

The Last Cowboy?

“The Last Cowboy” has been part of our shared American fantasy for decades.

There have been numerous movies, television programs, books, magazine articles, paintings, a play, and songs with titles like, *The Last Cowboy*. Ed Bruce’s 1980 song, *The Last Cowboy Song*, and Jamey Johnson’s 2008 song, *When the Last Cowboy’s Gone* share the same sentiment. The 2003 TV movie, *The Last Cowboy* and the 2008 documentary, *The Last of the Silver Screen Cowboys* do as well.

Also, in 2010, Animal Planet produced a series titled, *The Last American Cowboy*.

There are three different books listed at Amazon titled, *The Last Cowboy* plus *The Last True Cowboy*, *The Last Cowboys*, and *Last of the Old Time Cowboys*. People have been trying to cash in on the imagined demise of the American cowboy since barbed wire was invented, but it ain’t happening. Cowboys endure, all things western endure.

Clothing styles change every year, but Western attire is perennial and intergenerational. Western magazines have millions of subscribers.

Over one hundred Louis L’Amour novels are still in print, and thirty of them have been made into movies. Cormac McCarthy, Robert B. Parker, Elmer Kelton, Larry McMurtry, and others sell millions of Western novels every year.

According to the National Cattleman's Beef Association, there are about 758,000 beef/cow operations in the U.S. There's no need to get all melancholy about the "last cowboy" when today there are hundreds of thousands of working cowboys in America. As they say, just because you can't see them from the interstate doesn't mean they aren't out there. There are also thousands of rodeo cowboys, and millions of people who are Cowboy at heart.

Cowboys and all things western are as loved today as they ever were; they just aren't represented in traditional media outlets the way they were in the past. In 1957, there were thirty primetime western television series, and eight of the top ten television series were Westerns. Western movies, books, and music were mainstays of American culture from the 1920's through the 1960's.

In homes around the world, there are Native American blankets and photographs of flat-topped mesas from vacations out west that are the high points in the lives of millions of people.

Western home furnishings are a multi-million dollar business, yet when was the last time you saw Western décor in a movie or television program?

It makes one wonder why the representation of all things Western has been so thoroughly removed from media.

Most Hollywood production companies won't make a Western, but millions of people pay for the Encore Westerns cable television channel which airs Westerns 24/7. Encore Westerns restores old Western movies and television programs, it features documentaries about the west, and it provides historical insight into the old west from *True West* magazine editor Bob Boze Bell.

Many of those old Western movies were released in black and white not just because it was cheaper, but because there was often a year long wait to get a film into the color labs. There was a huge demand for Westerns and production companies, like Republic, Colombia, and PRC couldn't crank out Westerns fast enough.

Hollywood movie moguls may be reluctant to make Westerns; however, actors love to make them. They get to work on location in places where other people vacation, and they get to be outside, ride horses, and play cowboy. For many

actors, their first role was that of a backyard cowboy, and like most of us, they love revisiting those western days.

When actor Ed Harris approached Hollywood with the script for *Appaloosa* (2008), Hollywood declined, so Harris produced, directed and starred in the movie himself. It was a huge hit. When Kevin Costner couldn't interest Hollywood in *Open Range* (2003), he put up his own money and produced, directed, and starred in the movie himself. It was a mega hit. On those rare occasions when a Western does get made it's usually successful.

Hollywood would rather remake an old proven winner, such as *3:10 to Yuma* (1957 and 2007) or *True Grit* (1969 and 2010) than take a chance on a new western story. Which old Western would you like to see remade?

Western movies and television programs are like a phantom limb, you miss it and sometimes you can still feel it, like an invisible presence reminding you of better times. As in the very non-Western movie *13 Going on 30*, when the Jennifer Garner character says, "I think all of us wanna feel something that we've forgotten, or turned our backs on. Because maybe we didn't realize how much we were leaving behind. We need to remember what use to be good."

Westerns were not removed because they were a bad influence on young people.

Several of our Western movie and television heroes promoted moral values through codes of conduct that young fans were encouraged to live up to. Hopalong Cassidy's Creed for American Boys and Girls, Wild Bill Hickock Deputy Marshal's Code of Conduct, The Lone Ranger Creed, Roy Rogers Riders Club Rules, and the Texas Rangers Deputy Ranger Oath can all be viewed at www.elvaquero.com.

Gene Autry's Code of Honor is typical of these pledges, it states:

1. A cowboy never takes unfair advantage – even of an enemy.
2. A cowboy never betrays a trust. He never goes back on his word.
3. A cowboy always tells the truth.
4. A cowboy is kind and gentle to small children, old folks, and animals.
5. A cowboy is free from racial and religious intolerances.
6. A cowboy is always helpful when someone is in trouble.
7. A cowboy is always a good worker.
8. A cowboy respects womanhood, his parents and his nation's laws.
9. A cowboy is clean about his person in thought, word, and deed.
10. A cowboy is a Patriot.

And to think, Ed Bruce, who played the Sheriff on television's *Maverick*, also wrote the song *Mommas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys*. Actually, these days Mommas should hope that their babies grow up with a westering soul. Our cowboy heroes offer moral guidance.

The can-do, in-your-face, do-the-right-thing cowboy attitude has become part of the American character that will live forever. There is a little cowboy in the best of us, and he is not riding off into the sunset. A hundred years from now some evil doer will rise up, and a cowboy will be there to put him in his place.

All this sappy sentimentality about the last cowboy is undeserved, and all too often is just crass commercialism. If you want to get your creative effort published and promoted, name it *The Last Cowboy* (see title). However, we are far from the last cowboy anything. There will always be cowboys; as long as people are eating steak, there's gonna be cowboys. Cowboys forever! Can I get a yee haw for the cowboys?

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