

# THE WILD AND WOOLLY WEST

ALL sorts of excuses have been put forward to explain the popularity of the films; but Gilbert Seldes, for instance, in "Movies for the Million" says that the real reason people go to the movies is because they want to go to the movies. That is almost the last word, and certainly simplifies matters, but it doesn't explain why certain types of film are more popular than others.

It has been my not unpleasant fate to see a great number of films during the last year. Without going too far into facts and figures I should say that at least one third of these have been of the cowboy type, which proves, I suppose, that the majority of picture-goers want westerns. The western, as far as I can make out, is based on one of four plots. Once or twice (as in "Stage Coach" or "Oklahoma Kid") a film has strayed slightly, but once embarked, the essentials are usually the same.

## The Super-Western

Plot number one is that favoured by the Super-Western. This film runs eight, nine or even ten thousand feet, and includes such star names as Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea, to say nothing of Dietrich and (less successfully) Miriam Hopkins and Kay Francis. These films are well photographed, slickly directed, and often exciting. According to the "bally" which accompanies them, they are Epics, Sagas, Revelations—anything at all but what they really are, which is the same old cowboy film with a lot of frills.

The plot usually deals with the crossing of the American continent by the first pony express, the first railway train or the first telegraph pole. The hero is inevitably working for the Good company, and the Good company inevitably has a rival company which puts obstacles in the way of the hero, who, for his part, has to get the train, pony or line from one given point to another by a certain date in order to save the merger, or the mortgage or the girl. These obstacles consist of snow storms, burning desert sands, water holes without any water, avalanches, sudden death by bullets, poisoned darts, knives in the back, or what have you. There are buffaloes by the herd, Indians by the thousand, dance hall hells by the dozen and many other such diversions. And in the end the hero and heroine (who for nine out of the ten thousand feet have had a Misunderstanding) now come together and gaze out into the sunset, generally with a horse apiece, over a barren plain, or a rocky canyon, or a dense forest, the fade-out showing them looking into each other's eyes and murmuring "forever." (Examples — "Wells Fargo," "Union Pacific," and many more.)

## Thanks to Will Hays

Then there is the one about the dance hall girl who wears black sequin frocks, dances the can-can, sings



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in a husky voice, and would like to have you believe that she is a very tough customer indeed, and that the song is the height of innuendo, when, thanks to Mr. Will Hays, it is nothing of the sort.

Dance hall girls are either Good or Bad. If Bad there is no hope for them, and they Die, usually by flinging themselves in front of the hero just as the villain (now at his last gasp) writhes on the floor, and tries to plug the hero in the back. If the girl is Good, she is dancing for the miners or the backwoodsmen or the soldiers because she wants to get the plans through to the Federal Army, or else she is supporting her brother, who suffers from consumption and has been ordered out West for his health. It may be noted here that although the frequenters of dance halls are obviously the scum of the earth, they have never been known, screenically speaking, to utter a word that might bring a blush to a maiden's cheek. If the girl is Good you can be sure that she is going to marry the hero and make an honest moron of him.

As a rule, heroes are astonishingly priggish, and when they find that the one they thought so Pure is really a dance hall girl, they spend eight or nine thousand feet making curt, cutting remarks through tight lips. Sometimes there are two good guys in one film, in which case you can bet your boots that one of them will have to die to leave the way clear for the other. This is usually done by one of them leaping forward when the villain is ready to plug the other in the back. So that in the end the hero and heroine can still look out over the canyon, into the sunset, and then gaze into each other's eyes and murmur "forever." (Examples — "Destry Rides Again," "Virginia City.")

## Pop, Boy, Chorus Girl

Plot number three is the one in which Son is a hefty young animal spending father's hard earned wealth on a chorus girl in Li'l Ol' New York, while father, Grand Old Man that he is, stays way back in Texas, breeding cattle. One day Son gets a letter which starts off "Son . . ." and goes on to say that Pop's at the end of his tether. The rustlers, or the nesters or some other sech vermin are closin' in, and he's an old man now, and Needs His Boy. So Boy packs grip, says good-bye to chorus girl and trots off home.

When Son gets home he finds he is Too Late. The rustlers or something have already shot the Old Man, and the only person left to look after the ranch is little Spitfire Sue, who was adopted by the Old Man when a rattlesnake bit her pa and he died (her Pa, of course). Well, Sue hasn't no time for ornery city dudes and tells Son in no measured terms. Then the chorus girl arrives, and Sue finds that after all she loves Son with all the rapture of her untamed heart. Son vows to git the varmint that shot his dad, and after trailing said varmint over mountains and plains, Gets His Man. The chorus girl goes back home, and Son and Sue are last seen on a cliff or something, looking into . . . well, you know . . . (Example, "Call of the Wild" and a lot more.)

## White Horse and Hat

The fourth type generally runs a little over 5,000 feet, and is to be found tucked away on the first half of a double-feature programme. As a rule no one has heard of the leading man, who is six foot three, exceedingly handsome, and has a prancing white horse and a white sombrero with a brim at least three sizes larger than those worn by the other "boys." There is usually

a heroine somewhere around but she never matters very much. There are also the Bunkhouse Bohunks, or the Seven Singing Songsters, or the Roughridin' Romeos. These people manage in some miraculous manner to produce mandolins, violins, pianos, French horns, a few bass fiddles and at least three saxophones whenever they feel the need to burst into song, which is usually during a round-up or in the middle of an exciting gallop after the villain.

## Convincing Atmosphere

At least two million miles are covered by galloping horses, and nobody ever knows or cares what the story is about. And the funny thing is that these films, with no pretensions to art or philosophy, with no mission and no star names, quite often create an atmosphere more convincing, more redolent of the spirit of Zane Grey, Clarence Mulford, or even O. Henry, than the more pretentious vehicles. (Examples—the Gene Autry, the George O'Brien and the Charles Starrett pictures.)

Apart from the convention of plot there are several other conventions, all desperately stuck to. In the last type of film, for instance, you can tell the hero a mile off by his pants. They fit beautifully, and he wears knee boots with a high polish and some sort of dado or frieze work round the tops. The villain, on the other hand, wears a species of dungaree, fairly baggy, and turned up at the ankles. The villain's horse, naturally, is never a splendid, prancing beast, his hat is always black, and it never has an outsize in brims.

Then, in the epic western, it is noticeable that whereas all the other women wear gingham dresses and sun-bonnets, and trundle slowly behind in the covered wagons, the heroine rides out front with the hero, wearing a natty blouse and skirt, with a hat placed on top of hair which has been waved for the occasion—which is a dirty trick when you think of all the other women in the wagons who have not had a chance to get near a beauty parlour and/or the handsome young hero.

## An Escape from Life

All of which goes to prove just nothing at all of course, but it is interesting perhaps, to work it all out. The word "escape" has been used so much lately in connection with certain kinds of literature that I hesitate to use it again. The reading of detective novels has been condemned by many people who regard an interest in Lord Peter Wimsey or M. Hercule Poirot as the first sign of decadence. One might argue against them epigrammatically by declaring that all living is some sort of escape from life. Men cannot live by bread alone and neither can the average hardworking citizen subsist entirely on a mental diet of higher thought and intellectualism.

There should be a moral to all this, but I can't think what it is. At any rate, the films themselves are so full of a high moral tone, and the local cinema is just round the corner, so perhaps the best thing for you to do is to go and look for it yourself.