The "P" Western - 1932-1953

TOM MIX: BUCK JONES; KEN MAYNARD; RANDOLPH SCOTT; HARRY CAREY; BUSTER CRABBE
TOM TYLER: JOHN WAYNE; JACK HICKIE; KERMIT MAYNARD; WILLIAM BOYD; RED RUSSELL
GEORGE O'BRIEN; GEORGE AUTRY; DICK FORAN; JACK RANDALL; TEX RITTER; BOB STEELE
Hoot Gibson; Jack Perrin; Gilbert Roland; Bill Elliott; John Mack Brown
Bob Baker; Bob Livingston; Duncan Renaldo; Charles Starrett; Tim McCoy; Lane Chandler; James Ellison -- etc. -- vs

FRED KOHLER: WALTER KILLER; CHARLES KING; CHARLIE STEVENS; BOB KORTMAN;
Dick Craker; Noah Beery Sr.; Hooper Atchley; Harry Worth; Roy D'Argy; Harry Woods; Ed Cobb; Tom London; Bud Osborne; Tristram Coffin; Warner Richmond;
Earl Dwire; Joe Sawyer; Monte Blue; Dick Curtis; and hordes of savage Indians!

Last month we hope we swayed the opinions of those who lump all cartoons into one package; this month we're after the scalps of those to whom all "P" westerns seem alike! As with all films, there are tremendous differences -- all of them attributable to money, and talent. "P" series westerns, more than any other kind of film, depend very largely on their stars -- an inadequate hero, and the cause is lost before reel one is over. But there were other factors too; the real cheapies from small outfits sought to save money by any number of ways -- a lack of background music, a "ban" of expensive running inserts (riding close-ups, shot from a truck), a sparsity of extras and horses, and a plethora of stock shots. With reasonable budgets, worthwhile players and good directors, many extremely intelligent and interesting minor horse operas have been made; tonight we hope you'll agree with our choices of the good -- and the bad.

Frankly, this is the kind of a program that needs a shorter, snappier documentary approach, a la Project 20. Just the right scene to illustrate a point, and a narrator. But failing the budget to produce that kind of a show tonight, we've done the best we can to cover the field. There'll be gaps of course -- and if you find your particular favorites missing, it's because we obviously couldn't have every western star represented. Roy Rogers, Fred Scott, Allan Lane, Sunset Carson, Bill Cody, Tom Keene, Bob Allen and Tim Holt are among the missing tonight -- and if it seems odd that there might be three excerpts with one star, and none of other, there are usually reasons -- content, chronology, and so on.

These notes will of necessity be brief. The initial "rough cut" of the show ran a little over six hours. By 10 o'clock on the night prior to the show it was down to five hours, and then the editor-viewer blew a fuse! Luckily one of our members, Lou McMahon, lives just a couple of blocks away and rushed over with another 16mm viewer. By midnight the show was down to four hours, and since that was the point at which Stroheim insisted that "reeds" could be cut no further, it seemed an appropriate point to call a halt. That left the wee hours of the morning for the program notes (please don't ask us why we don't work further ahead!) and with 37 films represented, detailed notes on each one seemed rather a project! To save space, we're eliminating credits on our notes, but have attached (in nine cases out of ten) the main titles of the films to our excerpts. If anybody misses which films were photographed by Ted Eckord and Russell Harlan, or which ones were directed by Lambert Hillyer, Dave Howard or Ray Taylor, we'll be glad to fill you in afterwards. A final word: we've stuck strictly to chronological order throughout. This isn't really good showmanship as the westerns get weaker towards the end -- but it's better film history we feel.
"RIDE HIM COWBOY" (Warner) John Wayne
We're just using the rather nostalgic and enjoyable main
titles of this one to get the show under way; it's a good little western, and
we plan to run it in its entirety shortly on a lengthy Saturday afternoon-and
evening session. Details about this in our June notes.

