



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

Museum Recognizes TV Westerns with new Exhibit: TV Westerns: An American Love Affair



When the popularity of television exploded in the late 1940s and 1950s, westerns quickly became a staple of small-screen entertainment. William Boyd, the star of the Hopalong Cassidy movies, made a huge fortune buying up the rights to the films and offering them to TV stations for broadcast. The earliest western series made for TV were *The Lone Ranger* (1949-57), *The Cisco Kid* (1950-56), and *The Gene Autry Show* (1950-56). Many theatrical B westerns were also aired on TV alongside these shows. In time the Hoppy-Gene-and-Roy kind of western was superseded by new "adult" series of westerns like *Cheyenne* and *Wyatt Earp*. Soon family westerns joined the prime time schedules across all the networks.

The Museum's exhibit entitled **TV Westerns: An American Love Affair** provides an overview of the TV western culture, highlighting the most popular series and providing biographical history, pictures and memorabilia from this great period. A brief introduction is below.

In the beginning...

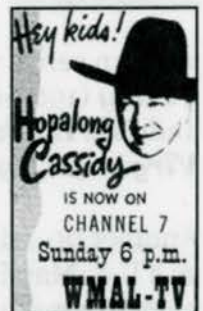
Edwin S. Porter's western, *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, captured the imagination of audiences on the silver screen and initiated the "western" genre. In mid-30's radio extended the adventure and excitement into the living rooms of American families.

Westerns became a defining genre of American film culture, a nostalgic eulogy to the early days of the expansive, untamed American frontier which marked the borderline between civilization and the wilderness.

Some would say that early TV western series helped define America as a nation; teaching the values of honesty and integrity, of hard work, of racial tolerance, of determination to succeed, and of justice for all. They were, in a sense, modern morality plays where heroes, strong, reliable, clear-headed and decent, fought their adversaries in the name of justice. At the show's end - moral lessons had been taught and learned.

Saturday morning "B" Westerns at the Cinema dominated the 30s and 40s and the introduction and mass appeal of television provided the forum for introducing a reformatted versions.

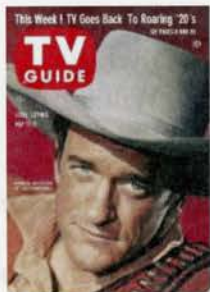
The first TV Western premiering on June 24, 1949, Hopalong Cassidy, played by William Boyd, and his horse Topper, rode across the small screen and into the homes of western film lovers in the form of the reformatted Cassidy theatrical films (1935-44) that were cut down to less than an hour's running time each. Soon Hoppy would be joined by made-for-TV series like *The Lone Ranger*, *The Cisco Kid*, *The Roy Rogers Show*, *The Gene Autry Show* and *Wild Bill Hickok*.



As television became popular in the late 1940's and 1950's, TV westerns quickly became an audience favorite. The juvenile market, for whom the ultimate hero was the cowboy, transitioned to the smorgasbord of free TV westerns versus that offered on the Saturday Silver screen.

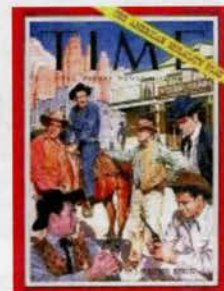
Most of the very early TV Westerns offered morality plays for the juvenile audience. Their plots were usually quite simple---good versus bad, black hat versus white, heroes riding wonder horses---and right always won out over wrong.

As those kids grew older their tastes changed leading to the development and creation of adult TV westerns. These new programs appealed to a both an older, and younger audience.

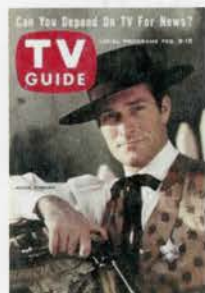


TV Westerns reigned supreme in the Fifties and Sixties with about 120 of them in production, depending on how you define a Western. The peak year for television westerns was 1960, with 30 such shows airing during prime-time. Top rated shows included, **Gunsmoke**, **Rifleman**, **Rawhide**, **Have Gun Will Travel** and **Bonanza** to name a few.

