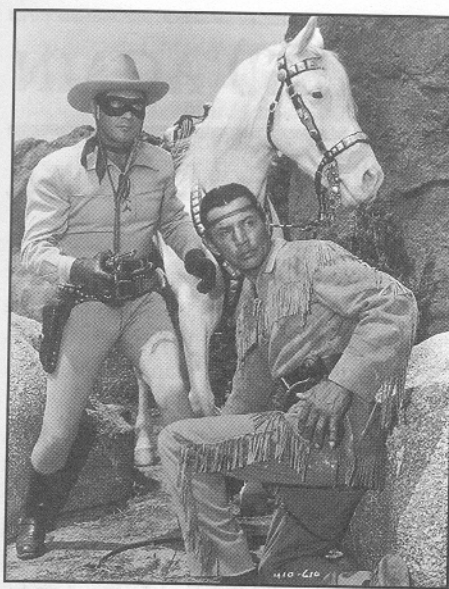
"Me, Tonto," said the Indian as the wounded man revived.

"What of the other Rangers?" asked his patient. "They were all my friends. One was my brother."

"Other Texas Rangers all dead," said Tonto. "You only Ranger left. You LONE RANGER now."

That was how it all began. Tonto buried five men at Bryant's Gap. But there were six graves. The surviving brother knew he was marked for death by the Cavendish gang, if they discovered he was alive.

That is also why he donned his famous mask. He did not want the outlaws to know he was alive. His mask was made from the cloth of a black vest belonging to his brother. The Reid brothers owned a silver mine. That is why the Lone Ranger used only silver bullets. He was easily the best shot in the west, but he never aimed to kill. He shot the gun out of his opponent's hand.



THE LONE RANGER and TONTO
Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels

In the 1938 movie serial, *The Lone Ranger*, the history of the great hero was changed a bit. In the serial, there were five Texas Rangers, and the idea was to figure out which one of them was also The Lone Ranger. One by one, these Rangers were killed off during the fifteen chapters. At the end, only the Lone Ranger was left. He was played by Lee Powell, a western star who was killed during the second world war. In a sequel, *The Lone Ranger Rides Again*, made a couple of years later, the leading role was played by western star Bob Livingston.

Silver was a stallion the Ranger captured in Wild Horse Canyon. He was the fastest and most intelligent horse in the west.

Scout, it should be noted, was Tonto's third horse, and the Indian's favorite. Tonto's earlier horses were White Feller and Paint.

For the record, it should also be noted that one of WXYZ's earliest Lone Rangers, before Graser and Beamer took over, was a chap named George Seaton who later

became a successful Hollywood producer.

Tonto and the Lone Ranger met before Bryant's Gap. They had played together as children. Tonto spoke broken English, but was a master of several Indian dialects, and was fluent in Spanish.

If this is true, it knocks out that story "Tonto" was Spanish for "fool." Tonto was too smart an Indian to adopt such a name. Then again, you never really know. Maybe he wasn't that fluent in Spanish, after all.

During the fifties, *The Lone Ranger* became a television fixture, with Clayton Moore as the Masked Man. John Hart played the role for 26 of the 221 half-hour episodes. The late Jay Silverheels was Tonto. The show went on TV on September 15, 1949.

The first two *Ranger* films starred Moore and Silverheels. The third film starred Klinton Spilsbury in the title role with Michael Horse as Tonto. It did poorly at the box office.

Video tapes of the *Lone Ranger* TV shows are around, as is an abundance of audio tapes of the radio series. And there's talk of still another wide screen *Ranger* flick due in 1998 or 1999.

All of which brings us back to "Kemo Sabay." What does it really mean?

According to western film historian Boyd Magers, nobody really knows for certain what the expression means.

"The late Jimmy Jewell, the first director of the old radio show," revealed Magers, "said he was the one who named Tonto. As for 'Kemo Sabay,' Jewell said that was a summer camp near Detroit. Actually, the sign at the camp's entrance read 'Kee Mo Sah Bee'."

That Michigan summer camp, by the way, is long gone now. So we'll never really know the truth. ■

(NOTE-- Tune in to *The Lone Ranger* on "When Radio Was" October 15 and November 25.)