
BEYOND THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD:

Sesquicentennial Visions of Kansas and the Great Plains in Film

edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch

The place of Kansas's most iconic film image in the American cinematic imaginary was reaffirmed at this year's Academy Awards, when the evening closed with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," sung by the students of Staten Island's PS22 Chorus. At the same time, for viewers looking in that performance for the Kansas roots of the refrain, what was clearest was the increasing deterritorialization of the tune: it was no longer about Kansas, but about New York City public-school kids finding their way onto a Hollywood stage. This deterritorializing trend is obvious elsewhere, too: look for the song on YouTube, and the first video that currently pops up is Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwo'ole's Hawaiian cover of the tune, which turns it into a paean to his island's scenery. And note that one of the most regular places to find Oz citations (usefully gathered by the Internet Movie Database at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032138/movieconnections>) is in the science-fiction genre, in universes far, far away from Kansas. In 2010 alone, for example, such references to the classic film appeared in *Fringe*, *Dollhouse*, and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* and as a hook in ads for the new fantasy video game *Rift*. Even David Grossman, the Israeli novelist, worked an Oz reference into his new novel, *To the End of the Land* (2010), where it is Haifa, not Kansas, that Dorothy is not in anymore (p. 522). The deterritorialization of the Oz reference suggests that the status of Kansas as the otherworld to Oz's color-rich realm is increasingly irrelevant to the film's range of reference.

Meanwhile, however, as the state celebrates its sesquicentennial, film representations of the region and its history have figured quite prominently in the celebrations. The McPherson Opera House has hosted a "Kansas on Film" series of memorable Hollywood films with Kansas themes, and Abilene's Heritage Center is sponsoring a series of documentaries on Kansas history through the course of the year. Kansas films have been a topic on Kansas Public Radio's *KPR Presents*, where Tom Averill and I discussed the image of Kansas in the movies with host Kaye McIntyre, and the Kansas Humanities Council's sesquicentennial activities have included tours of programs on Kansas films throughout the state.

Striking, too, in surveying films with Kansas and Great Plains connections over the course of the past two years, is the significant range of historical material covered. The Western is there, of course, above all else in the new remake of *True Grit*. But so are Kansas-born figures like Amelia Earhart, poet William Stafford, and Beat writer William Burroughs (treated in Yony Leyser's 2010 documentary *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*, not reviewed

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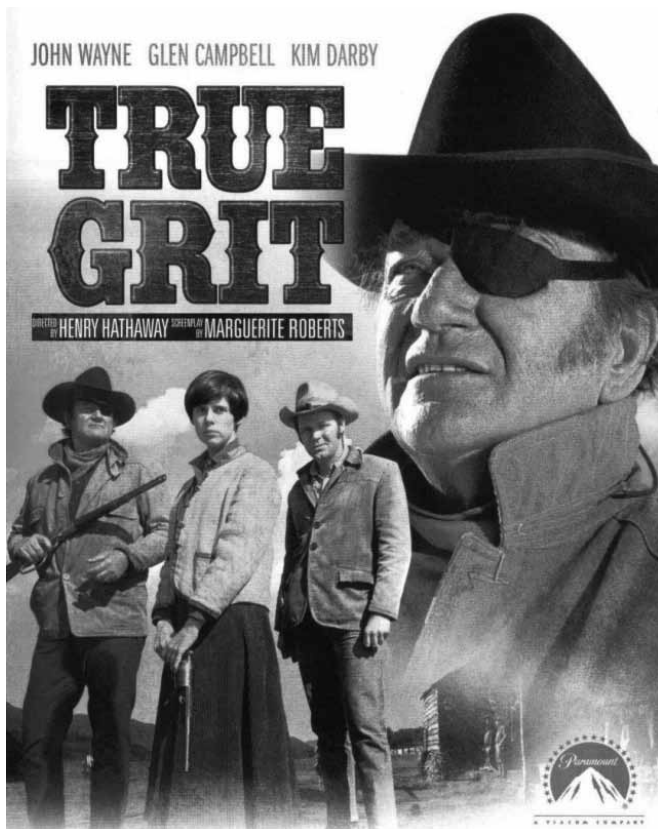
Although many recent references to Oz point to places far removed from Kansas, suggesting that the state's status as the otherworld to Oz's color-rich realm is increasingly irrelevant, Kansas sometimes still celebrates itself as the home there is no place like. The quizzical glances of some Kansans toward Dorothy and her companions at the annual Oztoberfest in Wamego, however, suggest that the old story no longer expresses everything there is to say about the state.

here). Twentieth-century Native American history, the fate of the Flint Hills prairies, Kansas politics, Topeka mariachis and delicatessens, industrialization projects, and the state's small-town communities all figure in our reviews. Other films released in the last two years but not treated in these pages cover topics ranging from railroad development, Kansas WPA projects, and the murder of Wichita abortion provider Dr. George Tiller. So even if Dorothy is losing her Kansasness, there remains much to celebrate in this sesquicentennial year about Kansas's place in historical film.

As always, we open our reviews with a classic, and this year, as we were able to do once before (in the contrast between the 1957 and 2007 versions of *3:10 to Yuma*, reviewed in these pages two years ago by Cynthia Miller), we offer a comparative perspective on a classic film and its recent remake, *True Grit* (1969, 2010). As long as Hollywood keeps recycling such material, we will use the opportunity to examine the ways in which historical

representations of Kansas and plains history shift over time. Bruce Kahler, professor of history at Bethany College, contributes his views on the two films. Readers of *Kansas History* will know Kahler from his essay in the spring 2011 issue, "John A. Martin, Soldier State Visionary"; he also participated in a sesquicentennial celebration of Kansas film as a commentator on *Seven Angry Men* (1955) when it was shown in McPherson.

