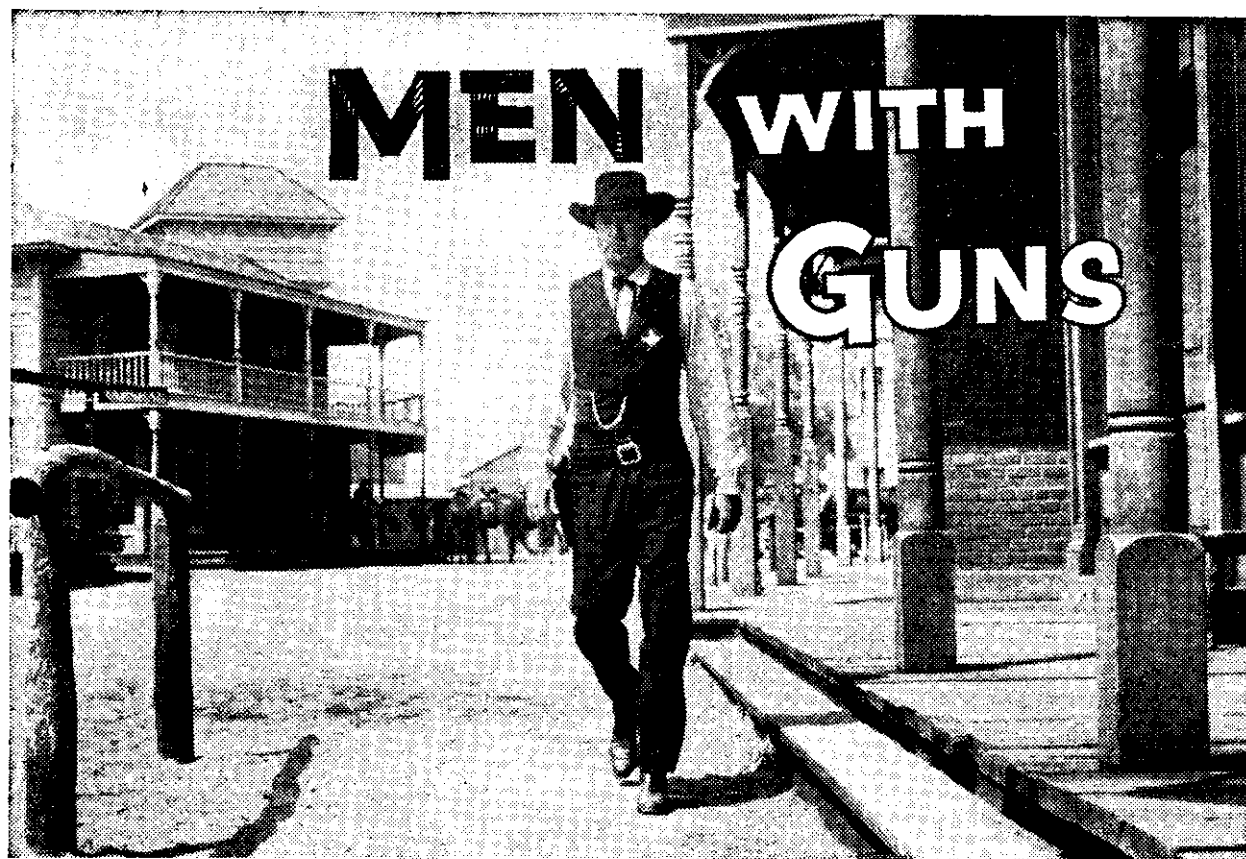


"SINCE the American cinema first chose a man astride a horse with a six-shooter in his hand as its favourite hero—as, if you like, the symbolic American hero—the pattern of the Western has set hard and fast. The conventions are rigid in this romanticised, legendary world, where the mysterious stranger rides time and again to the help of the oppressed, the good man is a little quicker on the draw than the bad man, the U.S. cavalry traditionally arrives in time, and the bar-room shooting or the man-hunt through the hot deserted streets of a hundred little towns puts a decisive end to all arguments."

