

20 SIGNIFICANT WESTERN MOVIES (1903-1969)

By David Morrell

Once a month for five years, a group of Santa Fe, New Mexico, writers – all WWA members – has met to watch and discuss Western films. We are: Johnny D. Boggs (multiple Spur-Award-winning novelist), Thomas D. Clagett (film editor, film historian and author of *The Pursuit of Murieta*), Kirk Ellis (Emmy- and Spur-winning writer/producer whose numerous miniseries include *Into the West*), David Morrell (bestselling author of *First Blood* and *Last Reveille* as well as *John Wayne: The Westerns*) and Robert Nott (author of books about Joel McCrea, Audie Murphy, Randolph Scott and, with Max Evans, Sam Peckinpah).

Here is a list of 20 Western films we considered essential to an understanding of the genre. We're not calling these the best. Nor are we saying that these are the only essential Westerns. But we believe these to be significant and influential enough that they take precedence over many others. No doubt you have your own candidates, but we feel these titles helped change the genre.

1. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) Director/screenwriter: Edwin S. Porter. Starring: Alfred C. Abadie, Broncho Billy Anderson, Justus D. Barnes.

One of the first films with a plot was also the first Western. Using New Jersey locations as a double for the Old West, this short silent movie dramatizes a train robbery and a posse's hunt for the thieves. Its action scenes provided models for numerous later Westerns. It contains one of the most famous effects in film history when a bandit stares at the audience and shoots at it, gunsmoke filling the screen. Viewers fainted.

2. *Hell's Hinges* (1916) Directors: Charles Swickford, William S. Hart (uncredited) and Clifford Smith (uncredited). Screenwriter: C. Gardner Sullivan. Starring William S. Hart, Clara Williams.

Hart became a Western star in this

frank, gritty silent film about a cynical gunman redeemed by a woman's love, the first major use of a perennial Western theme. Hart's insistence on realistic costumes and props made a difference, and the jaw-dropping cinematic climax in which Hart immolates the evil town established a standard for apocalyptic shoot-outs.

3. *The Iron Horse* (1924) Director: John Ford. Screenwriters: Charles Kenyon, John Russell, Charles Darn-ton. Starring George O'Brien, Madge Bellamy.

Earning Ford a reputation as a major director, this epic silent film about the creation of the Transcontinental Railroad uses immense outdoor locations with a scope that amazes even today. While elements of the plot seem clichéd by modern standards, it's because they were imitated so often over the years.

4. *Cimarron* (1931) Director: Wesley Ruggles. Screenwriter: Howard Estabrook, from the novel by Edna Ferber. Starring: Richard Dix, Irene Dunne.

Despite many flaws, *Cimarron* was progressive in its dealing with women, race relations (though today's viewers will cringe at offensive racial stereotypes) and the West's development. Beginning with a tremendously staged 1889 land rush, RKO's epic covering 40 years of Oklahoma history won the Best Picture Oscar. Six decades would pass before another Western (*Dances With Wolves*) was so honored.

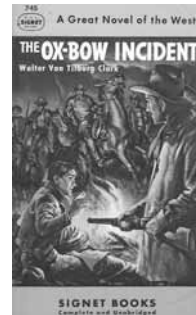
5. *Stagecoach* (1939) Director: John Ford. Screenwriters: Dudley Nichols, Ben Hecht, from Ernest Haycox's short story "The Stage to Lordsburg." Starring: John Wayne, Claire Trevor.

Ford's first sound Western rescued Wayne from a decade of working in B movies and made him a star. The



tracking shot that introduced Wayne twirling his rifle became one of the most famous in Westerns. The plot, sometimes called "Grand Hotel on a stagecoach," was frequently imitated, and Monument Valley became one of the most identifiable of all Western settings.

6. *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943)



Director: William A. Wellman. Screenwriter: Lamar Trotti, from Walter Van Tilburg Clark's novel. Starring: Henry Fonda, Dana Andrews.

A stark study in mob violence, this first anti-Western focuses on "frontier justice" gone wrong. Wellman shot it on soundstages because Fox production chief Darryl F. Zanuck insisted on keeping costs down, having little faith in the commercial prospects of a picture about a lynching. However, Wellman's claustrophobic direction brought a noir-ish atmosphere to Trotti's genre-upending script and its reproach of humanity, leading the way for later anti-Westerns such as *The Gunfighter*.

7. *Red River* (1948) Director: Howard Hawks. Screenwriters: Borden



Chase, Charles Schnee, from Chase's serialized novel *Blazing Guns on the Chisholm Trail*. Starring: John Wayne, Montgomery Clift, Walter Brennan, Joanne Dru.