In its issue of April 30th, 1959, *Time* Magazine reported that "Last week eight of the top ten shows on TV were horse operas. The networks have saddled up no fewer than 35 of the bangtail brigade, and 30 of them are riding the dollar-green range of prime night time (from 7:30 to 10 p.m.)."



TV Westerns "Grow Up"



In the mid-Fifties (1955-1956 Season) **The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp** premiered on ABC September 6, 1955, and was the first successful "adult" Western. Later that same week, September 10, **Gunsmoke** premiered on Saturday night beginning its 20-year run on CBS and a few days later on Tuesday September 20, **Cheyenne**, the first hour-long TV western, premiered. Soon afterwards, **Sugarfoot** (1957 to 1961) and **Maverick** (1957 – 1962) followed.

As fast as you could say, "they went thataway, pardner" the airwaves were filled with Westerns. Other leading adult westerns of the era included **Have Gun, Will Travel**, **Tales of Wells Fargo**, **Laramie**, **Wagon Train**, **Rawhide** and **The Rifleman**.

Family Westerns



The Rifleman (1958-63) and **Bonanza** (1959-73) were among the first TV Westerns to have a "family" as the core of the show. Previous westerns had numerous characters but no family unit.

Bonanza followed in the footsteps of **The Rifleman** featuring not a relatively young father and his adolescent son but an older father (Lorne Greene as Ben Cartwright) with three adult sons who are half-brothers to each other. During the long run of **Bonanza** in prime time, a number of other 60-minute family

western series were launched, such as **Daniel Boone** (1964-70), **The Big Valley** (1965-69), which starred Barbara Stanwyck as a female Ben Cartwright, and **The High Chaparral** (1967-71). All of these series were filmed in color, as was **The Virginian** (1962-71), and each ran 90 minutes. \



Another 90-minute series, **Cimarron Strip** (1967-68), starred Stuart Whitman as a U.S. Marshal but proved prohibitively expensive to produce and was canceled after one season. Another popular family western was **Little House on the Prairie** (1974 -1983) starring Michael Landon.





Late Sixties Bring Change

By the Sixties, the Westerns, led by ratings winner **Bonanza**, begin broadcasting in color and, in the case of **The Virginian** broadcast in a 90-minute time period each week. Others, like **High Chaparral** and **The Big Valley** are typical of Sixties TV Westerns.

But the world was changing. There was the war in Viet Nam. Sometimes even good guys seemed to wear black hats. Or maybe there is such a notion as too much of a good thing and audiences tired of the old fashioned horse opera.



Traditional Westerns began to disappear from television in the late 1960s and early 1970s as color television became ubiquitous, 1968 was the last season any new traditional Westerns debuted on television. By 1969, after pressure from parental advocacy groups who claimed Westerns were too violent for television, all three of the major networks ceased airing new Western series. The two last traditional Westerns on the air, **Death Valley Days** and **Gunsmoke**, ended their runs in 1975. This may have been the result of an ongoing trend toward more urban-oriented programming that occurred in the early 1970s known as the "rural purge," though

only two Westerns (NBC's **The Virginian** and **The High Chaparral**) were canceled in the peak season of the purge in 1971. **Bonanza** ended its run in 1973.



While the traditional Westerns mostly died out in the late 1960s, more modernized Westerns, incorporating story concepts from outside the traditional genre, began appearing on television shortly thereafter. New shows fused Western elements with other types of shows, such as family drama, mystery thrillers, crime drama, and even outer space with **Star Trek**. Creator, Gene Roddenberry, acknowledged in early interviews that in creating the first Star Trek he was inspired by Westerns such as **Wagon Train**. **The Wild Wild West**, which ran from 1965 to 1969, combined Westerns with heavy use of steampunk and an espionage-thriller format in the spirit of the recently popularized James Bond franchise. The limited-run **McCloud**, which premiered in 1970, was essentially a fusion of the sheriff-oriented western with the modern big-city crime drama popularized by Clint Eastwood's feature film, **Coogan's Bluff**.