"MY PAL THE KING" (Universal)
Tom Mix, aided by Mickey Rooney, carrying on the tradition
of his silents for Fox - sheer escapism, put over with verve and a good
budget. Mix was ageing, however, and his speech was far from good.

"MAN OF THE FOREST" (Paramount)
Paramount's Zane Grey series remains one of the best
groups of 2nd feature westerns of the 30's. This one, by Hathaway, has a grand
cast and dates not at all. Randolph Scott, Noah Beery, Harry Carey.

"WHEN A MAN RIDES ALONE" (Fowler)
With more polish than most independent westerns, this
cheapie holds attention by virtue of its athletic star, Tom Tyler (a popular
FOX top-liner in the 20's) and some good, sharp camerawork. And a Marilyn
Monroeish heroine, Adele Lacey, helps matters quite a bit too. The foreword is
worthy of Lewiie, by the way!

"THE THUNDERING HERD" (Paramount)
Hathaway again; many of the Paramounts in this series
were remakes of silent westerns, and used stock footage liberally. The
spectacular Indian battle scenes here come from William K. Howard's silent
version, and Jack Holt can be seen clearly in some scenes in place of hero
Randolph Scott. The speed shows up the age of the footage, but it's fine stuff.

"IN OLD SANTA FE" (Rascot)
An unusually elaborate independent western, this film
brought Gene Autry (who had some specialty numbers) to the forefront of
attention. Ken Maynard, who switched incredibly from major companies to
independents in this period, is the star, and the horse race that forms our
excerpt was used by Republic (Rascot's successor) for years as stock footage
for the westerns of Autry, Roy Steele, and many others.

"SMOKING GUNS" (Universal)
Maynard, who had his own unit, wrote many of his own stories,
and usually directed the director -- as well as making up the dialogue as he
went along. In addition, he was a heavy drinker, and his flights of fancy
sometimes have to be seen to be believed. This is a good example.

"HONOR OF THE RANGE" (Universal)
A briefier, and equally incredible, excerpt from another
Maynard. He apparently loved dual roles and masquerades -- his fans really
got the treatment in 1934!

"VALLEY OF GOLD" (Independent)
Jack Hoxie, an extremely popular star in silents, found in
talkies a tougher element. Big and amiable, but an illiterate, he found it
tough to read his lines in order to memorise them, and he was no great shakes
as an actor either. His talkie career was comparatively brief.

"THE TRAIL BEYOND" (Monogram)
John Wayne, unaccountably not a star after Walsh's "The
Big Trail", stepped down from Warners to Monogram -- but the westerns he made
there were good ones, "The Trail Beyond" had a lot of stock footage, but some quite elaborately staged new material too. Yakima Canutt does some fine stuntng for Wayne; one of the stunts, you'll notice, misfires -- but the cameras keep grinding, yakima picks himself up, gets back in the saddle, and tries it again!

"LAWLESS VALLEY"
Back in the late 20's, Lane Chandler was on an equal footing with Gary Cooper at Paramount. Cooper made it, Chandler didn't. After starring in cheap "P" westerns like this in the early 30's, Chandler drifted into villain and character roles -- incidentally improving as an actor as he did so.

1935

"NORTHERN FRONTIER" (Conn Productions)
A brief glimpse of Kermit Maynard, Ken's brother. A first-class stunt rider and a good enough actor, Kermit made some excellent starring horse operas before following the inevitable path into villain roles.

"OUTLAWS' GUNS" (Universal)
Buck Jones' early films for Universal were grand westerns in the old style; later we hope to show one of the best of them in its entirety.

"BAR 20 RIDES AGAIN" (Paramount-Harry Sherman)
The most fantasticly successful of all western series, the Hopalong Cassidy started in 1935. In the early ones, story took pride of place over action, and Cliff Lyons doubled Boyd in all the riding. Here Boyd does his own riding for the first time. All of the early Cassidy were slow, saving their action for a spectacular climax. Devoid of music during the preceding reels, they would suddenly come alive with Cluck's "The Furies" for the final chase -- a formula that paid off both dramatically and in terms of excitement. Our excerpt is of such a climax.