If *Stagecoach* made Wayne a star, then this made him a superstar. Sometimes called "Mutiny on the Bounty on the trail," this film about the first major cattle drive is crammed with rousing episodes involving weather, stampedes and marauding Indians that became standard ingredients in later

cattle-drive imitations but remain fresh in this film, no matter how often it's watched.

8. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) Director: John Huston. Screenwriter: John Huston, from B. Traven's novel. Starring: Humphrey Bogart, Walter Huston, Tim Holt.

John Huston's film adaptation pits greed against loyalty and logic in the definitive gold-prospecting Western. Bogart, Holt and Walter Huston are the three protagonists facing the elements, Mexican bandits, and mostly one another in the dangerous mountains of Mexico. The film spawned numerous imitators ranging from *The Walking Hills* and *Lust for Gold* to the spaghetti Western, *The Ruthless Four*.

9. *Broken Arrow* (1950) Director: Delmer Daves. Screenwriters: Elliot



Broken Arrow

Arnold, Michael Blankfort (pseudonym for blacklisted Albert Maltz), from Arnold's novel *Blood Brother*. Starring James Stewart, Jeff Chandler, Debra Paget.

Released the same year as the comparably themed but smaller-scaled *Devil's Doorway*, *Broken Arrow* is one of the first Westerns in the post WWII era to present American Indians in a non-stereotypical, sympathetic way. Although both films use Anglo actors to play the major Indian roles, this detail didn't trouble contemporary critics, and given the then-daring nature of the subject matter, the films might not otherwise have been made. *Broken Arrow's* influence on later Indian-themed Westerns is considerable.

10. *The Gunfighter* (1950) Director: Henry King. Screenwriters: William Bowers, William Sellers, from a story by Bowers and André De Toth. Starring: Gregory Peck, Helen Westcott, Millard Mitchell, Karl Malden.

Minimizing action in favor of dialogue, *The Gunfighter* is one of the first psychological Westerns. The film's innovations include what is mostly a single set – an almost deserted saloon – that adds claustrophobic pressure to this portrait of a soul-sick gunfighter who knows that his enemies are coming for him but who risks staying in place so that he might see his longestranged wife and son. The film marked a new level of in-depth characterization in the genre.



Winchester '73

11. *Winchester '73* (1950) Director: Anthony Mann. Screenwriters: Borden Chase, Robert L. Richards, from a story by Stuart N. Lake. Starring: James Stewart, Shelly Winters, Stephen McNally.

The first of five highly regarded pairings of Stewart and Mann, this film's psychological intensity matches that of its action as Stewart tracks down his homicidal brother to retrieve a stolen rifle and avenge his murdered father. In post-WWII culture, the flawed characters and their Freudian emotions added a freshness that boosted the genre's popularity throughout the 1950s.

12. *Westward the Women* (1951) Director: William Wellman. Screenwriter:



Westward the Women

Charles Schnee, from a story by Frank Capra. Starring: Robert Taylor, Denise Darcel, John McIntire.

This female-dominated Western was the first of its kind. Taylor acts as the traditional male hero, but far from being a cliché, he serves as a foil, showing how the women become as tough as him and any other man in the film. Because a different gender is emphasized, the familiar elements of the wagon-train story (established decades earlier in *The Covered Wagon* and *The Big Trail*) were transformed, giving new life to the pioneer aspect of the genre.

13. *High Noon* (1952) Director: Fred Zinnemann. Screenwriter: Carl Foreman, from John W. Cunningham's short story "The Tin Star." Starring: Gary Cooper, Grace Kelly.

With its anti-Blacklist, anti-McCarthyism theme, *High Noon* incorporated contemporary politics to a degree that hadn't been seen before, prompting many later Westerns to do the same. The climax in which the hero's wife, a pacifist Quaker, resorts to lethal violence to save her husband is stunning, making her one of the strongest heroines in any Western. The persistent ticking clock and the time limit of the title introduced an unusual degree of suspense to the genre.

14. *Shane* (1953) Director: George Stevens. Screenwriter: A.B.

Guthrie Jr., from Jack Schaeffer's novel. Starring: Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin. One of the most archetypal Westerns (the mysterious

drifter, the strong-hearted homesteader, the faithful wife, the evil rancher, etc.), *Shane* is fondly remembered for numerous emotional scenes that climax with a young boy chasing Shane after the latter is wounded in a gunfight that saves the farmers, imploring him, "Come back, Shane!" Often imitated, especially in *Pale Rider*, this film further earned its influential status because of the most graphic gunshot (Jack Palance blasting Elisha Cook Jr.) ever shown in a Western until that time.



