Where the West Was Won: A Look at Hollywood's Back Lot in the Alabama Hills and Lone Pine

Alice Watts

How The West Was Won (MGM, 1962). Courtesy of the Museum of Western Film History archives. Used with permission.

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By Alice Watts

The 1962 epic movie How the West Was Won told the story of how the pioneering Prescott family won their piece of the American West. But do you know where the West was won? The Alabama Hills on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada and the nearby town of Lone Pine, California, have served as one of Hollywood's popular back lots for "B" westerns and major films for almost 100 years, including scenes from How the West Was Won.

Lone Pine is located in the Owens Valley approximately 200 miles north of Los Angeles along Highway 395. Mountain men probably discovered the valley in the 1820's and found Paiute and Shoshone Indians living there; settlers first came to the valley in 1842, drawn by rich deposits of minerals. Mines such as Cerro Gordo produced silver, lead and zinc ore. After the mines petered out, many of the towns built around them also closed down.

Lone Pine, however, remained. It was almost wiped out by the 1872 earthquake which killed about one-third of its population of approximately 100, but the town was resilient and rebuilt. Today Lone Pine is a thriving town of 2,035 residents.

The Alabama Hills are located just west of Lone Pine toward Mt. Whitney. The name comes from the C.S.S. Alabama, a Confederate warship. Confederate sympathizers in the area named their mining claims after the ship, and the name stuck to the hills in which they prospected. It doesn't take much imagination to see Roy Rogers on Trigger (or Rogers' double Joe Yrigoyen) chasing bad guys across the dusty prairie represented by Movie Flats, or Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette stopping by that cucumber shaped rock that now bears Autry's name. What tales the rocks could tell if only they could talk.

Figure 1. ”Roscoe *‘*Fatty*’* Arbuckle, putting on his makeup*,”* The Round-Up *(*Paramount*,* 1920)*. Courtesy of t*he Museum of Western Film History *archives*. Used with permission.

It was January 3, 1920. The first day of filming in a new location. Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was making his Western debut in what would be his first serious role, The Round-Up; he had spent his career up to then as a comedic actor. Movie-making had come to Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills. Sound, and singing, came to the area with The Wagon Master in 1929 staring Ken Maynard as the first cowboy to sing in a movie. Of the over 400 feature length and short films shot in the Alabama Hills area, approximately 80% have been Westerns according to Inyo County Film Commissioner Chris Langley.

Producers were drawn to the area by the geology of the eastern Sierra noted Bob Sigman, Director of the Beverley and Jim Rogers Museum of Lone Pine Film History in Lone Pine. “Directors could film different scenes simply by shifting the cameras around instead of having to take them down and set them up somewhere else,” he said. Also different was the lighting. Called the “Valley of the Long Shadow” because of the 20 mile shadow cast by the Sierra in the evening sun, the Alabama Hills offered dynamic lighting throughout the day. In addition, thanks to the road system built to support the construction of the controversial aqueduct from Owens Lake to Los Angeles in 1908-12, Lone Pine was a relatively easy day trek for the film companies coming from Los Angeles. Plus, they could stop and film at Red Rock Canyon along the way and get paid for a day’s work.

"I think the townspeople loved it," said Langley. "I've heard few complaints. They [the movie companies] left money behind and didn't stay long." Filming outdoor scenes in the Alabamas only took seven to eight days and then the company went back to Los Angeles to shoot the rest of the movie. Even Lone Pine got into the action, as scenes were shot in town and around the buildings there. The Spainhower Anchor Ranch helped supply horses and cattle for the movies, recollected Sigman. "Locals served as extras and helped build sets. They were more involved in the 1930's and '40's than they are today. Today, Hollywood brings what it needs, including catering trucks."

The townspeople respected the stars, and the actors reciprocated. The actors loved the area, and to this day their children and grandchildren tell stories about their adventures in Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills. Rogers only made six movies in the Alabama Hills, but visited Lone Pine often. William Boyd lived in a cabin that now bears "Hoppy's" name when he was making some of the Hopalong Cassidy movies that were filmed in the Alabamas.

Figure 2." Roy Rogers and Trigger*." Courtesy of t*he Museum of Western Film History *archives*. Used with permission.

