

THE COWBOY SHOW - AN AMERICAN BOY'S DREAM WORLD

Robert B. Sivley, Ph.D.

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## PROLOGUE

JUST A BRIEF PROLOGUE before I begin my paper. During the past year the formerly conservative Athenaeum Society has debated all sides of the most vital and controversial issues of our day - such topics as pornography and government censorship, legalized and government financed abortion, welfare and the guaranteed income, environmental pollution, and even the use of tax money to bring about social change, until I have been almost overcome with the sheer relevancy of it all.

*INDEED, AT TIMES OUR MEETINGS* have been more like the 1972 Democratic convention than any outsider might suppose. It seems that we can no longer escape the necessity of giving almost daily attention to problems characterized as "the most important issues of our time." Perhaps this led me to prepare for presentation tonight a paper that is neither highly relevant nor especially important. As a topic it does not demand our attention and it is unique in that the future of civilization does not depend on any decision we make concerning it.

IF IT DOES NOT MAKE YOU FEEL GUILTY to waste time, I hope the topic can give you a small portion of the pleasure it has given me over the years.

## PROLOGUE

I realize that speakers today are expected to dwell on the most vital topics of our time. Indeed, the listener may feel cheated if the subject discussed is not described at least once as the most serious problem facing our people in this decade. Thus we hear frequently about runaway inflation, environmental pollution, the energy crisis, health costs, etc., until I wonder that we are not all overcome with the sheer relevancy of it all.

I suppose that it is this need for relief from the "most important issues of our time" <sup>that led me</sup> to prepare a talk on a subject that is neither highly relevant nor even the least bit important. As a topic, it does not demand our attention, is not something that every American needs to think about, probably will not generate any debate at all, and is unique in that the future of civilization does depend on any decision we make concerning it.


If it does not make you feel guilty to waste a few minutes, I hope the topic can give you a small portion of the pleasure it has given me over the years.

*This prologue prepared  
Let in for other present at 1960*

## THE COWBOY SHOW - AN AMERICAN BOY'S DREAM WORLD

HOLLYWOOD PRODUCERS CALLED THEM GRADE-B WESTERNS. Some humorists would speak of them as horse operas or sagebrush sagas, and my mother used to call them "shoot-em-up Tonies," but when I was a boy my friends and I called them cowboy shows.

WE USED TO SEE THESE COWBOY SHOWS on Saturdays, mostly, because that was the only day between the school week and Sunday School, and Saturday is still the schoolboy's true sabbath, just as it was for Abraham and Moses. But in the summertime you could see them any day you had the nine cents for the ticket and the wherewithall to get to a moving picture theater.

 OF COURSE YOU DIDN'T SEE GOOD COWBOY SHOWS at just any theater - you only saw them at the Rialtos and Cameos and Roxies and Princesses, never in the big showplaces such as the Paramounts or Loews' that showed more romantic films with people like Clark Gable and Bette Davis.

THE COWBOY SHOWS WERE LIKE MARBLES and baseball and fishing and Dixie cups with pictures of Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams to the boy of the 1930's and '40's, something he understood and could identify with, something he could always depend on to provide 90 minutes of thrilling adventure and a predictable finish that always came out right.

THE SATURDAY AFTERNOON COWBOY SHOW was usually accompanied by the 15-minute serial - my favorite was Sgt. Preston of the Yukon, a spic and span Royal Candanie Mountie. The last three minutes of every episode was

devoted to working the hero into some kind of terrible fix which was sure to result in a horrible death. But in the next episode the hero would find escape routes that were not at all apparent the week before, and it wasn't long before all of us knew this trick. By the time a boy had attained a mental age of eight years and six months, he could match wits with the canniest of Hollywood directors. We knew their game, and we laughed as we anticipated their every gambit as efficiently as Fisher anticipated the strategy of Spassky.

*THE SAMENESS OF IT ALL*, the standardized plot, the reusable scenery, none of this was a deterrent to our entertainment, because it is to boyhood with its obsessive-compulsive rituals that the western movie or cowboy show belongs (to the boy of over six who has left the apron strings of mother and joined the ranks of what modern psychologists like to call peer groups, but which we know is really a band of outlaws as rebellious as Robin Hood's own merry men; to the boy of under 13 whose pre-pubescent innocence is as much a puzzle to parent and teacher as to his more mature female counterpart of the same age). Though men in the fourth and fifth decades of life may yet escape the complexities of this age while losing themselves in early John Wayne, there is little doubt that such escapes involve a regression into that glorious age in every man's history when he was a pre-adolescent boy.

