

I See by Your Outfit: Cowboys Real and Mythic

—AN ESSAY BY—

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When I was a boy, I loved westerns, and my heroes were the heroes of those movies — Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, and Gene Autry, to be sure, but also less well-known stars such as Rod Cameron, Wild Bill Elliott, Tim Holt, and, especially, Lash LaRue. As I grew older, my tastes became somewhat more sophisticated simply because I saw better movies, and even as a kid, I was able to discern that Randolph Scott’s movies were superior to Gene Autry’s.

But whether the movies were the low-budget “B” variety — simplistic tales of white-hatted good guys and black-hatted bad guys — or the more nuanced films directed by John Ford or Howard Hawks, the heroes shared certain traits. They were frequently loners, men who didn’t live in towns or belong to any stable human community. They lived by a code, usually unwritten but no less rigid for that. Even though these characters were featured in cowboy movies, they seldom did the work of cowhands. They were gunfighters, lawmen, or simply lone riders, their occupation unrevealed, errant knights of the West, and their work usually meant ridding a town or region of any element that threatened the establishment of a so-called civilized society, and making it safe for women and children. Once their work was done, which inevitably involved violence, they rode or walked away. They made communities possible, but they didn’t live in them.

These were mythic male figures, characters more likely to be found in legend than in reality.

But western films are as often engaged in myth breaking as in mythmaking, and the iconoclastic 1960s were determined to tear down the legends and replace them with reality. Instead of quick-draw demigods who were

unbeatable in any conflict, whether with Indians, outlaws, rustlers, or cattle barons looking to push out the small ranchers (think Shane), the movies gave us antiheroes, psychologically conflicted characters who were often created to demonstrate that the myths of the Old West were false (think Jack Crabb in *Little Big Man*).

Even before the movies decided to separate fact from legend, I knew something wasn't quite right about the way cowboys were depicted in popular culture. How did I know? Very simple: My grandfather looked nothing like John Wayne or Randolph Scott or Hopalong Cassidy. And my grandfather had been a cowboy.

Gustavus Adolphus Petterson didn't ride in out of nowhere; he came to America on a ship. He emigrated from Sweden and found work in the western Dakotas and Montana, where he was known as "Bronco Gus," a horseman of some repute. And though he came to this country and became a cowboy — an iconic American figure (and how laughable he would have found both that phrase and that concept!) — he didn't count himself a success until he filed a homestead claim, married, raised a family, and helped establish a community. He was, I suppose, a sodbuster, but he had none of the cowman's scorn for farming. When he wasn't doing the hard work of running a farm, he played the mandolin, guitar, and accordion, and he stayed up all night once a week reading newspapers from Sweden. He wrote in his "autobiography" (a single page rendered in his elegant handwriting and consisting primarily of dates and place names) that "those Pioneer times were rough and rugged" and that you had to be "strong and tough" to take it, but his toughness had nothing to do with saloon shootouts and everything to do with making sure that his family was provided for. And that also meant that the family had a church to attend and his children a school, which they found their way to during blizzards by following his fence line. For practical reasons he kept horses on the farm, and he lost one of his sons when the boy was trampled under the hooves of a team of horses. My grandfather wore a perpetual frown, but that was the result of having been kicked in the forehead by a horse, not his disposition. He was a kind, cheerful man who would never have claimed any similarity between himself and a character in a movie. His descendants both resemble and refute the cowboy stereotype.

A grandchild and a great-grandchild reside in Montana and have their own ranches and have competed in rodeos. Both are women.

Calvin Sidey, the main character in *As Good as Gone*, has a realistic sense of who and what a cowboy is; he's lived that life and knows there's nothing romantic about it. In fact, he mocks the myths that cling to such figures. Yet he does have a code he lives by, and in its general outline it bears more than a passing resemblance to the code of those movie cowboys. But it's the 1960s, and in actuality in that changing cultural climate, his self-reliance can look like mere stubbornness, his chivalry can seem sexist, and his independence is of a variety so extreme he has difficulty fitting into human society. He has little faith in government or its agents, and when trouble arises, he trusts only himself to make things right. He takes justice into his own hands — a practice that makes him little better than a vigilante.

When he returns to Gladstone, Montana, his hometown, to look after his grandchildren, he stays in the basement of his son's house, a detail that gave me a working title that lasted through a couple drafts. I called the novel "Cowboy in the Basement" because I believe the romantic archetype of the cowboy lives just below the main floor of our cultural consciousness. We don't believe in him, not exactly, but that doesn't mean we've let go of the longing for the myth to become reality, and for one of those western knights to ride to the rescue. We've all heard the caution, however: Be careful what you wish for.