We turn from Westerns to Native Americans in our review of Kevin Willmott's *The Only Good Indian*, a film that takes as one of its starting points the role played by the United States Indian Industrial Training School (what is now Haskell Indian Nations University) in assimilating Indians to white ways, and which examines the end of the Wild West. Thomas Fox Averill, professor of creative writing at Washburn University, reviews the film for us. Readers of *Kansas History* will know Averill well, for work ranging from his examination of our Oz obsessions ("Oz and Kansas Culture," spring 1989) to



Charles Portis's novel *True Grit* is about Mattie Ross, a fourteen-year-old girl who hires the meanest federal marshal she can find and then insists on accompanying him into Indian Territory as he pursues her father's murderer. The most profound change made to the original story in the 1969 film adaptation is to nudge Mattie Ross to the side in favor of the flawed marshal, Reuben "Rooster" Cogburn. The reason for this is simple: this *True Grit* was a John Wayne movie. Poster courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

his "Flyover Country" essay in the journal's "Kansas at 150" issue ("Flyover Country: Images of Kansas," spring 2011), as well as for his contributions to these biennial film surveys. His edited collection *What Kansas Means To Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State*, just reissued in a twentieth-anniversary edition, has been chosen as a Kansas Reads book, and his new novel, *rode*, inspired by Jimmy Driftwood's song "Tennessee Stud," was released earlier this summer. Our perspective on *Amelia*, the recent biopic about Kansas's pioneering aviator, is provided by Ann Birney, an independent scholar who has studied Earhart's career in detail in order to don her persona in Chautauqua-style events for the historical performance troupe Ride into History.

Kansas poet William Stafford's position as a conscientious objector during World War II and his development as a pacifist throughout his life provides

the topic for Haydn Reiss's film *Every War Has Two Losers*. Reviewer Rachel Goossen of Washburn University is a close student of conscientious objection and peace movements and the author of *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941–1947* (1997). She has also published widely on Mennonite history. *Wounded Knee*, the final installment of American Experience's *We Shall Remain* series on Native history, brings the program firmly to the Great Plains and to the late twentieth century, focusing on the showdown between the American Indian Movement and both federal and local officials at the Wounded Knee site (although the episode also echoes more distant history, of the 1890 massacre and the assimilation program targeting Native Americans through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Kerry Wynn, a professor of history at Washburn University, whose publications include "'Miss Indian Territory' and 'Mr. Oklahoma Territory': Marriage, Settlement, and Citizenship in the Cherokee Nation and the United States," in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (2009), and book and film reviews for *Kansas History*, provides our review of the documentary.

The film *Mariachi Estrella* documents the brief history of Topeka's pioneering female mariachi group, the success of which was cut short by tragedy. Valerie Mendoza, our reviewer, remembers seeing the group perform many times as a child. She has taught history at the University of Kansas, is the author of "They Came to Kansas: Searching for a Better Life" (*Kansas Quarterly*, summer 1994), and now lives in Athens, Ohio. William Least Heat-Moon's return to Chase County, Kansas, twenty years after the publication of his loving portrait of the Flint Hills in *PrairyErth*, and the thoughts of Least Heat-Moon and a range of citizens of the region on the preservation of the prairie ecology are themes treated in *Return to PrairyErth*. William Sheldon, who teaches literature and writing at Hutchinson Community College and has authored two volumes of poetry, *Retrieving Old Bones* (2002) and *Into Distant Grass* (2009), reviews the film for us.

"What's the matter with Kansas?" was a question first posed by William Allen White in 1896, in an editorial lambasting the Populist movement. Just over a century later the question was asked again by Thomas Frank, in a book examining the appeal of social conservatism to Kansans, who, Frank argued, were convinced to vote against their own economic interests in their

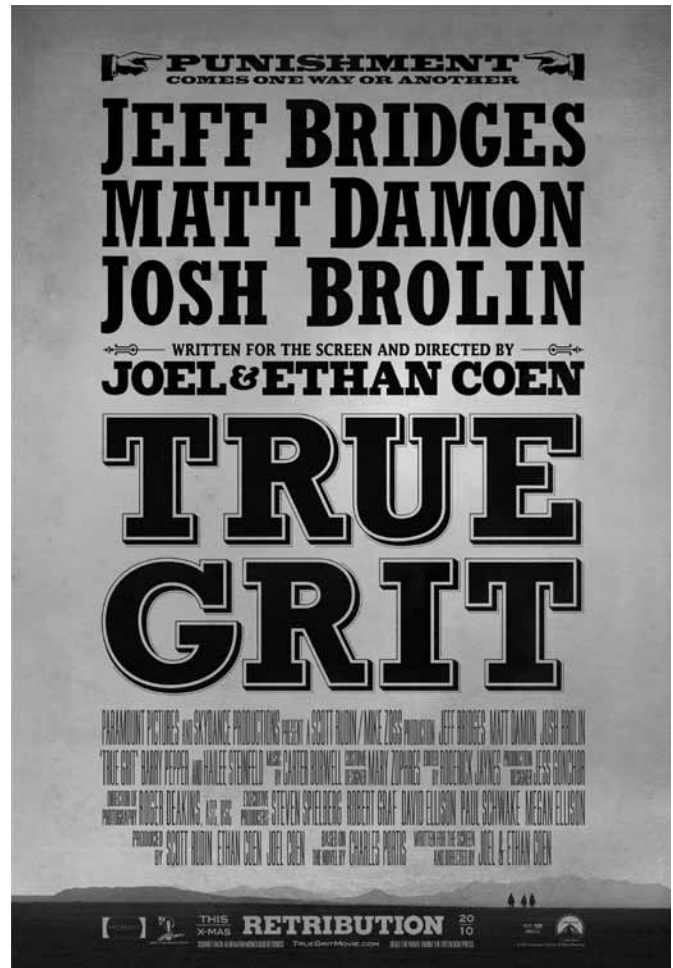
support of Republicans. A new documentary opens the question again, and it is reviewed here by Burdett Loomis, professor of political science at the University of Kansas. Loomis has written extensively about politics and the legislative process; his recent work includes the forthcoming *Kansas Pastoral: The Politics of Change, 1960–1975*, as well as the edited volume *Delay and Dysfunction: The U.S. Senate 1960–2010* (2011).

A local delicatessen’s deep history and its place on Topeka’s ethnic, cultural, and social map are explored in the documentary *Porubsky’s—Transcendent Deli*. Poet Amy Fleury, a Kansas native now teaching at McNeese University in Louisiana, reviews the work. She is the author of two verse collections, *Beautiful Trouble* (2004) and *Reliquaries of the Lesser Saints* (2010). Finally, the Kansas Humanities Council has long had a role in developing Kansas film subjects through its grants program, but it has now taken a further step by developing the FLIKS (Film Lovers in Kansas) programs, which, like its TALK book-discussion programs, circulate in libraries and other sites throughout Kansas. So far, two programs of short films, “As Big as We Think” and (because you can never quite escape the echoes of Oz) “There’s No Place Like Home,” have been developed. Because I have served as a discussion leader for the FLIKS series, and have some sense of how the films play for Kansas audiences, I will be reviewing the two film collections myself.

True Grit. Directed by Henry Hathaway; screenplay by Marguerite Roberts, based on the novel by Charles Portis; produced by Hal B. Wallis. 1969; color; 128 minutes. Distributed by Paramount Pictures.

