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I've worried about this paper for months now. Before this, I have written about people I knew and stories I had heard and things that had happened to me. It was all easy to write and you didn't have to pay very close attention to understand just what I was saying. I didn't mind my papers turning out that way; in fact, that's what I shot for. But when Jim Love did his paper on the Chicago Cubs, he spoke of "light weight" papers and indicated that they were something that must be avoided. The thought that papers that required no intellect to write, provoke no thought, dealt with no timely issues, and were finished while driving to the meeting were not well received caused my confidence to lag. Never one to languish in pain, I sprang to action. I picked a "heavy weight" topic. Not content to let that carry the day, I also decided to do some research. I asked Sandy to pull up everything that she could about my subject. Then I read it ... well, not all of it, but I did read some of it, and I scanned some of it. But I threw most of it away without looking at it – she pulled up a lot of material. Then I decided that I would look in old newspapers and find material pertinent to my topic. After finding out from a long-time Hopkinsville resident that the library was downtown near the river, I went there and started using the microfiche. After thirty minutes, I was bored and dizzy. I took care of the boredom immediately. The dizziness stuck with me a couple of weeks.

A lot of the papers have featured visual aids lately. I decided that I would do a Power Point presentation, but I don't know how to do that. A couple of posters might be good, but I'm not a very good printer, and I don't have any markers. I just brought one picture.

I needed a new tactic. I decided to do a survey. Surveys are scientific and impressive, and might actually uncover some bit of information that is either interesting

or informative. But more about the survey later. Now it is time for you to know that tonight we are going out West and that we will be talking about cowboys.

Fifty years ago, Maple Court was the Western badlands, and I was Gene Autry. My friends and I didn't play cowboys; we were cowboys. We said things like sidewinder and varmint and "slap leather" and "pardner" every day. When we left our houses, we wore six shooters (boots and hats were optional). My friend Tony Dunning was Hopalong Cassidy. The Means brothers were Frank and Jesse James, and Harry Weaver was known as "Dead Eye" – not because of any alleged shooting skill, but because he could turn his eyelids inside out.

Rules were rigid: no shooting in the back, no shooting an unarmed man, and no shooting a woman. The "good guys" had the best looking and fastest horses, didn't drink "red eye," always told the truth, and, of course, wore white hats. Firing one's sixshooter had to be accompanied by sound effects. The only way our pistols made sufficient sound on their own was with caps, and no one could afford caps for the hundreds of shots fired during just one bank robbery. No, you had to make your own sound, and everyone had his personal favorite. Simple "boom" or "bang" would never do, and "pow" would have been laughable. For a shot to amount to anything, you had to hear the report of the pistol as well as something of the sound of the bullet as it flew through the air. Few outlaws could escape peril when confronted by a cowboy whose fists were full of steel while the air was full of the sound of ricocheting bullets.

Clear cut winners were rare in our gunfights. No matter how staunchly a shooter claimed a killing shot, the opponent could just as staunchly claim a narrow miss. Since no one was ever hit, the battles went on for hours. Our entire neighborhood was

sometimes turned into a battleground. A fight might start in the Keys' yard and be waged past the homes of the Weavers, Liles, Lacys, and Means. Then we were quite likely to fight around the porch of the Church of the Nazarene (I'll never do that again on a Wednesday night, though) and on to Maplewood Drive, past my grandfather's house, Doug's Market, and even to my aunts' house – thousands of shots and no confirmed injuries.

It was in the midst of one of these epic battles that we were confronted by Mr. Weaver. Mr. Weaver was Harry's dad and was a lot like Harry. They were both small, had red hair, and liked cowboy movies. I don't think Mr. Weaver could turn his eyelids inside out. He did know how to get our goat, however. He started out by telling us just how inept Gene and Hoppy and Roy and the James brothers were. As if we were not already mad enough, he finished by saying that Tom Mix could handle all of us with one shooting hand tied behind his back. We responded appropriately. We slapped leather and filled that sidewinder full of lead. Mr. Weaver said the same things all of the other old men said about Tom Mix. You would have thought he was Babe Ruth.

As much as we hated hearing about Tom Mix, we knew he was good. None of us had ever seen him, but we knew he was tough and we knew he had a horse that looked a little like Champion. He started in the western movies in 1910, and by 1913 was a big star. With his first horse Old Blue, Tom rode the range, did good, and fought evil in hit after hit. In 1915, Tom retired Old Blue and started riding his new horse, Tony. In 1917, Tom was hired by William Fox to make movies for Fox Studios. By 1920, he had become the most popular screen cowboy in the world, and he maintained that popularity until the advent of sound. His movies specialized in action and a glamorized picture of

the West. In his frilly cowboy suit and ten-gallon hat, there was nothing that he couldn't do. He and Tony kept the old Fox Film Studio solvent in its infancy and enabled it to grow into the giant it became.