*IN MY DAY THE FAVORITES OF ME AND MY FRIENDS* were tough, plain-spoken men like Buck Jones, Hoot Gibson, Ken Maynard, Johnny Mack Brown, Charles Starratt, Wild Bill Elliott, and William (Hopalong Cassidy) Boyd, to name a few. None of these fellows played guitars or sang songs. Gene Autry, or his successor Roy Rogers, were alright (especially if it was

one of those days when you had to take your sister with you) but their costumes were a little too fancy - more rodeo than real frontier - and their shiny, pearl-handled sixshooters were a kind of parody of the real shootin' iron. The singing cowboys were an innovation of the late 30's and enjoyed several years of great success. They came to the movies mostly from radio rather than from the rodeo and wild west shows that spawned most cowboy stars.

YOU UNDERSTAND, OF COURSE, that these cowboy shows are not to be confused with the so-called adult westerns and definitely not with the modern x-rated western in which anti-heroes play upon erotic, sadistic themes. The cowboy shows were as wholesome as the hot popcorn sold in the lobby. In adult westerns plots were complicated by such thorny issues as whether the Indians really were robbed and betrayed by the broken promises of white men. In real cowboy shows the most complex sociological problem wrestled with had to do with the wisdom of stretching barbed wire fence through the prairie, and even then only the most radical boy would doubt that it was a mistake to let the sheepherders and dirt farmers interfere with the free movement of cattle. In the real cowboy shows the good guys always wore white hats and rode fast horses.

*YOU WILL NOTE THAT IN MY LIST OF FAVORITE COWBOY STARS I omitted such famous names as Tom Mix and Bronco Billy Anderson, because these stars were before my time. The same is true of William S. Hart, who, nevertheless, played an important part in the development of the western movie. Strangely enough, Hart's pre-World War I movies were more accurate in their description of the true wild west than were the later cowboy shows.*

*HART'S HERO WAS THE GOOD-BAD MAN*, a hard-drinking, hard-riding, hard-shooting he-man, often an outlaw, often the enemy of law and order, but always true to the moral code of the old frontier.

IN THE 1920'S, TOM MIX SET THE TONE for the type of film that was to become standard as the cowboy show of my day. Now the hero was the good-good man, riding the range to protect the weak and bring outlaws to justice. He never drank, seldom smoked, and used his pistols only when forced to.

*THE WESTERN BECAME ONE OF THE TWO AMERICAN FILM FORMS* that would withstand foreign invasion - the other being the slapstick comedy. Immensely popular all over the world, there was no need to make the cowboy show more artistic by following European fashions. At once too successful and too lowly to warrant such improvements, it was considered just entertainment. It depicted the world as a simple place for men with the pioneer virtues of honesty, courage, a taste for adventure, and a quick trigger finger.

IN CASE YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN, let me refresh your memory of the scene, plot and action of the typical western. There were slight variations, but probably no agency besides the U.S. Mint ever produced as many samples of something that always came out looking about the same as the Hollywood producers of western films.

*THE SETTING WAS ALWAYS A SMALL TOWN* that consisted of one street lined with a series of nondescript storefront buildings, usually of faded, unpainted wooden planks nailed straight up and down. Among these unimposing structures three establishments stood out: the saloon, the bank and the

sheriff's office. The saloon was the gathering place for everybody, including the hero (who frequently went in but never drank the straight whiskey that was invariably served in one-ounce shot glasses and downed in one gulp with no chaser by the bad element of the town).

A STRANGE THING ABOUT THE SALOON WAS THE FURNITURE. It seemed durable enough until the fight started, but then the furniture seemed to crumble with age. The weight of an ordinary man, when struck on the jaw by the hero, would smash a chair to splinters. A bottle of whiskey would break into tiny slivers when brought into contact with a man's head. And large mirrors and plate-glass windows would crumble like sand castles at the slightest trauma. But though the furnishings of the saloon were ridiculously fragile, they seemed to have no capacity to break the skin or even to bring a drop of blood from those against whom they were smashed.