True Grit. Directed, written, and produced by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, based on the novel by Charles Portis. 2010; color; 110 minutes. Distributed by Paramount Pictures.

Charles Portis’s agent sought to auction the movie rights to his novel *True Grit* before its serialized publication in 1968, perhaps indicating that Portis wrote the story with the Western film genre in mind. If so, he intended his tale of revenge to be most unconventional. Rather than focusing on the male hero who pursues vengeance against those



The 2010 version of *True Grit* was a tremendous commercial and critical success. With over \$170 million in domestic ticket sales, it became the highest grossing Western of all time. The film was nominated for ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Film critics were nearly unanimous in judging the movie to be superior in every regard to its predecessor. Poster courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

who have harmed him, *True Grit* is about a fourteen-year-old girl who hires the meanest federal marshal she can find and then insists on accompanying him into Indian Territory as he pursues her father’s murderer. Mattie Ross is a fascinating character and a refreshing change from the usual females found in Westerns. She possesses neither the dance-hall girl’s sexual allure and warm heart, nor the nurturing, maternal instincts of the schoolmarm. Like other women in the imagined West, however, Mattie is an outpost of civilization in a masculine frontier. A sharp mind and strict Presbyterian morals guide her through many dangerous trials.

Portis's reader soon recognizes that the young girl from near Dardanelle in Yell County, Arkansas, has every bit as much "true grit" as the men she encounters.

Mattie's "sand" was faithfully adapted by screenwriter Marguerite Roberts, director Henry Hathaway, and actress Kim Darby in the 1969 movie. We first see her as the thrifty bookkeeper of her family's farm and soon after as a tough-as-nails horse trader. She is swift and blunt with her opinions, can cross a river on her horse when others use the ferry, and even knows how to roll a cigarette. And yet there is a girlish vulnerability that is new to the character. Darby is rather cheerful considering the circumstances, and she is downright stylish with her mop-top haircut and vested skirt suit. But, in a private moment at a boarding house in Fort Smith, the first stop on her pursuit of the killer, we see her weeping, perhaps suggesting that her willfulness is just a front.

The softer characterization of Mattie in Hathaway's film adaptation is matched by a brighter and more visually attractive setting photographed by Lucien Ballard. Much of the novel takes place in the evening or at night, but Hathaway and crew filmed in daylight, and not in Arkansas or Oklahoma, but on the western slopes of the Rockies in Colorado. Several panoramic shots of the gorgeous mountain scenery and fall foliage lighten the mood of the drama.

But the most profound change made by the film is to nudge Mattie Ross to the side of the stage in favor of the man she hires to find her father's killer, Reuben "Rooster" Cogburn. The reason for this is simple: this *True Grit* was a John Wayne movie. As Randy Roberts and James S. Olson tell the story in *John Wayne: American* (1995), Wayne was anxious for his own production company to purchase the rights to the novel. However, when Portis decided to sell them to producer Hal Wallis, "Duke was badly disappointed, calling Wallis himself to say so. Wallis chuckled knowingly over the phone. Only one man on earth could play Rooster Cogburn, and that was John Wayne. He offered Duke the part on the spot. Wayne roared his approval and accepted immediately" (p. 562).

Rooster Cogburn, a cantankerous veteran of Quantrell's Confederate raiders, loves nothing more than to play cards and "pull a cork." He is impatient with the criminal legal system and would rather shoot a scoundrel than serve papers on him. Mattie is offended by his crude behavior but impressed by his reputation, and she eventually comes to respect his courage. Rooster is perplexed at first by Mattie's independence, though he recognizes in her his own stubbornness ("By God, she

reminds me of me!"). By the end of the story, there is a palpable affection between the fat man with an eye-patch and his "baby sister." Wayne won his only Oscar for his portrayal of Cogburn as a likeable misfit, although critics and historians agree his greatest performance was in the role of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), for which he was not even nominated.

The 2010 version of *True Grit* was a tremendous commercial and critical success. With over \$170 million in domestic ticket sales, it became the highest grossing Western of all time. The film was nominated for ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Joel and Ethan Coen, writers and directors of the remake and longtime critical darlings, were praised for faithfully adapting a novel that allowed them to indulge their taste for dark humor and distinctive speech patterns. Film critics were nearly unanimous in judging the movie to be superior in every regard to its predecessor.

In the new version, Mattie (Hailee Steinfeld) is restored to her central role in the story and is even more implacable and self-assured. Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) is grimmer, less articulate, and devoid of sentimentality. His stature is also reduced somewhat by having to share the screen with a stronger characterization of Mr. La Boeuf (Matt Damon in the new film; Glen Campbell in the earlier version), a pompous Texas Ranger who is pursuing the same man for an earlier murder.

The difference between the two films is perhaps most apparent in their last scenes. Cogburn has saved Mattie from certain death by snakebite. In the Wayne version, Rooster then visits Mattie at her family's cemetery. Her arm is in a sling, healing. Their conversation suggests they will see each other again, but, just in case they do not, Mattie expresses her affection for her friend and hero by inviting him to one day be buried alongside her. Moved, he agrees, and with a flourish rides off, playfully jumping his horse over a nearby fence rail. The Coens' tale hews more closely to the somber and poignant mood of the novel. Mattie has lost her arm to the poisonous bite and has also lost touch with Rooster. It is a quarter century before she is able to track him down, only to discover that he has recently died. She has his remains moved to her family plot and, in the end, as she muses over how time flies, we see her walking away from the gravesite and toward the horizon.

How might we explain the contrast between the two versions of *True Grit*? Sometimes Westerns can be understood as commentaries on their times, a classic example being the close association of *High Noon* (1952) with the political repression of the McCarthy era.

But in this case that does not seem to be a promising path of interpretation. The 1969 film is comparatively sentimental and upbeat, yet it was made in the midst of one of the most turbulent periods in our nation's past. Most critics have suggested that the 2010 rendition is not so much a reflection of twenty-first-century life as it is of the Coens' admiration for a novel written four decades earlier.