"ARIZONA BADMAN"
Reb Russell was another who stayed in the bottom drawer; this excerpt shows quite clearly why. In this strange little film, a sympathetic William S. Hart-calibre villain (well played by Ed Cobb) actually had far more footage than hero Russell.

"WHEN A LAD'S A MAN" ("SAGA OF THE WEST")
We'll say little about this fine little Sol Lesser subject, save that it's one of the best little "P" westerns of all, and certainly one of George O'Brien's best. Plus factors include a more human villain than usual in Harry Woods, lovely Dorothy Wilson, some fine old melodic themes from the silents, and some first-rate camerawork by Frank B. Good, one of the most under-rated of all cameramen.

THE MUSICAL WESTERS (our excerpts: 1935-37)

"TUMBLING TUMBLEWEEDS" (Republic, 1935)
The first starring Gene Autry vehicle, this still had more action (and good action, too) than songs. Later of course, and especially in the 40's, the musical elements got so out of hand that the films almost became lampoons of westerns.

"MOONLIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE" (Warner's, 1935)
Dick Foran was Warner's answer to Autry, and this was Foran's first western. His voice was much better than Autry's, and though he at first seemed somewhat of a phoney -- thanks to excessive makeup and old-hat dialogue - he soon became a first rate western star. His films had solid production values too.
"RIDERS OF THE DAWN" (Monogram, 1937)
From Fred Scott to Jimmy Wakely, a dozen singing cowboys tried to emulate Autry. Jack Randall was one of the better ones, but came along too late. The market was glutted with singing westerners, and Monogram eliminated songs from his films after the first two or three. "Riders of the Dawn," his first, has a wonderful climax that even John Ford wouldn't be ashamed of -- with Yakima Canutt clearly recognizable as he doubles for Jack in the stagecoach stunting.

"TROUBLE IN TEXAS" (Grand National, 1937)
Tex Ritter is our singing cowboy in this one -- but we've picked a sequence where he doesn't sing, but instead watches the cantina girl as she dances. She's Rita Hayworth -- then Rita Cansino, and like Jennifer Jones, Laraine Day and Carole Landis, doing western chores prior to real stardom.

1936
"CAVALRY" (Republic)
One of the staple plots in the 30's was for Abe Lincoln to concern himself with the gold shipments not getting through. Here there's a slight switch -- an "independent Republic" is starting up out West, and Abe (played in silhouette by Bud Buster) sends Bob Steele to put a stop to it. The Civil War stock shots are from Ince's "Barbara Frietchie".

"HAIR TRIGGER CASEY" (Atlantic)
Jack Perrin started out with Sennett in 1916. He wound up as an extra in Wyler's "The Friendly Persuasion". Currently, we are reliably informed, he can be heard beating his wife most mornings in his Hollywood bungalow. In between all this he made a group of decidedly inferior westerns like this one, wherein he is plainly intoxicated. But don't misunderstand -- we like Jack, and some of his Universal silents were great. One incredible sequence in this film had Jack recalling his war adventures -- consisting of almost a reel of stockshots, including the best war scenes from "The Big Parade".

1937
"THUNDER TRAIL" (Paramount)
The Zane Grey series still maintaining a very high standard; the films packed non-stop action and real production values into running times often below 50 minutes! This one had some truly fine photography by Karl Struss.

1938
"IN EARLY ARIZONA" (Columbia)
Columbia, which had made some good series with Ken Maynard, Buck Jones and Tim McCoy, here introduced a "new" star in Bill Elliott (who had been in movies since the 20's). His first few for Columbia were fine; then they went into a shabby decline. But Bill, who patterned his performances after Willam S. Hart's, climbed back to the top again at Republic and Allied Artists.

1939
"DESPERATE TRAILS" (Universal)
Two stars for the price of one -- Johnny Mack Brown and Bob Baker co-starred. This started a trend which continued through the 40's, and brought back many old-timers from retirement.
"PIONEERS OF THE WEST" (Republic)
The popular 3 Mesquiteers series here tries to add production value by falling back on the big Indian attack scenes from "The Big Trail". Somehow the horses of Indians from the Fox epic don't match up too well with the few moth-eaten extras that Republic manage to dig up!

