

**The Niche of a Western in Our Hearts**

By: Nick Meagher

As one drives over a mountain pass which was once an old mining trail, crosses a river, or an old train track, it is easy to drift off in reminiscence of a Western. If you can trust your memory of these films, you are sure to mix up a few scenes from this one or that one. Whether Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Sam Elliott or Tom Mix come to mind, it was inevitably a Western of adventure and nostalgic romance. It is precisely because a Western gives us a glimpse into our past, our roots and ourselves, that the Western is such a vital force in film making. The Western is a vision of ourselves today. As we examine the values in our Westerns, we understand our own little worlds of daily lives. What has changed? What has stayed the same?

Yet one wonders, exactly what the niche of the western is, Westerns, large and small, have always been a bread and butter product for Hollywood moguls. Producers could afford to see a current release flop at the box office if they knew they had a few good stories for Westerns to rebuild their coffers. But it seems curious that the Oscar has saddled up so few times with a Western. This highest honor in American film has only recognized three Westerns as Best Picture, four Best Actor winners and not even one Best Actress win. WOOAH NELLIE! A Western might get kicked around a bit, but they are as tough as their characters.

In 1928, Warner Baxter as Cisco Kid, won Best Actor for "In Old Arizona". In 1931, Cimarron was the first Best Picture winner and it was not until Dances with Wolves (1990) that the Best Picture would again go to a Western a mere 59 years apart. During this gap such films as Stagecoach (1948), Red River (1948), She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949), and My Darling Clementine (1946), were overlooked. Although Westerns were not entirely ignored, it strikes one as an aberration that a genre so dear to the American heart could be trampled and kicked around so, until Gary Cooper earned Best Actor honors in High Noon (1952) as the charismatic Sheriff, Will Kane. Hope was not lost when Lee Marvin won Best Actor as the outrageously drunk gunfighter, Kid Shelleen, in Cat Ballou (1965). John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn took the Oscar home in 1969, but it wasn't until Dances with Wolves (1990), and Unforgiven (1992) that Westerns were back in the saddle again. So why don't the Academy folks like the smell of Westerns? Do they abhor the violence and despise a hero who wears a gun? Is it a male dominated genre? Why was Julie Christie ignored in McCabe and Mrs. Miller or Jean Arthur in Shane? How could Shane have been ignored as Best Picture, although it did receive an Oscar for cinematography? Some folks view Shane as the all-time quintessential classic. When Alan Ladd rides off at the end and the boy (Brandon deWilde) watches, we enjoy a classic moment of emotion and empathy. That was a movie!

The Searchers was passed up in 1956 in favor of Around the World in 80 Days. John Wayne with John Ford's directing in Monument Valley was too similar to recent films (Stagecoach) to stand out, but what a masterpiece, described as "King Lear with Cowboys". In 1969 almost a Western, Midnight Cowboy roped the Best Picture over another viable alternative, Once Upon a Time in the West, considered by some the finest "spaghetti Western" ever made. This was Sergio Leone's masterpiece, the man who perhaps made Clint Eastwood, and considered by some film makers the master of the close-up.

So one wonders why the Academy Award has been so elusive to Westerns. Hollywood was itself built by rogues and outlaws. Hollywood developed as a film making community in part because early film makers could escape the enforcement of patent laws (on the camera equipment) that were in effect on the East Coast and if need be, head to Mexico.

Perhaps Hollywood is uncomfortable with a lead character who resolves social problems with a Colt .45. But the Western is malleable amorphous character. Changing times and changing values reflect in changing Westerns. From the comparison of the slow motion glorified death of a Sam Peckinpaw scene, (The Wild Bunch), to a revisionist conception of death (Unforgiven), one can easily see that Westerns will change and adapt to the times. Perhaps this evolutionary adaptability assures that the Western will survive to gain another accolade.

It seems the Western is an examination of our culture and ourselves in the naked truth. That's the way it was, gritty, tough and cruel. That's who we were and where we came from. Those folks were tough as rawhide, strong as mules; stout as bears breath, and that was the WOMEN! The mythological and mystery of our understanding is that we see ourselves in another day. Where did Paul Newman go in the Time Machine and why did James West take technology back in time? Where is the West anyway? West of what? Ourselves? The Western is a good honest look in the mirror.

But what is a Western? Sam Peckinpaw said: "the mere facts tend to obscure the truth anyway." The West is more a state of mind than a particular place in Texas. The Western is a strange combination plate of fantasy, facts history and inspiration. It's our past and our present at the same time. The Western has a particular niche in the heart and soul of the American past. The Western is a dynamic and explosive mixture of tradition and imagination. If Hollywood seems a bit out of step with Westerns - who cares - as long as there are more and more of them being made. Westerns are here to stay as fundamental to the American experience. A Western inspires the imagination in our hearts.

And so it goes, if we were to triangulate and analyze a trend from the very first Western, perhaps the Great Train Robbery (1903) on and through Dances with Wolves (1990) and Unforgiven (1992), we can see one thing for sure...

**A Western in our hearts, like no other Western, is a Western here to stay!!**