THE PRINCIPAL PLAYERS IN A COWBOY SHOW were as standard as the accouterments of the town. There was the hero (who was always a stranger in town), his trusty sidekick, the lovely heroine, and the leader of the outlaw gang. The hero was a steeley-eyed fellow who wore an open-necked shirt with a bandanna, and usually sported two guns which he could draw with lightning speed. His horse was distinctive though not always white, and his whole person exuded honesty, loyalty and courage. He was a 19th Century western version of King Arthur's knights, riding the countryside and jousting with six-shooters and fists against the fiery dragons of western badmen.

LIKE THE KNIGHTS OF OLD, he was even accompanied by a kind of page or second, whose role was to provide comic relief, because the cowboy hero was a serious fellow with little sense of humor and inclined to be a little dull. These sidekick or saddle partner roles were played by men like



Smiley Burnett, Al "Fuzzy" St. John, and perhaps the most lovable of all, George (Gabby") Hayes, sidekick to the early John Wayne (who was then known by the *supernatural name of* ~~as~~ Dusty Rhodes) and to the later Roy Rogers.

THE HEROINE WAS A SMALL, DELICATE LITTLE CREATURE, who often appeared to be as fragile as the barroom furniture actually was. She was the only daughter of the town judge (or banker, or the wealthiest rancher in the valley). She was pretty but not voluptuous, wonderfully feminine, but afflicted with a disturbing tendency to faint during times of stress. She was not the hardy pioneer type, and she may have set the cause of equal rights for women back a whole generation.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF WAS THE MOST WELL-DRESSED FELLOW in the movie, in spite of his penchant for black suitcoats and hats. He was easily identified as the real brains behind the gang that was terrorizing the town. (In the cowboy shows the chief occupation of outlaws was to terrorize towns - this was even more popular than robbing banks and rustling cattle, though I was never sure if it was as profitable.)

THE TEMPO OF THE COWBOY SHOW PLOT WAS FAST, the technique clean and uncomplicated. It ran something like this: The hero rides into town with his fumbling saddle partner and the two go immediately to the town saloon, where several of the local toughs pick a fight and a terrific fracas ensues. The battle practically destroys the saloon, but the hero wins, establishing himself as not only a man to be reckoned with but as the honest town's people's last hope for justice and salvation.

DURING THE NEXT HOUR OR SO at least one stagecoach is robbed just outside of town and the old fellow who rides shotgun and looks something like Buffalo Bill Cody is killed. Somehow the bandits cast suspicion on the

hero and the dullwitted sherrif *allows as how the law's the law*, and locks the *young feller* up. His sidekick arranges a daring escape just in time for the hero to ride across the plains to rescue the heroine, who by now has managed to get herself kidnapped by the boss's vicious gang. She is bound hand and foot and gagged, and is being kept in the gang's hideout, probably an old abandoned mining shaft. The hero outwits, outfights, and outshoots the badmen, rescues the heroine, and gets back in town just in time to expose the evil plans of the gang leader and to save the heroine's father from financial disaster. Seeing that his plan is exposed, the outlaw grabs a saddlebag full of money, jumps on a horse and goes tearing out of town. The hero gives chase, and with the aid of a shortcut (by which he can *cut him off at the pass*,) he overtakes the bandit, leaps from his own saddle to pull him down to the ground, and proceeds to defeat him in hand-to-hand combat. The town is saved and the evil forces are proved once again to be unable to match wits and fists with the white hats.

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THE COWBOY SHOW WAS, OF COURSE, A HUGE FANTASY. While no one ever claimed that it was anything but fiction, there was always among us the general conviction that it was something like things once were, something historical and early American. The fancifulness of the movie western fed sumptuously on the mixture of fact and legend that became the history of the American West. From stories handed down by word of mouth there grew such preposterous ideas as that Jesse James was a kind of Robin Hood and that the usual scenario for the death of a gunman involved a face-to-face showdown with one contestant outdrawing the other in a fair and square contest.

