

HAPPY TRAILS AGAIN: The rescued films of Roy Rogers

By David Morrell

Western icon Roy Rogers rescued many people in his films, but those films themselves have turned out to need rescuing.

Of the more than 80 in which he starred, nearly all were mutilated for television. Unless you're old enough to have seen his films in theaters, it's likely you saw inferior versions and can't appreciate why the *Motion Picture Herald's* poll of exhibitors ranked him the No. 1 Western star from 1943-1954 or why an estimated 80 million people (half the then-population of the United States) went to his movies each year.

Most of those movies were made at B-budget Republic Pictures, starting in 1938 when its singing-cowboy star, Gene Autry, went on strike, demanding more money. Furious, studio president Herbert J. Yates replaced him with Rogers, a singer/guitarist who had founded the Sons of the Pioneers and performed with them in several films. Rogers's first screen name was Len Slye (a version of his birth name, Leonard Sly). His second screen name was Dick Weston. But now he became Roy Rogers, combining a version of the French word for "king" with an allusion to revered humorist Will Rogers as well as singer Jimmie Rodgers (one of Rogers's musical influences).

Rogers's leading-man debut was *Under Western Stars* (1938), about a singing cowboy who's elected to Congress and urges legislators to help Dust Bowl ranchers. That film had a Gene Autry blend of action, music, a spirited female co-star, a buffoon sidekick, the 1930s West (horses next to automobiles) and Depression era/New Deal themes. (See the author's essay, "Gene Autry's 'New Deal' Western Films," in the April 2017 *Roundup*.)

But after Autry returned to the studio, Republic needed a different identity for Rogers's films and set them in the historical West: Texas at

the time of Sam Houston, for example, or California during the Pony Express era. Playing a character named Fletch McCloud, he had a supporting role in John Wayne's *Dark Command* (1940), which takes place in Civil War Kansas. In other films, Rogers portrayed historical Western figures such as *Young Buffalo Bill* (1940) and *Young Bill Hickok* (1940).

During World War II, Rogers's career entered its second phase when Autry enlisted in the Army Air Forces in 1942. (Rogers had a draft deferment because he was married and had children.) Again replacing Autry, Republic declared Rogers to be *King of the Cowboys* (1943). His character was now always called Roy Rogers. His films now had contemporary settings. Most importantly, Yates saw Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* on Broadway and decided that musicals represented the future of entertainment. Thus, from 1943-46, Rogers's films (*Hands Across the Border*, for example) tended to minimize action in favor of lengthy, elaborate song-and-dance sequences that resembled Las Vegas shows. These musical extravaganzas include *Cowboy and the Senorita* (1944), Rogers's first of 28 big-screen pair-



Party time on the set with producer Eddy White, Roy Rogers and William Witney. Witney Family Archive

ings with his later wife, Dale Evans. (Revered *My Pal Trigger* is an exception during this period, its elements of realism making it almost a drama.)

With *Roll on Texas Moon* (1946), Rogers's films began a third phase. The force behind the change was William Witney, who had directed many of Republic's "cliffhanger" serials during the 1930s and early '40s (*Zorro Rides Again*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *Dick Tracy Returns*, to name a few). Witney invented the modern action sequence. Prior to 1937, fight scenes depended on lengthy master shots in which stuntmen flailed at each other until they ran out of breath. Then Witney saw Busby Berkeley (*42nd Street*) create a complex dance sequence by assembling brief images, such as a close-up of dancing feet and then a close-up of a smiling actor, making it seem that the actor was the dancer.

Witney realized that the same tech-

On the set of *The Bells of Coronado* with William Witney, right of camera, walking toward Dale Evans and Roy Rogers. Witney Family Archive



nique could be used for action scenes. In his autobiography, he described the editing process: “A punch, cut, a fall over a chair, cut, a charge into someone and over a desk, cut.” Between these fragments, a close-up showed one of the stars, as if he were doing the stunts. “A fall over a table could be done with precision and without the chance of being off balance,” Witney explained. “A fall off a balcony could be done safer because when they fell they knew their takeoff point.”

