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American Cowboy

Dream on

What makes the Western, well... Western? A writer and movie critic offers his thoughts.

By Joe Wilkins (<http://americancowboy.com/activity-feed/userid/96365>)



This article is from our "Legends of Western Cinema" collector's issue, which can be purchased at [HorseBooksEtc.com](http://horsebooksetc.com) (<http://horsebooksetc.com/products>)

([/American_Cowboy_Legends_of_Western_Cinema_Collectors_Edition-1297-41.html](#)).

In 1890 the United States Census Bureau declared that the American frontier had come to an end. No longer was there a clear line running north and south separating settled from unsettled; no longer were there any vast stretches of purely unbroken land. At the conclusion of the Civil War, the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains had more or less been empty of

white settlement. But 20 years later, the Census Bureau declared these lands settled. It happened that quickly.

Surely, then—as the Industrial Revolution churned in the great cities of the East Coast and Midwest and as the nation turned from tasks of expansion to tasks of civilization—those few lean years of frontier life in the West were bound to slip from American consciousness. They were destined to be historical asides, the topics of lonely dissertations, nibbles of trivia. Right? Not so. Thirteen years after the frontier was declared settled, the 12-minute motion picture feature *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) hit movie screens. Often considered the first Western, the film starred actor Justus D. Barnes, who looked every bit the part in a low-crowned slouch hat, a cowpuncher's thick mustache, and a bandana at his throat. At the movie's conclusion, he turns his .45 Long Colt at the camera and fires. American culture hasn't been the same since.

Despite the scant years it took to settle the West, we've been making, watching, and loving Westerns for over a century now. From hokey B Westerns and Academy Award-winning masterpieces to trite television oaters and critically acclaimed neo-Westerns, the Western has proved to be one of the most durable, malleable, and effective forms of storytelling our culture has ever produced. You could even claim that the Western is our national art form (sorry, jazz lovers). Yes, we're throwing a wide loop, but we have this bull by the horns.

First, the Western movie genre offers the principles upon which our nation was founded: hope and possibility. Folks left the old country and came to America for a better life, and Westerns capture that dream. Consider HBO's hit series *Deadwood* (2004–2006), in which each of a cast of motley characters, including Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane, drifts into the boomtown of Deadwood, S.D., hoping to remake themselves. Married to this quest of renewal, Westerns also tap into a more ancient—and quintessentially American—theme: the hero. We are a nation hungry for heroes and have produced them in abundance, from Paul Revere to Martin Luther King, Jr. Westerns are thick with heroes. Western protagonists tend to make their own rules, while abiding by noble, self-evident truths. Even revisionist Westerns like Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) feature lonely, truthful heroes who stand up for those they love despite danger, laws, or consequence.

Finally, no Western would be complete without glorious cinematography highlighting our Western landscapes. Long sunset shots, mysterious sagebrush plains, and ragged mountains rising in the distance are a staple of the genre. This American land is what we love. It makes us who we are, and the cowboys and Native Americans of the silver screen embody its

majesty. Western movies acknowledge and (for the most part) honor the rightful place that land holds in our history and our imagination. I was born in the Bull Mountains of eastern Montana and revere my favorite Westerns—*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), *A River Runs Through It* (1992), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)—for the beauty of the landscapes.

I'm not saying that those hopeful European homesteaders always found the possibilities that they came looking for, or that real-life heroes are uncomplicated, or that we haven't sometimes loved the land to death. The mythmaking of the Western genre can obscure the hard reality, yet the best Western movies refuse these easy dualities and reckon with grand themes on a grand scale. This then is the reason Westerns have proved so important to our national conversation: Westerns deal in what we know and what we dream.

In Chris Eyre's contemporary masterpiece *Smoke Signals* (1998), Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph ask Suzy Song for stories about Arnold Joseph, Victor's recently deceased father.

"You want lies, or do you want the truth?" she asks.
"I want both," Thomas answers.

And so do we.

Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing up on the Big Dry* (Counterpoint, 2012). He teaches writing at Waldorf College in Iowa.

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