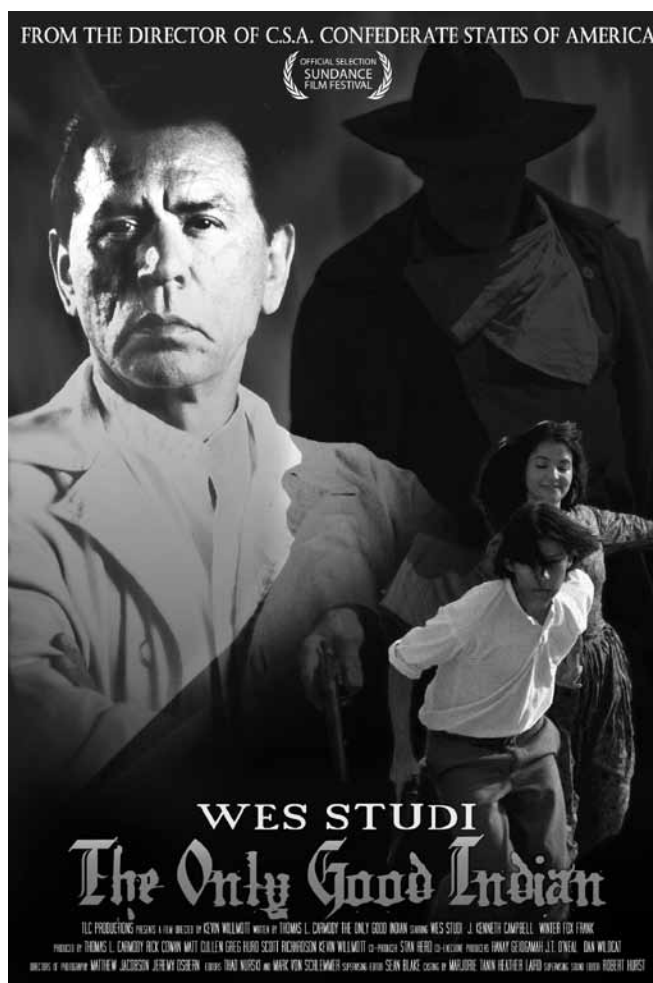
We would be on more solid ground by arguing that the differences between these two films are due to the distinctive sensibilities of the directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and other creative personnel who worked on them. Furthermore, we should recognize that the Western genre changed between 1969 and 2010. Henry Hathaway adapted *True Grit* in the same year that Sam Peckinpah directed *The Wild Bunch*; historian Paul Andrew Hutton has contended that the former represents the last of the "traditional" Westerns, whereas the latter is the first "post-modern" example of the genre ("True Masterpiece," in *True West*, March 29, 2011, at http://www.truewestmagazine.com/stories/true_masterpiece/1774/all/). The Coen brothers, in other words, could be expected to make a *True Grit* that was darker and more graphically violent than the more traditionally sanguine Hathaway retelling.

Bruce R. Kahler
Bethany College

The Only Good Indian. Directed by Kevin Willmott; written by Thomas L. Carmody; produced by Thomas L. Carmody, Rick Cowan, Matt Cullen, Greg Hurd, Scott Richardson, and Kevin Willmott. English, with some subtitled Kickapoo and Cherokee. 2009; color; 114 minutes. Distributed by TLC Productions.

In Kevin Willmott's *The Only Good Indian*, set just after the turn of the twentieth century, the past is myth, the future cruel, and the present is the only place where redemption is possible. In particular, the Old West collides with the New West, and the only good Indians and Indian fighters are trapped in the middle.

Possibly one of the latter, Sheriff Henry McCoy (J. Kenneth Campbell) is legendary for Indian fighting—especially the killings at the massacre at Sand Creek—as well as for buffalo hunting, crack marksmanship, and



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survival. He carries the blade of an Indian knife in his back, revenge for his buffalo slaughter. He has outlived the West and is now rendered as a mere character in dime novels and film, just like Buffalo Bill, who monetized himself and the immediate past into present myth in his Wild West Show.

One of the "good Indians," perhaps, is Black Fox (Wes Studi), who in times past scouted for the army, leading them toward that same Sand Creek, and who now goes by the name Sam Franklin and runs his own detective agency. He rides a motorcycle and has ambitions to join the Pinkerton Agency. With equal amorality he hunts down murderers and runaway Indian children who have

been forcibly removed from their families and enrolled in boarding schools. Franklin's goal is to "out white man the goddamn white man."

These two Old West figures meet up again when Charlie #363, Kickapoo boy Nachwihiata (Winter Fox Frank), runs away from the Haskell Institute, an Indian boarding school in Lawrence, and is captured by Franklin, who plans to return him for a ten-dollar reward. When the two Indians are cornered by violent white men, their resistance turns into murder. As Sheriff McCoy chases them for those crimes, Franklin pursues a separate bounty, dragging Charlie along on his hunt for a Native woman wanted for murder. Sally (Therza Defoe), incarcerated in the Federal Indian Insane Asylum and repeatedly raped by her guards, has killed one of them with a chain and sought refuge in a church. Franklin and Charlie capture her, but Charlie cannot let Franklin give her over for the reward money. And McCoy, when he visits Haskell to find out about Charlie and Franklin, is disgusted by the forced incarceration of any human. When he later sees more Native children being taken to the boarding school, he cannot let that happen.

In the Old West, violence and heroics went hand in hand with the culture wars between Native and Anglo. In the New West, run by railroads and clocks, by alphabets and advertising, these characters are equally lost and equally trapped. McCoy and Franklin are more alike than different. Franklin rides a machine, but he cannot be a machine. McCoy rides a horse into law enforcement and pulp fiction, but he cannot seem to bring justice—not, at least, for the Native children who continue to be abducted—nor can he survive as mere fiction. In one scene, he watches a silent Western film, a movie about himself and the Indian wars. Reduced to its terrible black-and-white simplicity, mythologized beyond reality and pain, violence and death, the portrayal is so overwhelming McCoy can only stand up and scream.

The end of the movie sees the inevitable showdown: McCoy and Franklin, who has again become Black Fox, draw their guns in a gutted church, with Charlie in the middle. Sally has been redeemed and returned to her protectors in their church. Black Fox has renounced the Sam Franklin who wanted to be a Pinkerton Agent; Henry McCoy, who cannot be killed, is ready to die.

In one scene in the film, a sign at the boarding school reads: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." *The Only Good Indian* might have another slogan: Kill the Man, Save his Dignity. The heroes of this piece, except for the boy, are already dead. In a wonderful conceit, Charlie #363

is reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) all through the film, the book his only possession. He is a smart boy and is captivated by the story. The film's screenwriter (and producer) Thomas L. Carmody very skillfully picked passages from the novel that fit his own story perfectly. For example, vampires suffer "the curse of immortality; they cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world." The same is true of Franklin and McCoy. And the same is true of a New West run by time and capital.