Witney, a World War II combat photographer, brought something more than elaborate editing to Rogers’s films – he intensified the action. Starting with *Bells of San Angelo* (1947), the songs became fewer and shorter while fight scenes became protracted, bloody and often sadistic. In *Springtime in the Sierras* (1947), a fight in a meat locker ends with thugs beating Rogers senseless and leaving him to freeze to death. In *North of the Great Divide* (1950), Rogers and the bad guy lash each other with bullwhips, tearing each other’s shirts off and inflicting bloody gashes.

But no matter how much cruelty Rogers endured in these later films, he never lost his good nature: what Rogers/Witney enthusiast Quentin Tarantino called Rogers’s “common decency.” This quality made so many children want to emulate Rogers that he was second only to Walt Disney for the sale of merchandise such as comic books, lunch boxes,

pajamas, cowboy boots and cap pistols – more than 400 items.

Besides the new approach to editing and action (Rogers’s hat even changed shape from peaked to flat), a further element distinguishes this last group. Starting with *Apache Rose* (1947) and ending with *Trail of Robin Hood* (1950), 19 of the 27 Rogers/Witney films were in color. Audiences suddenly discovered that Rogers’s famously squinty eyes were a riveting blue. His fans could now appreciate his rainbow costumes. The copious blood on his face glistened. His palomino horse, Trigger (“The Smartest Horse in the Movies”), looked merely light-hued in black-and-white but was now truly *The Golden Stallion* (1949).

Until recently, it was almost impossible to see original versions of these films. In 1955, Republic sold them to television, trimming them from as long as 78 minutes to 54 minutes to fit a one-hour television slot with commercials. Some lost more than a quarter of their length. Color became black and white. Nearly half lapsed into public domain after Republic sold its assets and closed in 1959. Thereafter most of Rogers’s films could be seen only in corrupted, poorly reproduced versions.

Finally Paramount Pictures, which owns Republic’s catalogue, rode to the rescue. In association with UCLA, Paramount has impressively restored many of Rogers’s films, although only

Trigger, Jr. and *Sunset in the West*, both from 1950, are available on Blu-ray/DVD (from Kino Lorber).

In *Trigger, Jr.*, Jack Marta’s brilliant color photography offsets its somber theme of a boy traumatized by having seen a horse stomp his mother to death. His grandfather shouts at him about his fear of horses and strikes him with a cane. Rogers helps the boy to find courage, even as Roy hunts a psychotic horse that kills livestock and blinds Trigger. Humor (for the kids) and strong action (for the adults) alternate until Rogers finally straps on his guns for the shocking climax. In the script by Gerald Geraghty, the most significant moment is the quietest when Rogers – the Zen cowboy, “elegant and stoic” as the *New York Times* described him – approaches the ranting, abusive grandfather and calms him by merely touching his shoulder.

Sunset in the West looks equally radiant. An example of Rogers’s multicultural movies, it features Hispanic actors (rare for the time). The ambitious action scenes include one of Trigger’s most famous stunts, galloping next to a speeding train, ignoring white blasts of what appear to be threatening steam. Trigger wasn’t scheduled for the scene, but numerous stunt horses refused to go near the train, and “The Old Man,” as he was known, showed what he could do.

In 1951, Rogers filed a lawsuit against Republic, claiming he had a right to share income from the sale of his films to television. He won the first court case but lost on an appeal that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. After 1952’s *Son of Paleface* (made at Paramount, with Jane Russell and Bob Hope), Rogers never starred in another studio film although he, along with several other TV and film stars, had a cameo in the 1959 United Artists film *Alias Jesse James*, again starring Hope. Rogers said that, although he was at the height of his popularity, other studios joined with Republic to blackball him as a troublemaker for wanting actors to share the income from television residuals.