As the 1920's came to a close, movies gained a voice. Fox discontinued westerns, after building the studio primarily on the earnings of the Mix films. Tom did make ten talkies for Universal in the early 30's, but by that time, his dominance was being challenged by younger stars who were more prepared to utilize the medium of sound.

In 1952, I turned six and became officially old enough to walk to the movies with friends. I had spent most of my life walking to town with my mother. She never went to the Saturday movie, but I was never alone. All of my friends were there. There were three theaters downtown: the Alhambra, Princess, and Kentucky. All three had special Saturday matinees. The decision about which movie to go to was usually a toss-up, other than in the fall when the rat problem was worse than usual at the Kentucky. We often made our minds up based on the serial. Saturday matinees featured a cartoon, at least one western movie, and a serial which usually ran twelve weeks. It was important to choose the right one because once you started, you were locked in to that theater for three months. The choices were usually westerns or spaceships (Flash Gordon stuff).

The serials or cliffhangers were dramas that lasted about fifteen minutes each week. The first five minutes recapped what had happened the previous week. The next five minutes were devoted to getting the hero out of a certain death situation from the previous week. During the last five minutes, the hero worked himself into another mess that was sure to lead to his death. Many weeks reached their conclusions with our white

hatted cowpoke unconscious, hogtied in the bottom of a horseless wagon that was filled with dynamite, and going over the edge of a mountain. There was absolutely no way that anyone could survive those situations, but time after time, luck, skill, good timing, a fast horse, a trusty dog, or a hard head pulled our hero through. It was almost too good to be true – guns, horses, fights, bad guys, and the hero could sing.

“Git yourself another singin’ cowboy. I ain’t gonna do it no more.” The speaker was John Wayne. He had been cast as “Singing Sandy” for several years in a series of B westerns produced at Lone Star Monogram. Wayne, who couldn’t carry a tune, had his voice dubbed by Smith Ballew. At first, he went along with the casting as a gag, but, unfortunately the idea had caught on. During personal appearances, he often found himself backed into a corner by fans shouting for him to sing a song. Wayne got fed up. When Monogram and several other small, independent production companies sold out to Yates in 1935 to form Republic Pictures, Wayne told his boss to get another crooner. When Wayne made his first western, *Westward Ho*, for Republic, it was strictly action fare.

The new crooner picked by Republic Pictures was Gene Autry. Autry’s first starring role was in a serial by the name of *The Phantom Empire*. The twelve week serial featured a science fiction motif with the singing cowboy from Melody Ranch pitted against the inhabitants of the underground kingdom of Murania. The story was wild, unbelievable, and thoroughly bizarre, but it worked. Not only did audiences like the fantasy story; they also liked the guitar-plucking young hero with the friendly manner.

As improbable as the plot of *Phantom Empire* was, Autry being cast in the starring role was just as hard to believe. Gene was born in Texas in 1907. His dad was a

cattle buyer and his grandfather a Baptist minister. As a teenager, Gene worked as a telegraph operator and passed time playing his guitar and singing. One night a stranger dropped by to send a telegram, listened a while, and suggested that Gene give radio a try. Later Gene found out that the stranger was Will Rogers. Determined to follow Rogers' advice, Gene soon landed a show on KV00 in Tulsa where he was billed as "Oklahoma's Singing Cowboy." From there, he moved up to WLS in Chicago and the "National Barn Dance."

In 1934, Nat Levine with Mascot Pictures signed Gene to a movie contract. Autry would make \$100.00 a week. Levine's intention was to use Gene as support for established cowboy star Ken Maynard in a series of musical westerns in both serial and feature format. There were troubles with the project. Maynard couldn't sing, and Autry couldn't act or ride a horse. The first problem was solved by changing the script to allow Autry to do most of the singing. The second problem proved a little more difficult. The studio spent several months teaching Gene to act and ride. The first film was *In Old Santa Fe*, and this was followed closely by *Mystery Mountain*. Then, after Maynard was either fired or quit, Gene was cast in the lead role for *The Phantom Empire*. Movie history was in the making. Gene still was far from an accomplished actor. He sometimes fell off his horse, and he didn't possess the muscles of the classic cowboy, but moviegoers loved his singing and his enthralling personality.