Already dead, too, are elements of the Old West that will not survive the multiplying evils of this New West. An all-black settlement, Harkin, is turning to dust because the railroad has passed it by. Native language and culture are being buried in mock funerals in boarding schools. Before he escapes, Charlie goes up into the big clock that dominates the school. He places a buffalo nickel, thrown at him by mocking white children, into the clock's cogs, as though to stop the future. The heroic West has gone to California, like one of McCoy's admirers, who hopes to play an Indian fighter in the movies. "Go out there and lie," McCoy tells him. "Make it a big one, because the bigger the lie the more they believe it."

Willmott's film is big, but it is not a lie. It is a skillful portrayal of the collision of myths, of the injustices of "taming"—the West, the Indian, the soldier, the lawman—and of the shadows of all of those trapped between a bloody past and a bloodless future.

Thomas Fox Averill
Washburn University

Amelia. Directed by Mira Nair; written by Ron Bass and Anna Hamilton Phelan; produced by Ted Waitt, Kevin Hyman, and Lydia Dean Pilcher. 2009; color with black-and-white newsreels; 111 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation; DVD distributed through Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment LLC.

Having researched, written about, and interpreted Amelia Earhart through dramatic first-person narrative for over fifteen years, I will admit to being rather set in my understanding of Kansas's favorite daughter. When a new interpretation appears, however, I try to suspend



Amelia, the 2009 biopic of the Atchison-born aviatrix, plays fast and loose with the facts and is marred by awkward, trite dialogue. On the other hand, Earhart's strength is well represented by Hilary Swank, the airplanes are gorgeous, and there are some fine moments in the film. Poster courtesy of Fox Searchlight.

disbelief. I saw *Amelia* in Atchison, Amelia Earhart's birthplace and the site of most of her best growing-up experiences, on the day of its release. Reserved tickets included admission to the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum, where costumes worn by Hilary Swank as Amelia were on display. There was great excitement among locals convinced that the movie was going to put Atchison on the map. But the film bamboozled me. *Amelia* is not about the determination of a woman to fly at an especially important moment in the history of American aviation, a determination that encouraged other women to follow their own dreams. Instead it is about two affairs and a marriage. And it is not Amelia's story, but that of Gore Vidal.

The film's historical flaws are not the fault of the two biographies that *Amelia* credits as sources. Mary S.

Lovell's *The Sound of Wings* (1989) and Susan Butler's *East to the Dawn* (1997) are both sound works. Nor can they be blamed on Elgen Long, the researcher and aviator credited as a "story consultant" for the film and coauthor of *Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved* (1999). *Amelia* confuses in spite of these experts.

Earhart's life was full of interesting decisions, most of which the filmmakers ignore. For instance, in her *20 Hrs., 40 Mins.: Our Flight in the Friendship* (1928), Earhart herself said that she had no particular affinity for airplanes until she was an adult and volunteering at the Sapdina Military Hospital in Toronto, Ontario. In the film, however, we see her as a child standing in a wheat field (a location removed from Earhart's Atchison home), wearing shorts (although we know that Earhart, born in 1897, wore dresses even for outdoor sports until she was an adult and could flaunt social mores), looking up at an airplane as her adult voice declares that she was inspired to fly as a child. Nor could the filmmakers let Earhart have her own wedding. Instead of a judge and a minimum number of witnesses in her mother-in-law-to-be's living room, they gave her a romantic garden wedding. The truth of Earhart's life is repeatedly ignored.

Awkward, trite dialogue frequently contributes to the sense that this film is all wrong. An example: during their around-the-world flight, Earhart (Hilary Swank) calls navigator Fred Noonan (Christopher Eccleston) forward into the cockpit to appreciate wildlife below as they fly over Gambia. "Look how free they are!" she shouts. Noonan's reply: "For a gal who don't like schedules, you sure got yourself hooked up with the wrong fella in Mr. Putnam."

This leads to the problem of sequencing. The film uses Earhart's attempt to fly around the world as the story's frame, but it is intrusive. Cutting back and forth to earlier and then later events results in neither the frame nor the many stories within it, told in flashbacks, working to build tension. As a result, the film's storytelling is as poor as its history. Amelia flies her white-knuckle solo across the Atlantic Ocean so quickly that it leaves little impression. We see thunderheads and a flash of blue flame, but there is no reference to the decision that she made to keep going instead of turning back. The conflict is all external; she is just along for the ride. Even the scene in which Earhart and Noonan fly from Lae, New Guinea, toward Howland Island is damaged by Noonan breaking down emotionally when he was more likely to have been frantically looking for the island. Do we identify with Earhart, who is still trying to find their goal,

or Noonan, whom the camera repeatedly finds sobbing into his hands?

The central problem, however, is not technical but interpretive. In the movie a young Gore Vidal (William Cuddy) has a nightmare while staying at the Earhart/Putnam's with his father, aviator Eugene Vidal (Ewan McGregor). Earhart leaps to her feet when Gore calls out instead of his father doing so. After she talks with him about confronting fear, he asks her to marry his father. Earhart rejects his plea, pointing out that she is "already married to Mr. Putnam." Viewers never find out that Amelia's husband, George Palmer Putnam (Richard Gere), had sons from his first marriage to whom she was committed; although Gore is in several scenes, David and George are not even mentioned. This is not Amelia's film, it is storyteller Gore Vidal's film, which is one reason it does not work.

In the souvenir book *Amelia: The Motion Picture* (2009), screenwriter Anna Hamilton Phelan complains: "After slogging my way through most all of the thirty-eight books written about the woman" she still had not found her "soul. The wound she tap-danced around. Every memorable film character has one." Phelan hoped to "use that scar to layer the character." But all was not lost: "Then a stroke of good fortune. Gore Vidal, who as a child knew Amelia, was kind enough to spend an afternoon with . . . me. To share his memories. It wasn't so much what he said about Amelia, but how he said it. With a definite tinge of sadness" (p. 11). From Vidal's wound, his sadness, Phelan created an Earhart who flew and broke records because she "believed she was not good enough."

But Vidal, born into the eastern economic and political elite, does not "get" Kansas and, therefore, Earhart. Vidal describes Earhart's "humble beginnings," but she was the granddaughter of Amelia Harres Otis, who was proud to a fault of her Philadelphia upbringing, and Alfred Otis of Atchison, a retired district court judge and bank president. She lived with her grandparents nine months out of the year through eighth grade, going to a private college-preparatory school and reading through their extensive library. Earhart knew how to move in the "best" society. In fact, her social graces were influential in her being selected to represent all American women in her first flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Such an upbringing was not out of reach in Kansas, although the film gives the impression that Kansans are a simple lot and the sort of people who say things like "hooey."