OF ALL THE HOLLYWOOD DISTORTIONS of the American frontier and its folkways, those of the western badmen may have been the worst. The exploits

of Doc Holliday and of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, have been romanticized to the extreme. A casual glance at the real history of several of the lawless breed will serve to illustrate how far from reality was the cowboy show. Two of the most famous, perhaps because each gave his name to a long list of Saturday afternoon gunfighters, were Billy the Kid and Black Bart. The former became the model for the young, handsome, dashing gunfighter, usually a fellow turned bad because of some terrible wrong done him by the railroad, oil, or cattle barons.

BLACK BART, ON THE OTHER HAND, became the model for the true villain dressed in black - swarthy, cruel, and lacking any redeeming moral or social value. These two names appeared so frequently in western movies that they took on a kind of standard identity like the "Wolf Man" or "Jack the-Ripper" of horror movie fame. Their roles could be played by any number of actors, but always with certain prescribed characteristics of appearance and mannerism.

*WHO CAN FAIL AT THE MERE MENTION OF BLACK BART* to conjure up the mental picture of an evil, tough-looking, mustachioed hombre whose meanness is obvious in every word he speaks. Even the black hat he wore suggested the sinister character of his personality. And yet, the real Black Bart, whose name was Charles E. Bowles, was a fascinating bandit who frequently left handwritten verses at the scene of his robberies (always signed Black Bart, with the letters P.O. and the numeral 8 - Poet).

DURING HIS YEARS OF PURSUIT by federal marshals and Wells-Fargo detectives, Black Bart behaved in a manner very unlike those movie badmen who later maligned his name. He never fired a shot during a robbery and later

claimed that all of his hold-ups had been perpetrated carrying an empty shotgun. He never robbed nor abused a passenger. After his capture he was sentenced to a state prison and released seven years later with time off for good behavior. On his release he was said to have made friendly calls on the officers who had had a part in arresting him, but strangely enough his wife claimed never to have seen him again. Arresting officers described him as a man of attractive personality, an interesting conversationist, and well educated. Wells-Fargo personnel records described him as a good office man, because it was in several of the stage company's offices that he worked between robberies. His epithet could well have been four lines of verse that he left at the scene of one of his robberies. It went as follows: "So blame me not for what I've done, I don't deserve your curses. And if for any cause I'm hung, let it be for my verses." It is quite possible that Black Bart's greatest crimes were literary.

BUT IF THE NAME OF THE GENTLEST OF BANDITS was to be ill-used and hardened by Hollywood, the name of one of the Old West's most infamous characters was to be endowed with a kind of glamour and romance that its bearer did not deserve. Perhaps the name Billy the Kid just had more romance and box office appeal than Black Bart.

*THE KID, WHOSE REAL NAME WAS HENRY McCARTY*, also went by the name William Antrim and, later William or Billy Bonney. He was a pale, slender, high-voiced, buck-toothed, light-haired, and altogether effeminate and extremely homely individual of short stature. He was a cruel, wanton killer, who once shot three Mexicans to death, "just to see them kick," as he himself put it.

THE KID'S LAWLESS CAREER apparently started at age 15 (though some say as young as 12) when he was arrested for stealing from the hotel in which he was working as a waiter. Soon after, he committed his first murder. When he was shot to death six years later in 1881 (a bad year for outlaws, because this was also the year in which Jesse James was killed) his gun had 21 notches on it, one death for each year of his life. His unromantic career had consisted mostly of cattle rustling and working as a hired gun for warring cattle barons.

THE KILLER OF BILLY THE KID was Sherrif Pat Garrett, who shot him without warning in a darkened house in New Mexico, a far cry from the standard movie version of two gunmen in a face-off at high noon in the dusty streets.

and [ BUT THEN THE REAL GUN DUEL, WESTERN style, was far less romantic than the Hollywood version. One incident in the life of Wild Bill Hickok, then marshall of Abilene, may explain why more of the movie-type gunfights were not actually staged in the Old West. As the story goes, a gambler and bully named Phil Cole, who had acquired some reputation as a killer, had been drinking heavily and fired a shot from the street at Wild Bill, who was leaning against a table in a saloon. The shot went wild and Hickok whirled immediately and shot Cole in the abdomen. As he walked outside to see who his would-be assassin was, one of his deputies and best friend came rushing to his aid. Apparently jumpy by this time, Wild Bill turned and fired two bullets into the deputy's chest, and he died almost instantly. It was said that his grief showed so plainly that the people let him continue as marshall, though there was some murmuring in Abilene that their lawman was not only nervy but a little nervous. ]