Later, in 1935, Levine merged his Mascot Pictures with several small studios to form Republic Pictures. Republic then produced Autry's next movie, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*. The \$75,000 investment grossed \$500,000. With stardom now inevitable, the studio spent a lot of time creating just the right persona. Gene would always be Gene

Autry on stage. (There is only one exception to this.) Gene built his own image around the ten commandments that he had devised for himself. He would always be pure as the driven snow and respect women, parents, old folks, children and animals. He would be truthful, clean of thought and speech, abhor racial and religious intolerance, abstain from liquor, smoking, and sex. Gene even put it in writing. His plan was to create a pure cowboy whom youngsters (meaning me) could admire.

Reality was not a highly sought commodity in Autry westerns. In fact, there was a strong correlation between the degree of fantasy and the popularity of his movies.

For the remainder of the 30's and 1941 and 42, Gene's star status continued to rise. From 1937 through 1942, he was voted America's favorite cowboy each year. In 1940, he was the fourth most popular movie star in the world. He received more fan mail than anyone (80,000 letters a month). His prewar films such as *The Big Show*, *Gold Mine the in Sky*, *Mexicali Rose*, *South of the Border*, *Melody Ranch*, *Down Mexico Way*, and *Sierra Sue* were Republic's largest moneymakers. Gene wasn't doing badly either. Through his movies, records, personal appearances (he could now stay on Champion for extended periods of time without falling off), radio, comic books, and endorsements, he built a financial empire worth several million dollars.

In 1942, after starring in his fifty-second movie, Gene entered the U.S. Air Force. Following the war, Gene made another 36 pictures, and then in 1953, switched to television, starring in over 90 segments of "The Gene Autry Show."

In 1954, we lived in a new neighborhood. I was eight years old, and the Cavanahs got their first television. I had given up wearing my six shooters around the neighborhood (a little late judging by the amount of kidding I took). I was no longer

going to the Saturday matinees. There were almost no westerns on at the theaters. Thank goodness for T.V.! You could see westerns almost every day. Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Hopalong Cassidy all had shows. There were a couple of movies on every Saturday. America loved sitting in the living rooms, watching their heroes whip the bad guys, save the “purdy” girl, save the “purdy” girl’s ranch, say goodbye to the “purdy” girl, and ride off into the sunset. We loved the uncomplicated plots. It was fun knowing that right would prevail. We were also beginning to see some new stars. Men like Randolph Scott, Audie Murphy, Johnny Mack Brown, Lash Larue, Whip Wilson, and John Wayne were beginning to mow down the bad guys.

If not center stage, another set of cowboys appeared stage right and one step behind the heroes. Comic relief came in the form of zany sidekicks such as Smiley Burnett, Al “Fuzzy” St. John, John Forest “Fuzzy” Knight, George “Gabby” Hayes, and Pat Buttram. Each of these men were best friends and constant companions of the heroes and always tried to help, but usually succeeded only in causing trouble.

Horses were vital members of all the teams. Horses like Silver, Scout, Fritz, Silver King, Old Blue, Tony, Tarzan, Champion, and Trigger often got star billing along with their riders.

Heroes needed villains to fight. Lots of character actors became stock villains in the B westerns. Fans knew to boo the bad guys (Forrest Tucker, Jack Elam, Jack Palance, Ted DeCorsia, and others) the minute they appeared on screen.

Back when I was a cowboy, I never carried a rifle. When you could shoot a six shooter like I could, you didn’t need anything else. Winging an outlaw from 150 yards

while riding my horse at a full gallop was no trouble; and I wasn't just accurate. I was fast.

I did vary my arsenal a bit. Gene always carried one pistol and wore his holster on the right side about waist high; so did I. But occasionally, I carried two guns. That allowed 50 additional shots without reloading. Sometimes, I needed to draw especially fast, and on those occasions, I wore my holster much lower and strapped to my leg. By doing that, I could take on a dozen yellow-bellied sidewinders and six Injuns all by myself. (Of course, that Injuns part was years prior to anyone thinking up the term "politically correct.")

I did, on occasion, feel the necessity to explore the possibility that I might really be left-handed. This is attested to by the picture that I have provided to you. In it you see me with the Hole in the Wall Gang. To my right are Stubby, Happy, Smelly, and a bar maid by the name of Fanny that we brought along to pleasure the members of the gang.

As America became more and more enamored by TV Westerns, the weapons that were featured on the shows became more and more important. We watched Matt Dillon and Paladin as they kept peace and made money with their guns. But we really fell in love with anything unusual.

Unusual is just what we found with Wyatt Earp's Buntline Special. With this 12 inch sixgun, Earp could shoot from greater distances and with more accuracy. The gun became so popular that Colt began to produce them in 1957. The Special remained in the line for more than 30 years.