15. *Seven Men from Now* (1956)



Director: Budd Boetticher. Screenwriter: Burt Kennedy. Starring: Randolph Scott, Gail Russell, Lee Marvin.

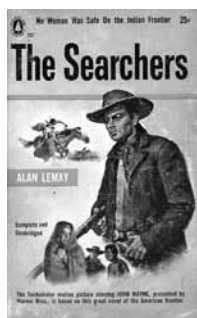
The first of seven films in which



Seven Men from Now

Scott paired with Boetticher, *Seven Men from Now* is distinguished by a jagged landscape (Lone Pine, California) that matches Scott's equally jagged soul. Boetticher's direction is amazing. But what makes this film historically important is that screenwriter Kennedy built on the innovative Stewart/Mann tortured-hero Westerns by introducing his own innovation, one that continued in most of the other Scott/Boetticher pairings – a villain who dominates the story more than the hero.

16. *The Searchers* (1956) Director: John Ford. Screenwriter: Frank S. Nugent, from Alan Le May's novel. Starring: John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter, Vera Miles, Ward Bond, Natalie Wood.



The Searchers is one of the most critically praised films of any type. Few other Westerns contain so many iconic, frequently discussed images (the final shot of



The Searchers

Wayne walking away from a closing door, for example). The overuse of broad humor is a perhaps necessary flaw, leavening the theme of a murderous racist determined to kill his niece who, he feels, has been contaminated by her Indian abductors. The search that concludes with Wayne's humanity triumphing over his prejudice is one of the most harrowing ever dramatized.

17. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) Director: John Sturges. Screenwriters: William Roberts, Walter Newman, Walter Bernstein, from Akira Kurosawa's film *The Seven Samurai*. Starring: Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, James Coburn, Robert Vaughn, Eli Wallach, Charles Bronson.

Adapted from Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (which some scholars believe was itself influenced by the Western genre), this much-revered film about American mercenaries protecting Mexican villagers from a gang of bandits was one of the first Westerns to dramatize various specialists being recruited for a mission. It changed the genre by substituting a heroic group in the place of a single protagonist. Elmer Bernstein's rousing, much-imitated score became synonymous with epic Westerns.

18. *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) Director: David Miller. Screenwriter: Dalton Trumbo, from Edward Abbey's novel *The Brave Cowboy*. Starring: Kirk Douglas, Gena Rowlands, Walter Matthau.

A 20th Century Western that dramatizes the death of the 19th Century West, *Lonely Are the Brave* features Douglas in his favorite role, a cowboy who was born into the wrong era. Hunted by a police helicopter, Douglas hopelessly tries to escape, urging his horse up a mountain while a modern, unheroic lawman (Matthau) watches sympathetically. The film has a too thematically blatant conclusion, but until then, its depth of nostalgia for a long-lost frontier (a theme in many later films) makes this one of the most highly regarded Westerns.

19. *A Fistful of Dollars/Per un pugno di dollari* (1964) Director: Sergio Leone. Screenwriters: Victor Andrés Cat-

ena, Jamie Comas Gill, Sergio Leone, from a story by A. Bonzzoni, Victor Andrés Catena, Sergio Leone. Starring: Clint Eastwood, Marianne Koch, Gian Maria Volonté.

Not the best "spaghetti" Western – or even the best of the *Dollars* trilogy – but the one that set the standard and made a star of Eastwood, the iconic Man With No Name. An unauthorized rip-off of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, Leone's violent, cynical, cold-blooded take on the traditional Western aroused equal parts box-office admiration and critical outrage, and paved the way for the revisionism to come.

20. *The Wild Bunch* (1969) Director: Sam Peckinpah. Screenwriters: Sam Peckinpah, Walon Green, from a story by Walon Green and Roy N. Sickner.



The Wild Bunch

Starring William Holden, Robert Ryan, Ernest Borgnine, Edmond O'Brien.

Released in the same year as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Wild Bunch* marked the end of the traditional Western and the beginning of the modern era, in which conventions were turned upside down and violence was explored in a new, ultra-realistic way. The film made so great a difference that later Westerns would be compared to it in terms of whether they followed its example or adhered to a pre-1969 approach.

Because so much changed, our list ends here. A new list would be required to address the transformed Western landscape in the post-*Wild-Bunch* era. **WR**