[ SOME YEARS LATER, AFTER HICKOK HAD MOVED to a new marshallsip at the lively mining town of Deadwood, his own career was ended when a fellow named McCall shot him in the back while the marshall was playing poker and sitting with his back to the door, something very rare for Wild Bill, since he had feared such an assassination for many years. It is interesting to note that Sherrif Pat Garrett also met death by being shot in the back - by a man who claimed to have fired in self-defense. Though Wild Bill Hickok may have been the closest thing to the western movie "towntamer" that actually lived, he was not a cool-headed, fair-fighting Gary Cooper, and his role as lawman was probably a simple case of harnessing aggression to serve the cause of good. Like many of the other marshalls and sheriffs of the Old West, he was a violent man whose guns would have been used anyway if not in the interest of law and order. ]

*IF THE WESTERN MEN WERE UNLIKE* the villains and heroes of my cowboy show days, how totally different is the story of one of the West's most famous women from anything depicted on the silver screen. Referred to in one western history as a brushwood courtesan, she was, to quote the historian, "A wild young thing, black-eyed and dark-haired, rebellious at her mother's efforts to restrict her and bring her up like a lady, and out of that rebellion going to the very opposite extreme." Her name was Myra Belle Shirley, and she was to come down in history as Belle Starr. When she was 18, Myra Belle stepped over the bounds and suffered for it in a woman's way. Her seducer was Cole Younger, who was at the very start of his bandit career and was visiting in the home of her father at the time. After the Younger episode the Shirleys were much stricter with Belle and Mr. Shirley frowned upon her later involvement with a member of the James Gang called Jim Reed.

Mr. Shirley ordered Reed off the place and shut the girl up on the attic floor of his house. One night with 20 reckless young men to help him, Reed staged a rescue and released her from parental custody. She lived with Reed for several years and often described herself as his wife, though there was no legal record that they were ever married.

AFTER REED WAS KILLED BY A BOUNTY HUNTER, Belle fell in love with an Indian bandit named Sam Starr, with whom she began living and for whom she took an oath of allegiance to the Cherokee Nation. On her ranch at Younger's Bend she built two guest houses which were described as shelter for the most vicious criminals of her time, her most prominent lodger being Jesse James. Sam Starr was killed by another bandit, after which Belle married a 24-year-old outlaw named Jim July, known afterward as Jim July Starr, since Belle refused to change her name again. Another historian wrote of her, "Belle starr was no bandit queen as romantic writers of the times entitled her, except insofar as she harbored bandits and furnished them with ideas and acted as an intermediary and often as a bedfellow for them." She herself came to a tragic end in 1889 when her riderless horse came trotting into the yard of her home at Younger's Bend and she was later found lying in the mud beside the road, having been shot first in the back, and then in the face, with a double-barreled shotgun.

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THE WESTERN MOVIE NO DOUBT DISTORTED FRONTIER HISTORY, though we can hardly blame Hollywood for that. The producers turned out their simple dramas for their commercial value. It was art for money's sake, regardless of the motto on the lion's head.

*BUT THE COWBOY SHOW DID HAVE A DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE.* It was essentially a morality play. I have said that Saturday afternoon was the

schoolboy's sabbath, and there is considerable truth in that statement. Because the cowboy show was a kind of sermonette, not without ritual and replete with moral teachings. The characters -- brave hero, cruel villain, delicate heroine, rich landowner, honest townspeople -- all played a part, not just in the Saturday afternoon matinee, but in the great struggle between good and evil.

IF YOU WERE A DEVOTEE OF THE MOVIE COWBOYS, then you know that the articles of faith accepted by their followers could only be believed by the audience for whom they were intended, a predominately male group of pre-adolescents. Hollywood had, by the 1930's, hit on the formula that would capture an entire generation, a formula that was little more than a projection of the fantasy life of small boys.

AND THE COWBOY HERO WAS MORE THAN AN IDEAL with which little boys could identify. He was an alter-ego, a schoolboy's mind in a strong, adult male body. He was the masculine prototype that the modern boy could not find in the real world in which he lived.