The film does give a sense of Earhart's determination to control her own future. That meant avoiding marriage.

When Putnam persisted, she agreed but on the condition that, if things did not work out after a year, they would go their separate ways and not be held to "any medieval code of faithfulness." In most other respects, however, the movie plays fast and loose with the facts, is stilted in its dialogue, and loses Earhart's story to Vidal's. On the other hand, Earhart's strength is well represented by Hilary Swank, the airplanes are gorgeous, and there are some fine moments, including Earhart stroking the microphone while talking to Putnam before taking off from Lae and director Mira Nair's "commodity montage," which carries the film's indifference to historicity to such an extreme that it works, almost as a spoof of itself.

Ann Birney
Ride into History

Every War Has Two Losers: A Poet's Meditation on Peace. Produced and directed by Haydn Reiss, based on the writings of William Stafford. 2009; color and black-and-white archival footage; 32 minutes. Distributed by Zinc Films.

This documentary is based on the journals of the celebrated American poet, William Stafford (1914–1993), winner of the National Book Award and consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress, as well as the author of more than sixty books. Contemplating war's futility and the alternative possibilities of reconciliation, Stafford wrote hauntingly about individual and collective responsibility, what he termed "the people who are ready to do right" in the face of cultural certitude about war's inevitability. Early in the film, we get a glimpse of Stafford's resolve and profound sense of hope: "I can't stop war. Jesus couldn't stop war. Eisenhower couldn't stop war. Why should I blame myself for not stopping war? What I can do is to do things that are within my power. I can decide there's one person who won't be in it. *That's a possibility*" (Stafford journal entry, February 2, 1983).

Born in Hutchinson and raised in western Kansas, Stafford was pursuing a master's degree at the University of Kansas when America's entry into the Second World War interrupted his studies and sharpened his advocacy for peace. In the film, Stafford's close friend, the poet Robert Bly, reflects that Stafford's decision in 1942 to declare himself a conscientious objector removed him

A POET'S MEDITATION ON PEACE

Based on the Journals of William Stafford



Featuring

Coleman Barks
Robert Bly
John Gorka
Maxine Hong Kingston
Michael Meade
W.S. Merwin
Naomi Shihab Nye
Kim Stafford
Alice Walker

EVERY WAR HAS TWO LOSERS

www.everywar.com

A Film directed and produced by Haydn Reiss

The documentary Every War Has Two Losers is based on the journals of the celebrated American poet, William Stafford, a Hutchinson, Kansas, native. Contemplating war's futility and the alternative possibilities of reconciliation, Stafford wrote hauntingly about individual and collective responsibility, what he termed "the people who are ready to do right" in the face of cultural certitude about war's inevitability. Poster courtesy of the filmmaker.

from the mainstream of millions of Americans mobilizing for war. Taking an unpopular stance, Stafford embarked on a four-year sojourn in Civilian Public Service camps in Arkansas, California, and Illinois.

Working alongside other unpaid conscientious objectors in firefighting, soil conservation, and social-service agencies proved formative for Stafford. From 1942 until his release from Civilian Public Service in 1946, he made scores of pacifist friends in the camps with whom he read and discussed literature, and he developed his habit of rising before dawn to write. In later decades, as an educator, husband, and father in Oregon, he practiced the discipline of writing daily, eventually producing more than twenty thousand pages of journal reflections and poetic musings, ranging from the invitational ("Everyone is a conscientious objector to something.

Are there things *you* wouldn't do?") to the demanding ("Why are there nations you don't like? That's a fiction you're responding to, a label put onto a million varied individuals. Your feeling has been created, and created by interests you might do well to analyze").

From this rich store of journal entries and poems, producer-director Haydn Reiss has crafted a relatively short (32-minute) film juxtaposing historic images of war and its legacies of destruction, fear, and alienation with photographs and video footage of Stafford in Oregon, in his home and his classroom at Lewis and Clark College, where he taught literature and writing to generations of students. In the film, actor Peter Coyote provides voice-over for Stafford, and a cast of poets—including Maxine Hong Kingston, Robert Bly, Alice Walker, and W. S. Merwin—read Stafford's work and interpret his antiwar perspectives.

By using influential writers to convey Stafford's views, Reiss gives minimal attention to the biographical or narrative storyline, the particulars of Stafford's life. Instead, he emphasizes the appeal and relevance of Stafford's antiwar commitments across time and space. Stafford's literary friends remind us that the work of the pacifist, perhaps like that of the poet, is "not to be judged by immediate results." Stafford's longing for peace speaks to the virtues of humility and patience, to environmental commitments and preservation, and to a carefully nurtured belief in "the fragile but essential community of the world."

Every War Has Two Losers is based on the book of the same name published a decade after Stafford's death, comprised of a collection made by his son, Kim Stafford, of his journal entries and poems on peace and reconciliation. Together, these stand as deeply human responses to war and conflict. Viewers of the film who want to dig more deeply into Stafford's grounding of his lifework in Kansas-influenced pacifism may want to read *Down in My Heart*, originally published in 1947 and based on his master's thesis at the University of Kansas, an autobiographical account of his forestry and other civilian work projects with fellow conscientious objectors during World War II. Also valuable for the additional context they provide this film are *Kansas Poems of William Stafford* (edited by Denise Low, reprinted in an expanded edition in 2010), as well as Kim Stafford's appreciative and insightful book *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford* (2002).

Rachel Waltner Goossen
Washburn University

Wounded Knee, part 5 of *We Shall Remain*. Directed by Stanley Nelson; written by Marcia Smith. 2009; color and black-and-white archival footage; 74 minutes. Produced and distributed by the American Experience, PBS.

The makers of *Wounded Knee*, the final documentary of PBS's *We Shall Remain* series, faced a daunting, but enviable, task. Of the films in this engaging series, part of the larger *American Experience* program, only *Wounded Knee* focuses centrally on the twentieth century, a time when primary events were recorded on film and primary witnesses are still alive to be interviewed firsthand. Given the wealth of materials available to the filmmakers, the complexity of the historical influences on a multiplicity of participants, and the uneven understanding of American Indian history among the contemporary audience, telling a unified story of the American Indian occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, a seventy-one-day event influenced by centuries of history, is not a simple endeavor. As the film unfolds, the filmmakers merge their portrayal of the goals of the siege participants and the purpose of the documentary into a quest for visibility. *Wounded Knee* is a chronicle of the siege itself and an exposition of its causes that raises important questions about twentieth-century federal American Indian policy, political protest, and the possibilities of publicity.

