



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

Stuntmen

There is an inherent risk in the performance of all stunt work. The most risk exists when performing stunts in front of a live audience. In filmed performances, visible safety mechanisms can be removed by editing. In live performances the audience can see more clearly if the performer is genuinely doing what they claim or appear to do. To reduce the risk of injury or death, most often stunts are choreographed or mechanically-rigged so that, while they look dangerous, safety mechanisms are built into the performance. But, however well-choreographed exercises they appear to be, stunts are still very dangerous and physically testing exercises.

From its inception as a professional skill in the early 1900s to the 1960s, stunts were most often performed by professionals who had trained in that discipline prior to entering the movie industry.



The word stunt was more formally adopted during the 19th century travelling vaudeville performances of the early Wild West Shows, in North America and Europe. The first and prototypical Wild West show was Buffalo Bill's, formed in 1883 and lasting until 1913. The shows which involved simulated battles with the associated firing of both guns and arrows, were a romanticized version of the American Old West.

Early Cinema

The first picture which used a dedicated stunt performer is highly debated, but occurred somewhere between 1903 and 1910. The first possible appearance of a stunt-double was in **The Great Train Robbery**, shot in 1903 in Milltown, New Jersey. The first auditable paid stunt was in the 1908 film **The Count of Monte Cristo**, with \$5 paid by the director to the acrobat who had to jump upside down from a cliff into the sea.

As the industry developed in the West Coast around Hollywood, California, the first accepted professional stunt performers were clowns and comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the Keystone Kops.

Cowboy Professionals

From 1910 onwards, American audiences developed a taste for action movies, which producers then replicated the formulas of into successful serials. These mostly western-themed scripts required a lot of extras, such as for a galloping cavalry, a band of Indians or a fast riding sheriff's posse; all of whom needed to proficiently ride, shoot and look right on camera.

Producers also kept pushing the directors, calling for riskier stunts using a recurring cast, necessitating the use of dedicated stunt doubles for most movie stars. The directors turned to the current rodeo stars for inspiration for their action scenes, and employed former cowboys as extras who not only brought with themselves the right look and style, but also rodeo techniques that included safe and replicable horse falls. Early recruits included Tom Mix, who after winning the 1909 National Riding and Rodeo Championship, worked for the Selig Polyscope Company in Edendale, CA. Mix made his first appearance in **The Cowboy Millionaire** in October 1909, and then as himself in the short documentary film titled **Ranch Life in the Great Southwest** in which he displayed his skills as a cattle wrangler. Mix eventually performed in over 160 cowboy matinee movies during the 1920s, and is considered by many as the first matinee cowboy idol.

The recruitment venture was aided in 1911 by the collapse of the Miller-Arlington rodeo show, which left many rodeo performers stranded in Venice, California. They included the young Rose August Wenger, who married and was later billed as Helen Gibson, and was recognized as the first American professional stunt woman. Thomas H. Ince, who was producing for the New York Motion Picture Company, hired the entire show's cast for the winter at \$2,500 a week. The performers were paid \$8 a week and boarded in Venice, where the horses were stabled. They then rode the 5 miles (8.0 km) each day to work in Topanga Canyon, where the films were being shot. In 1912 Helen made \$15 a week for her first billed role as Ruth Roland's sister in **Ranch Girls on a Rampage**. After marrying Edmund Richard "Hoot" Gibson in June 1913, the couple continued working rodeos in the summer and as stunt doubles in the winter in California, most often for Kalem Studios in Glendale.

Eventually, the out of work cowboys and out of season rodeo riders, and the directors and producers, figured out a system for the supply of extras. A speakeasy called The Watering Hole was located close to a Los Angeles corral called the Sunset Corral. Every morning, the cowboys would congregate at The Watering Hole, where the directors would send over their assistants to hire for the following day. The cowboys would then dress in their normal riding clothes (unless told otherwise, for which they were paid extra), and ride to the set, most of which were located to the north in the vicinity of the San Fernando Valley. These "riding extras" jobs paid \$10 per day plus a box lunch, and most were only hired on a per day basis. These early cowboy actors eventually gained the nickname The Gower Gulch Gang, as many of the small studios cranking out westerns were located on Gower Avenue.

Subsequently a number of rodeo stars entered the movie industry on a full-time basis, with many "riding extras" eventually becoming movie stars themselves, including: Hank Bell (300 films, between 1920 and 1952); Bill Gillis; Buck Jones; Jack Montgomery (initially worked as Tom Mix's body-double); and Jack Padjeon (first appeared in 1923, played Wild Bill Hickok in the John Ford directed **The Iron Horse** in 1924). But the best known stuntman turned star was probably Yakima Canutt, who with his apprentices - who included John Wayne - devised during the 1930s new safety devices, including: the 'L' stirrup which allowed a rider to fall off a horse without getting hung in the stirrup; and cabling equipment to cause spectacular wagon crashes, while releasing the team. One of Yakima's inventions was the 'Running W' stunt, bringing down a horse at the gallop by attaching a wire, anchored to the ground, to its fetlocks and launching the rider forwards spectacularly. This either killed the horse, or rendered it badly shaken and unusable for the rest of the day. The 'Running W' was banned, used last in 1983.



Our Museum exhibit has a wonderful collection of memorabilia including rubber spurs, hats and boots of Joe Yrogoyan and Yakima Canutt, leather "jerk" vest, arrow mechanism, and various stunt saddles and pictures.

Lone Pine has long been host to many of the Stuntmen including Loren Janes, Donna Hall, Alice Van, Jock Mahoney, Jack Williams, Montie Montana, Tom Steele, - Whitey Hughes, Wayne Burson, Yakima Canutt, Joe Yrogoyan, Richard Farnsworth and Dean Smith to name a few.

Please see Boyd Magers, b-monthly newsletter; Western Clippings for bios on many of the Western Stuntmen & Women. http://www.westernclippings.com/stuntmen/yakimacanutt_stuntmen.shtml

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stunt_performer

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakima_Canutt