THE CAPTIVE OF FEMALES (~~aware from the age of three of the difference between himself and those of the other sex~~) the American boy struggles to find a model for himself. But the most significant people in his life are women -- his mother, his teacher, the babysitters and maids, his Sunday School teacher, even his grandmother -- all are women. Where are the models for masculine behavior? Father is a remote figure, visible for only a few hours per week, and no male can rival in significance the host of females that dominate his home, school, and church life. But in the ultra-masculine cowboy star, the boy found a desirable image -- a powerful



grown-up person with whom he could identify -- who was not a woman. *Unfortunately, he was not a real man either.* He was a projection of the boy's imagination, aggressive, violent, and skillful with guns and horses. A free spirit, who like Barrie's Peter Pan would never grow up, but could roam eternally the open range like the coyotes and wild horses.

THE COWBOY HERO'S SOCIAL AND VOCATIONAL LIFE was another projection of boyhood. He rarely did anything that could be called real work and he usually had no visible means of support. He preferred the company of men and horses to that of girls, and the end of each movie saw him spurn the obvious offer of love and marriage and ride off irresponsibly into the sunset with his loyal saddle partner to the next adventure. He never held hands with a girl by choice and would not think of actually kissing one.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO MAKE SNIDE REMARKS about the virility of the western hero, smirking about his preference for male company and even suggesting that several stalwart knights of the saddle were seen hugging and kissing their horses. To imply any hint of perversion is to show ignorance of the true nature of the western matinee idol, for he was an asexual person, possessed of the same aversion to and fear of all that is feminine that is often seen in the elementary school boy, ~~who would rather make his way barefoot and alone in a briar patch than to tread the smooth sidewalk in the company of girls.~~ It is only in the company of male companions in his own age bracket that the boy finds true comfort and security. Such was the pristine, never-been-kissed purity of the cowboy star.

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I SUBMIT, THEREFORE, THAT THE COWBOY SHOW summarized, condensed, and perpetuated the simple, straightforward good and evil morality of the

pre-adolescent boy. If some of the great battles of the British Empire were won on the fields of Eton and Harrow, perhaps some of the great battles of our nation were fought on the silver screen on Saturday afternoons in the Rialto's and Princess Theaters across the land.

BUT, ALAS, THE COWBOY SHOW AS WE KNEW IT before the advent of universal television is no more. Republic Films, RKO, and Columbia Pictures, with their small black and white screens, turn their reels no more to the likes of Buster Crabbe, Bob Steele, or Sunset Carson. Not even the late-late show sees fit to bring back these films, with the exception of a few made by John Wayne.

*THE PETER PAN OF THE WILD WEST NEVER GREW UP.* Inhabitant of a land that never really was (like so many that provide the setting for children's dreams) he was taken away with our boyhoods, in the full bloom of his youth. Or perhaps one day he simply rode off into the sunset with his familiar, "So long, podnuh," and never returned.

NOT USED WHEN  
PRESENTED ON 5/3/73

To all you silver cowboys who rode the silver screen,  
Do you remember ridin' thru the Strand?  
And do you remember me? I'm the front row kid,  
Who galloped right behind you till the end.  
And saved your life so often, by callin' out your name,  
When it looked like Blackie had the upper hand.  
We saved towns and ranches in spite of threats and rain,  
While stayin' safe and dry in the Strand.

The Strand, it was a fortress, in the heart of town,  
Its marquee proudly boastin' out your name,  
Sendin' out a message to young'ns all around,  
And each and every Saturday we came.

We came to watch our heroes ride the silver screen  
In hot pursuit of Blackie's outlaw band.  
I wish that I could walk up to that ticket booth again,  
And buy just one more ticket to the Strand.

But our town is changin' and it seems we need ~~a parkin' lot to help our town expand~~  
A parkin' lot to help our town expand.  
Today I got the message, like you I must be brave,  
Today I learned they're tearin' down the Strand.

I wish that there was somthin', fellas, we could do,  
Just one more effort before we disband.  
We saved those towns and ranches, and before we're thru,  
Seems we ought to try to save the Strand.

But they say it's over, and I guess it's true.  
They'll park their cars, where horses used to stand.  
I'll try to use the courage that I learned from you,  
Everytime I think about the Strand.

And if I could live life over,  
There's much that I would change,  
And possibly, I'd be a different man,  
I'd follow many different trails, but one would stay the same,  
And that's the one that led me to the Strand.