The most compelling aspect of *Wounded Knee* is the use director Stanley Nelson makes of archival film footage and participant interviews. We see American Indian Movement (AIM) members and Oglala Lakotas from the Pine Ridge Reservation conduct negotiations and rally the ranks in support of the siege. We hear the political and personal stakes of the occupation, as participants reflect on their preparedness to sacrifice their lives in order to create a better future. Those who occupied Wounded Knee sought to reach an American public largely ignorant of, and perilously indifferent to, the difficulties facing American Indians in the twentieth century. They did so in order to achieve their demands: the investigation of treaty violations and of corruption throughout the Indian Service and at Pine Ridge.

The documentary interweaves the narrative of the occupation with explanatory vignettes exploring several of the historical and contemporary factors motivating the protestors. It is here that the filmmakers seek to bring to light the long history preceding the Wounded Knee occupation. The documentary thus briefly examines



Wounded Knee is the fifth and final installment in PBS's *We Shall Remain*, part of the "longest-running, most-watched history series," *American Experience*. The challenge posed to the makers of *Wounded Knee*, is that the film focuses centrally on the twentieth century, a time when primary events were recorded on film and primary witnesses are still alive to be interviewed firsthand. This wealth of material, however, makes it more difficult to tell a unified story. Image courtesy of PBS and Bettman/Corbis.

the corruption on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre, U.S. federal boarding schools, and termination programs for American Indians. Through these vignettes, the documentary places the siege in local and national, as well as historical and contemporary contexts. These histories are not tangentially connected to the events at Wounded Knee in 1973; they are intimately bound together. The men and women who participated in the occupation were residents of Pine Ridge, descendents of survivors of nineteenth-century battles and massacres, boarding-school graduates, and veterans of relocation programs.

In the end, *Wounded Knee* shines its light broadly, providing its viewers with a wide-ranging historical background with which they can interpret the event, all while giving a play-by-play account of turning points within the occupation. Its scope is admirable, yet we might wish for more depth in particular areas, such as the personal histories of men and women from Pine Ridge and AIM who occupied Wounded Knee, or the world of American Indian political organizing in the twentieth century. *Wounded Knee* raises important and pressing questions about threats to American Indian communities and their growth in the twentieth century, the nature of the media, armed protest and violence, the coercive force of the American state, and the relation of the Vietnam War to the conduct and understanding of events such as Wounded Knee. These questions will perhaps lead viewers to contemplate Wounded Knee on many levels.

As the film concludes, it is clear that the occupation served most immediately as a symbol and inspiration for American Indian cultural renewal and political revitalization. These post-occupation trends are certainly too much for one documentary to explicate in depth, and some have served as the subjects for excellent documentaries in their own right. However,

the importance attributed to the occupation of Wounded Knee by interviewees speaks to the idea that visibility is simply the beginning—a means to an end—and hopefully *Wounded Knee*, like the occupation it chronicles, will encourage viewers to learn more.

Kerry Wynn
Washburn University

Mariachi Estrella: A Short Documentary About One of America's First Female Mariachi Bands. Directed by Peter Jasso; produced by Marlo Angell. 2011; color; 30 minutes. Distributed by Via Dolorosa Films.

I saw the band Mariachi Estrella perform many times as a child, and the first time that I saw this movie was at the church where the group got its start, in a room full of former band members and their relatives. The emotion was palpable, the film moving. Rather than being a technical introduction or a history of the mariachi genre, the film lets the music speak for itself. Other than the opening footage from one of the band's television performances, the group's melodies are in the background, subtle yet always there.

Mariachi Estrella is about more than music and musicians, however. The film espouses the importance of friendship, feminism, and community. The death of four of the group's seven members in the collapse of the walkways at Kansas City's Hyatt Regency Hotel in July 1981 serves as the catalyst for the film, although that event is not discussed until the last few minutes. Rather, *Mariachi Estrella* celebrates the musicians and their place in the history of their community. The group began in 1977 as an outgrowth of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church choir in Topeka, Kansas, and quickly became a popular local and regional band. Mariachi Estrella was a family affair, made up of two sets of sisters as well as cousins, but it was more than that. In the film, the surviving members note that it was the friendships they formed that made the group special.

The documentary includes interviews with two of the three surviving band members, Teresa Cuevas and Isabelle Gonzales, along with family of deceased members Dolores Carmona and Linda Scurlock. They all talk about how much fun the women had playing in the band and how it helped them through hard times by giving them a sense of themselves. Two of the members

THE KANSAS HUMANITIES COUNCIL AND JUSTICIA, INC. PRESENT

A VIA DOLOROSA FILM



Mariachi Estrella is about music and musicians, but also about the importance of friendship, feminism, and community. It celebrates the Topeka, Kansas, group that began in 1977 as an outgrowth of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church choir and quickly became a popular local and regional band. The film also remembers the group's tragic end, after four of its seven members died in the collapse of the walkways at Kansas City's Hyatt Regency Hotel in July 1981. Poster courtesy of the filmmakers.

were divorced, a rare occurrence for the time, and others had small children. They recall how they would meet at one another's homes to practice, socializing afterwards, and how close bonds were formed in the process. Being in the band allowed them to be part of something larger and gave them a sense of purpose outside of their day-to-day lives.

Mariachi music is, of course, traditionally the realm of men. Mariachi Estrella, made up entirely of women, was in that way unique. The film explores the role that feminism played in the life of the band and the lives of its members. Cuevas relates how the female members of their audience in particular would get excited to see them and be inspired. Gonzales talks about the tension between the demands of being a band member, including the time it took to practice and travel to performances, and the obligations of raising her family. She shares how

eventually she decided to play only local, in-town gigs and how this probably saved her life.

The film also touches on the historical backdrop of the band's formation by mentioning the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement brought a renewed interest in Mexican culture that included music. Mariachi Estrella was a product of its time, influenced by the Chicano movement and the women's movement. The question of race is also addressed in the movie, as one of the members, Linda Scurlock, was Caucasian and blonde. Her son, Kliph Scurlock, recalls asking his mother if she felt strange being in a mariachi band and remembers her saying "no." In fact, Linda wrote much of the band's original music, and Kliph fondly recalls the women of Mariachi Estrella as mother figures for him and his brother and great friends to his mother. Cuevas remembers that Scurlock's race was never discussed and that she fit in beautifully.