Dale Evans, Roy Rogers and William Witney discuss a scene on the set of *The Golden Stallion*.
Witney Family Archive



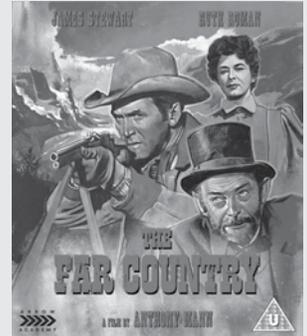


Posters courtesy of David Morrell



Clocking on extras on Blu-ray/DVD releases

American Frontiers: Anthony Mann at Universal is the title of a featurette “extra” on Arrow Films’ new Blu-ray release of *The Far Country* (\$39.95). Exploring Mann’s work for the studio, *Frontiers* goes into detail about his classic films with James Stewart and their eventual creative split. It’s a fine piece that I’m proud to have been interviewed for and also marks the 100th time I’ve been either on camera or provided commentary for a vintage film.



That’s a lot of movie talk.



C. COURTNEY JOYNER

In 2007, a friend called to ask if I’d like to be interviewed about Raoul Walsh for a special feature they were producing for a Blu-ray of *The Big Trail*. I leapt at the opportunity and have been leaping ever since, although pay is usually lunch and maybe a copy of the release. It seems like scant reward, but the chance to talk definitively about a genre film is too good for a cinema nerd to resist, so I don’t.

Other documentaries followed quickly after *The Big Trail*. I was offered the chance to do commentary on several Euro-Westerns. I asked friend Henry Parke of *True West* magazine to join me on the recordings so we could be conversational and avoid the droning monologue of a singular film scholar.

One of the best commentaries I was part of was *The Culpepper Cattle Co.*, where Bo Hopkins shared his own experiences making the movie. Obviously, enlisting someone involved with the film makes for the best insights, but beating death is a major problem when creating “extras” for releases of older titles.

Finding crew or cast on films made before 1960 gets harder with each passing year. For producer Daniel Griffith, I appeared in an extra about the life of Buck Jones, Western movie star from the 1920s to the early ’40s, for the VCI release of the serial *The Roaring West*. It’s well done, with experts offering straightforward opinions but without the voice of anyone even remotely associated with Buck.

For *The Far Country*, we had plenty of scholars, but I knew a good friend who could offer something different. Michael Preece, the enormously successful TV director who started his career as Mann’s script supervisor, came on board to talk of his own experiences, adding true insight to *The Far Country*. After a hundred times, I still get excited by those rare memories because that’s what these extras are all about.

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Rogers’s television series, *The Roy Rogers Show*, ran from 1951 to 1957, but his next feature film, *Mackintosh and T.J.* (produced independently in 1975), came nearly a quarter of a century after *Son of Paleface*. Against the background of the vast 6666 Ranch in West Texas, he plays a modern wandering cowboy whose wife and son died in a car crash and who befriends another wanderer, a homeless 14-year-old boy. The film dramatizes Rogers’s lifelong commitment to helping children and living by example, a frequent theme in his films.

At age 65, he could still perform many of his own stunts, especially in a barroom knife fight. His acting skills are impressive. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson perform on the soundtrack. Acclaimed Joan Hackett has a featured role. But because of distribution problems, the film was shown mostly in Texas and Oklahoma. It seldom appeared on television. Rogers’s potential for a film comeback died.

Mackintosh and T.J. is available on disc through Penland-ProductionsInc.com. Meanwhile, in addition to the Kino Lorber releases of *Trigger, Jr.* and *Sunset in the West*, Turner Classic Movies occasionally airs some of Rogers’s restored films, including *Under Western Stars*, which is on the National Film Registry for its cultural, historical importance, and *Trail of Robin Hood*, an endearing holiday film in which Rogers fights Christmas-tree robbers on a farm owned by silent-screen Western star, Jack Holt. Republic cowboy heroes Alan “Rocky” Lane, Rex Allen, Monte Hale, Tom Tyler and Ray “Crash” Corrigan, join the fight.

Anyone interested in Rogers’s legacy and the history of Western films will be thrilled by these beautiful, important, restored rarities, which give Rogers the chance to ride to the rescue again.