The Winchester Model 1892 carbine was the rifle used by most cowboys. It gained special notoriety, however, when it co-starred with Chuck Connors in "The

Rifleman.” Lucas McCain had added an adjustable screw to the trigger guard to trip the trigger every time the lever was slammed. McCain was able to crank off nine shots in one and a half seconds. McCain also added a larger, more squared-off loop lever that enabled him to spin cock his rifle.

The modifications made by the rifleman were miniscule compared to those made by bounty hunter Josh Randall in Steve McQueen’s “Wanted Dead or Alive.” The Winchester 1892 used by McQueen was the most bizarre and memorable firearm of any TV western. The “Mare’s Leg” as it was christened by McQueen, had its barrel cut off to nine inches. The stock was also cut back. The Mare’s Leg was no longer a rifle, nor was it a pistol. The U.S. Treasury’s Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division did not have trouble identifying it, however. It was illegal. Shortly after the first episode of “Wanted Dead or Alive” aired, producer John Robinson was contacted by the Treasury Department and informed that his creation was classified as a federally restricted short-barreled rifle. Josh Randall’s Mare’s Leg would have to be registered or confiscated. Eleven hundred dollars later, the cameras were rolling again, making the Mare’s Leg the most expensive TV western gun in history.

The sawed off theme was duplicated in “The Rebel.” Nick Adams played Johnny Yuma, an ex-Confederate soldier who roamed through the West with a sawed off shotgun strapped to his leg.

So there you have the cowboys. From the singing and the dying to the shooting and the robbing, to the movies and the TV, they were a wonderful lot. Each one was a little piece of America. Some were good, and others were bad, and it was always easy to tell which was which. Well, maybe not so easy with all of them. I would just like to

know one thing. Where does Roy Rogers get off calling himself the “King of the Cowboys”? His name when he was born was Leonard Sly. I don’t know whether it is possible to trust anyone named Leonard Sly. Then some publicity whiz told him that he needed to change his name to something easier to remember and more recognizable, so he changed it to Dick Weston. After he saw that wasn’t working for him, he changed to Roy Rogers (probably after the chicken). Then he crowned himself and took his little title. After that he married Dale Evans and thought he needed to give her some sort of regal name, so he started calling her “Queen of the West.” He also had this ugly dog that he named Bullet the Wonder Dog. And who stuffs a horse? That’s what Leonard did with Trigger right after he had Trigger’s hoofprints put in cement outside Mann’s Chinese Theater. Another thing -- Trigger wasn’t even Roy’s horse initially. Trigger had starred in a movie as Olivia DeHaviland’s horse before helping Roy out.

Anyway, when I met with Dr. Freer, he called this obsessing and suggested therapy that involved wires and electrodes, so I’m not going to do that anymore. I do have to tell you one more thing. If Gene Autry hadn’t quit making movies and gone off to win World War II, no one would have heard of Leonard Sly and Gene would be King and there wouldn’t be a queen or an ugly wonder dog, or Buttermilk, or Nellie Bell or a stuffed Palomino out somewhere in Oklahoma. I’m glad I have this obsessing thing licked.

I promised to give you the results of the survey. As you know, each of you was mailed a sheet containing one question. You were each asked to name your favorite cowboy. Thirty-nine forms were mailed out. Twenty-four of you responded. Six of you mailed the sheet back with no answer and no comments. One of you mailed the sheet

back with no answer, but a three word comment. To that individual, let me say that statement does not best represent the cowboy spirit.

As for the respondents.

William Rowlett liked Billy the Kid.

John Tilley, Wendell Rorie, Logan Askew, Scott Kasierski, and Bob Isom all favored Jack Elam and Jack Palance.

Tom Westerfield's big favorites were Matt Dillon, John Wayne, and Hoss Cartwright.

Naturally John Freer and Bob Sivley think Doc Holiday is best.

Wendell Lynch, Bob Cope and Curtis Brasher didn't have a favorite, but they didn't like Jesse James or any of the other bank robbers.

Mark Schweizer liked any of the singing cowboys.

Hal King always pulled for Sky King.

Ken Dougherty also liked Doc Holiday, but added that his true favorite western character was an Apache Indian by the name of Blunt Tomahawk who performed the West's first known circumcisions at the Little Big Horn.

Jim Adams is a big fan of Judge Roy Bean.

Charles Tilley may not have completely understood the question, but he believes that Robin Hood is a dandy hero and that his band of merry men would be wonderful limerick writers.

I along with all the other cowboys from Maple Court to Hollywood would like to say:

"Adios."

“Happy Trails.”

“Goodbye, good luck and may the good Lord take a likin’ to ya.”

“Hi Yo Silver, Away!”

and looking ahead to the comments, “Smile when you say that.”

Dave Cavanah

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