That's how one writer, Penelope Houston, summed up the ingredients of the Western film. She was writing, as it happened, about *Shane* and its stranger riding to the help of the oppressed. But she might have been discussing other Western classics—*Stagecoach*, say, and the arrival of the cavalry during the chase across the salt flats, or *High Noon* and perhaps the greatest man-hunt of all, when the marshal fought Frank Miller and his three henchmen through the streets of a small Western town in the blazing noon-day heat.

More than 50 years after *The Great Train Robbery* was at once the first feature movie and the first Western, horse opera is still as popular as ever. Recently eight of the 10 most popular shows on American television were Westerns; and it's on the most popular of these, *Gunsmoke*, originally a radio show, that the Australian radio series of the same name is apparently based. Scripted in its Australian version by Ron Ingleby, *Gunsmoke* will be back on the air from ZB, ZA and ZC stations and 1XH on Tuesday, November 3. *Gunsmoke's* hero is Marshal Matt Morgan of Dodge City, "an indomitable law-enforcer" who once in the buried past was "a trigger-proud pistolier," his friends then "notched-gun drifters hiring themselves for illegal death and deals."

Look up the documents and you'll find that *High Noon* was set in 1865, the year the Civil War ended. It was from then on for about 25 years—till all free arable land in the West was occupied and the frontier closed—that the Western hero as we know him today flourished.



MEN WITH GUNS

Skip another 13 years and you find *The Great Train Robbery* launching the Western on the world, and with it the first Western star and hero, Gilbert Anderson as Broncho Billy. Anderson did as much as anyone to make the "cowboy" a myth. As actor, writer and director a big noise in films of the day, he featured Broncho Billy in not far short of 400 Westerns to make him by 1912 the most popular movie character. Unlike today's lanky heroes, Anderson was stolid and portly. He was thrown during the first day's riding on *The Great Train Robbery*. Of marksmanship he once said, "Heck, in those movies a blank used to turn a corner and kill a man."

Anderson's Broncho Billy movies would seem naive today, but the films

of Thomas Harper Ince, who succeeded him and became the first great director of Westerns, are still praised by the critical. Forty-five years ago Ince signed up William Shakespeare Hart to make *Two-Gun Hicks*. Probably the greatest of all Western stars, Hart had worked as a ranch hand in the Blackfeet and Sioux country. He was in Ince's greatest successes, usually as the "good bad man"—an outlaw who went some way towards reform but still stayed outside the law. Hart's attitude towards women contrasts with the more idealistic one of hero to heroine in later Westerns. Hart (one writer has summed it up) "expected all women to be like Louise Glaum, the vamp in most of his films, with whom he conducted relations on a level of cash, sex and no questions. When, there-

ABOVE: Sheriff Gary Cooper, hero of "High Noon"—"perhaps the greatest man-hunt of them all"

fore, he encountered innocence in the person of Bessie Love, he either beat a hasty retreat, or attempted—and frequently accomplished—seduction, followed by remorse and tragic atonement."

W. S. Hart's career spanned about 11 years—aged 50, he retired to his ranch in 1925 after his sort of films had failed to compete with such dashing successors as the Old California Westerns of Douglas Fairbanks—remember *The Mark of Zorro*? Tom Mix, who had been in films before Hart but was not as good an actor, somehow managed to keep going longer and to succeed him as a popular star—probably because he was more adaptable and opportunist than Hart, Anderson or the Farnums. Even after retiring he made a comeback as late as 1932 in a couple of films. In his hey-day Mix wore the fancy boots and white hat and suit later adopted by such singing cowboys as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.

Of the older cowboy stars, Art Acord disappeared even before Hart, Harry Carey (who had starred in 30 Westerns for John Ford) turned to straight action films, and Hoot Gibson didn't long survive the sound film. Of those who did survive it, both Buck Jones and William Boyd ended up making the sort of films that would do even the youngest moviegoer no harm.

Although land hunger had been the great driving force that pushed the frontier West, it had little to do with the birth of the Western, which was more interested in a man with blazing guns on a galloping horse. And as Henry



LEFT: John Ford's "Wagonmaster"—"land hunger did find its place in the Western"