Most of the major cowboy stars made movies in the Alabama Hills—Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, Tim Holt, Randolph Scott, John Wayne and Clayton Moore, to name just a few. Rogers made his staring film debut in Under Western Stars (1938) in the Alabama Hills. Autry made 16 movies in the area including Boots and Saddles (1937), and Boyd proved that good guys could wear black as Hopalong Cassidy chased outlaws in a record-setting 66 feature movies between

1935 and 1948, approximately 22 of which were made in the Alabamas. Boyd is also credited by film historian Dave Holland with reintroducing movie goers and movie makers to Westerns and the Alabama Hills by airing his Hopalong Cassidy adventures on the newly popular 1950's venue called television.

The heyday of the Western movie was the 1930's and early '40's, according to Langley, with the stars portraying the historical western period of 1870-90. By the 1950's the movies were feature length, in color, and had more adult themes. The role of women changed from being part of the set and needing saving by the cowboy to more realistic treatment. Violence became much more pronounced, more graphic. Themes such as land and water control, a topic that resonated with Owens Valley residents, became bigger issues.

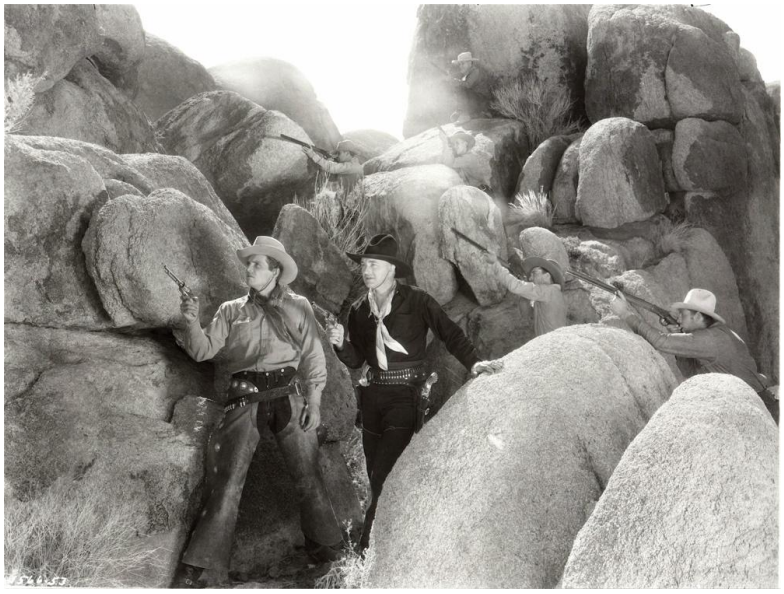

Figure 3. *"*Hopalong Cassidy (William Boyd).*" Courtesy of t*he Museum of Western Film History *archives*. Used with permission.

The early Westerns had a different kind of acting, said Sigman. There were more facial expressions, more body language, and story lines were different. There was more subtlety then. There was a different kind of actor, real action with cowboys on horses. Today we have visual effects; back then people put their life on the line with their own stunts.

"Why do we care so much?" mused Langley. "What was the importance of the Western?" They taught us how to behave, he said. They taught kids right from wrong, and how to stand up for the community. They taught lessons about freedom, simple ethics and how to treat women. The stars

stood for something. We see our world as much more complex. Most of the Westerns portrayed the ideal West, not the West as it really was. “The Western,” he concluded, “was one of our [American] truly original creations.”

The Alabama Hills has been one of Hollywood’s, and perhaps the world’s, biggest back lots, boasts Sigman. Movies and commercials continue to be filmed there under the watchful eye of the Bureau of Land Management which has had oversight of the area since 1969.

Although not as many Westerns have been filmed there as in days gone past, the West has been won many times over in large part because of Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills where the legacy of the Western lives on. Lone Pine celebrates its Western film heritage in various ways throughout the year. The Beverly and Jim Rogers Museum of Lone Pine Film History opened in 2006 with hundreds of items from movies made in the Lone Pine/Alabama Hills area on display and a theater for film screenings. Buildings in town such as the Mt. Whitney Restaurant display movie posters, many of which have been autographed by the stars. Movie locations in the Alabama Hills, including the Gene Autry Rock, can be found by visitors via self-guided tour maps.

And every year since 1990 the annual Lone Pine Film Festival has brought film lovers to town from all over to watch a seemingly endless array of movies and to take tours into the Alabama Hills to see where their favorite films were made. The Film Festivals celebrate the early films over Columbus Day weekend every year with a star-studded cast of Hollywood “folks,” family and, of course, movies to see once again where the West was won.

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