Hec Ramsey was a feature-length western who-dunnit mystery series in Sunday night rotation with **McCloud** and other non-western series **Columbo** and **McMillan and Wife**. **Little House on the Prairie** was set on the frontier in the time period of the western, but was essentially a family drama. **Kung Fu** was in the tradition of the itinerant gunfighter westerns, but the main character was a Shaolin monk, the son of an American father and a Chinese mother, who fought only with his formidable martial art skill. **The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams** was a family adventure show about a gentle mountain man with an uncanny connection to wildlife who helps others who visit his wilderness refuge.

The 1990s saw no new western series but a number of stand-alone TV movies and mini-series, notably the **Lonesome Dove** cycle. The networks found success filming original Western movies on their own. Like Louis L'Amour's **Conagher** starring Sam Elliott and Katharine Ross, Tony Hillerman's **The Dark Wind**, **The Last Outlaw**, **The Jack Bull** etc.

A few new comedies like **The Cisco Kid**, **The Cherokee Kid**, and the mentioned gritty miniseries **Lonesome Dove**, followed by several sequels and a TV series.

With the growth of cable television and direct broadcast satellites, reruns of westerns have become more common. Upon its launch in 1996, TV Land carried a block of westerns on Sundays. Today, westerns can be found on many cable stations and digital networks. Thanks to such technology, and to DVD, one can see hundreds of westerns from every period of film and TV history in the comfort of one's home seven days a week.

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Key TV Shows, Stars and Character names

Annie Oakley (1954-1957) – ***Gail Davis as Annie***

Bonanza – (1959 – 1973) - ***Lorne Greene as Ben Cartwright, Pernell Roberts as Adam, Dan Blocker as Hoss, Michael Landon as Little Joe.***

Bronco (1958 – 1962) - ***Ty Hardin as Bronco Layne***

Cheyenne (1955-1963) – ***Clint Walker as Cheyenne Bodie***

Cimarron Strip (1967-1968) - ***Stuart Whitman as Marshal Jim Crown***

The Cisco Kid (1950-1956) - ***Duncan Renaldo as The Cisco Kid and Leo Carrillo as Pancho***

Gunsmoke (1955 – 1975) – ***James Arness as Marshall Matt Dillon***

Have Gun Will Travel (1957 -1963) – ***Richard Boone as Paladin.***

The High Chaparral (1967-1971) - ***Leif Erickson as Big John Cannon and brother Buck Cameron Mitchell.***

The Lone Ranger (1949-1957) – ***Clayton Moore as Lone Ranger, Jay Silverheels as Tonto***

Maverick – (1957-1962) - ***James Garner as Bret Maverick***

Wyatt Earp (1955-1961) – ***Hugh O'Brien as Wyatt Earp***

Rawhide (1959 -1966) – ***Clint Eastwood as Rowdy Yates***

The Rebel (1959-1961) – ***Nick Adams as Johnny Yuma***

Rifleman (1958-1963) – ***Chuck O'Connor as Lucas McCain and Johnny Crawford as son, Mark.***

Sugarfoot (1957-1961) – ***Will Hutchens as Tom Brewster***

Tales of Wells Fargo (1957-1962) - ***Dale Robertson as Agent Jim Hardie***

The Virginian (1962-1971) - ***James Drury as and Doug McClure as Trampas.***

Wild Bill Hickok (1951 – 1958) – ***Guy Madison United States Marshal James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok, and Andy Devine as his comedy sidekick, Jingles P. Jones.***

Zorro (1957-1959) - ***Guy Williams as Don Diego de la Vega (Zorro) and Bernardo (portrayed by pantomimist Gene Sheldon.***