"RAGTIME COWBOY JOE" (Universal)
Universal made strictly formula westerns -- but what a slick, fast-action formula it was. With excellent background music and particularly smooth running inserts, they were first-class little "B"s.

"FORBIDDEN TRAILS" (Monogram)
More "B" westerns were being made at this time than at any other period in history. One of the most pleasing and intelligently written was Monogram's "Rough Riders" series, with old-timers Duck Jones, Tim McCoy and Raymond Hatton. Robert N. Bradbury, who directed, was Bob Steele's father.

"ARIZONA CYCLONE" (Universal)
Despite poor print quality, we've included several excerpts of this one to show just what a good director can do with stock material. Former editor Joseph Lewis (later a director of top-flight melodramas) gets in some fine effects here, and even gets new visual excitement into such old situations as the leap into the saddle, and the showdown between hero and villain. And one chase is immeasurably enhanced by having a low horizontal fence between the careening wagons and the camera truck; it's a simple effect, yet adds tremendously to the impression of speed. Even apart from this, it's a good rousing western, with Johnny Brown after Dick Curtis once again.

"THE PHANTOM PLAINSMEN" (Republic)
Nazis got much more of a foothold in the West than the Communists have ever been able to do. Here the 3 Mesquiteers put paid to Teutonic plottings, and got in some neat propaganda for the war effort too. David Sharpe rather obviously doubles for Bob Steele in a fight.

"DEATH VALLEY RANGERS" (Monogram)
In the wake of The Rough Riders came The Trail Blazers -- and the last starring roles for Raynard and Hoot Gibson. Bob Steele was to remain more active. A cheap and shoddy series in terms of production value, and afflicted with moronic music from Frank Sanucci, the films at least had speed and action, and some pretty impressive stunt work. The stars still rode well, but doubles took over for all the tricks.

"LIGHTNING RAIDERS" (PRC)
This trailer for a Buster Crabbe opus symbolises all we need have said, via a longer excerpt, about the many cheap PRC westerns. The camerawork crude, the scripts almost non-existent, each film exactly like its predecessor, this type of film marked the beginning of the end for the "B" horse opy.
1946

"THE GAY CAVALIER" (Monogram)
Monogram still made a commendable effort to keep quality in its westerns. Veteran producer Scott Dunlap made films economically but not cheaply, and the added dollars always showed. Gilbert Roland made a fine Cisco Kid in this Monogram series.

"THE COWLISH MAN FROM TEXAS" (Monogram)
Another Dunlap production, this was directed by Lambert Hillyer. Westerns were beginning now to reflect much of the toughness of the post-war school of private-eye thrillers; here, without much ado, the secondary heroine is killed off, and the villain winds up with a broken neck. Brutality, sex and private-eye dialogue were beginning to seep into the "P" westerns, although it wasn't until the fifties that such qualities began to become objectionable in films like "Jesse James' Women".

1951

"THE KID FROM ALAMOILLO" (Columbia)
In the early fifties, most of the series westerns began to fold. It wasn't as tragic as it might have been, as with the exception of Rko's Tim Holt films (carefully and expensively made), the overall quality was low. These Durango Kid-Charles Starrett westerns at Columbia were made in 3 days, thanks to an overuse of stock. Here again we have a markedly vicious ending. Jack Lachoney, doubling for Starrett, also appears as one of the villains.

1953

"TOPANGA" (Allied Artists)
Bill Elliott's series at AA (which also declined badly before it was halted) was the last "R" series of quality. Elliott consciously strove to imitate Hart both in performance and in his plots, and this film bore a more than coincidental similarity to Hart's "The Return of Draw Kran". It also boasted a moving-camera-happy photographer, who kept his cameras on the move even more than had Paul Rojas in "Broadway"!

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