The film brings up the 1981 tragedy suffered by the group almost as an afterthought. While it discusses the impact of the members' deaths on those in the band and their families, the main focus is the effect the tragedy had on Topeka's Mexican American community. The skywalk collapsed during Topeka's annual Fiesta Mexicana, a multi-day event in which the mariachi band played a central role. The community mourned the women and wore ribbons in their memory.

One place where this film falls short is in its assumption that the audience knows the band's story. For example, some band members are not identified until the very end of the film, and it is confusing to hear about band members without knowing who they are, especially when two of them are named Dolores. Overall, however, this is a heartfelt film by two Kansas residents about an important and groundbreaking Kansas group.

Valerie Mendoza

Athens, Ohio

Return to PrairyErth. Directed and produced by John O'Hara, with the participation of William Least Heat-Moon. 2010; color; 90 minutes. Distributed by New Truth Films.

F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) imagines Dutch sailors encountering the new world, "face to face for the last time in human history with something commensurate to



RETURN TO PrairyErth

with William Least Heat-Moon

A FILM BY JOHN O'HARA

Return to PrairyErth chronicles William Least Heat-Moon's visit to the Flint Hills twenty years after writing his acclaimed *PrairyErth (A Deep Map): An Epic History of the Tallgrass Prairie Country*. The book explores Kansans' aesthetic response to the prairie landscape, and the film documents the evolution of thought and feeling in some of those interviewed in the book and of life in Chase County over the past two decades. Poster courtesy of the filmmaker.

[man's] capacity for wonder" (2004 ed., p. 180). The observation seemed a truism for me until John O'Hara's film *Return to PrairyErth* forced my rethinking of that position. For many, the vast openness of America's grasslands has engendered a reaction like that of those sailors, an "aesthetic response they neither understood nor desired," as Fitzgerald asserted (p. 180). The film, like the book on which it is based—William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth (A Deep Map): An Epic History of the Tallgrass Prairie Country* (1991)—explores our aesthetic response to the prairie landscape.

Least Heat-Moon himself admitted to having been "intimidated" the first time he crossed the Flint Hills. It is no surprise, then, that O'Hara's film depicting the writer's return to Chase County, the setting of *PrairyErth*,

begins with ocean footage taken off Cape Cod and Least Heat-Moon likening the Flint Hills to “sea under wind,” a “sea of air.” Perhaps the Flint Hills, if they are to be comfortably categorized, demand such metaphors; they are, in Least Heat-Moon’s words, “a place that seemed to require me to bring something to it” (Least Heat-Moon, p. 27).

Even more tellingly, Least Heat-Moon stated a few sentences later: “I learned a prairie secret: take the numbing distance in small doses and gorge on the little details that beckon” (Least Heat-Moon, p. 27). It is a lesson O’Hara has also learned, filming loving close-ups of bluestem, focusing on a spider atop Leavenworth’s eryngo, or dwelling on booming prairie chickens. But O’Hara’s camera also attempts to capture the prairie’s startling vistas and the striking spring burnings, without applying much dramatic cinematic technique. Indeed, the film is most lyric when O’Hara avoids the overuse of filters or the time-lapsed movement of cloud-shadow across the land, instead letting the place speak for itself.

Likewise, O’Hara is a self-effacing narrator, allowing Least Heat-Moon and the residents of Chase County to carry the load. One great pleasure of the film is seeing characters from the book twenty-odd years later: listening to Elaine (Shea) Jones, for instance, discussing the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, only a contentious idea at the time of the book, or hearing rancher Jane Koger chuckle at her own loquaciousness when Least Heat-Moon first interviewed her, saying in true Kansan fashion, “I knew a lot more then than I do now.” Touching base with these folks is a homecoming for Least Heat-Moon and his readers.

The film also looks at folk drawn to the Flint Hills by Least Heat-Moon’s book. Bill McBride shows his “green” house with its roof water tank, gray-water recycling system, and wind generator that provides 85 to 90 percent of his electricity. Ton Haak, who moved from The Hague to the Flint Hills after reading *PrairyErth*, jokes with Least Heat-Moon, “You’re the one who f---ed up my life.” O’Hara also touches on the agritourism that is now part of the Flint Hills, filming at Josh and Gwen Hoy’s Flying W Ranch, which offers visitors a place to spend the night or to join in the ranching experience. The film documents Josh, Gwen, and their hands doctoring calves, including the castration of a young bull.

The cowboy is the dominant image of the West, but as Josh’s father, cowboy, author, and university professor Jim Hoy, is wont to point out, it is a tradition as thin, in terms of time, as the soil above the Flint Hills limestone, a current Euro-American way of imagining the place. And

in truth, only three still photographs constitute the film’s discussion of the lengthier Native American experience in the hills. Perhaps that is what one takes from the film—from Least Heat-Moon’s discussion of “ghostwalking,” of putting himself into the minds of people dead decades before he wrote his book, and from his statement that he desired to help Americans reconnect with the land—that no matter how pure the intent of that connection, it is always predicated on human dreams grafted to the land and on human desires for its usage.

O’Hara’s film is a worthy coda to *PrairyErth*. Least Heat-Moon states, “I am proud of Chase County. . . . They’ve taken some possibilities that . . . the book brought them, as I see it . . . and they’ve been able to look at things in a new way. And some of the negativity that I thought was almost prevalent here two decades ago, I don’t see that much any more. There are still naysayers, but there are plenty of yeasayers, and they’re the ones . . . shaping things. And so Chase County today is an enlightened place . . . no longer a dark corner of Kansas or the country. This place, with what they’ve done in just two decades, it gives me hope for America.” The film is worthwhile for its depiction of Chase countians, familiar and new, and for O’Hara’s framing of the Flint Hills’ beauty, both its “little details” and its expansiveness. Finally, it is worthwhile in that it forces the viewer into an “aesthetic contemplation” of a place always “commensurate with [our] ability for wonder.”

William Sheldon
Hutchison Community College

What’s the Matter with Kansas? Directed by Joe Winston; produced by Laura Cohen and Joe Winston, based on the book by Thomas Frank. 2009; color; 90 minutes. Distributed by Tallgrass Films.

What’s the Matter with Kansas? is a phenomenon, and especially a Kansas phenomenon. It is a question that appeared first in an editorial against Populism penned by newspaperman William Allen White in 1896, and it has been often repeated since, most recently by journalist Thomas Frank in his 2004 book and in the 2009 film based on it. In its latest iteration, the question has been asked in an atmosphere of intense partisan politics, both in Kansas and nationally. Watching the 2009 film in 2011 offers a useful perspective on the continuing

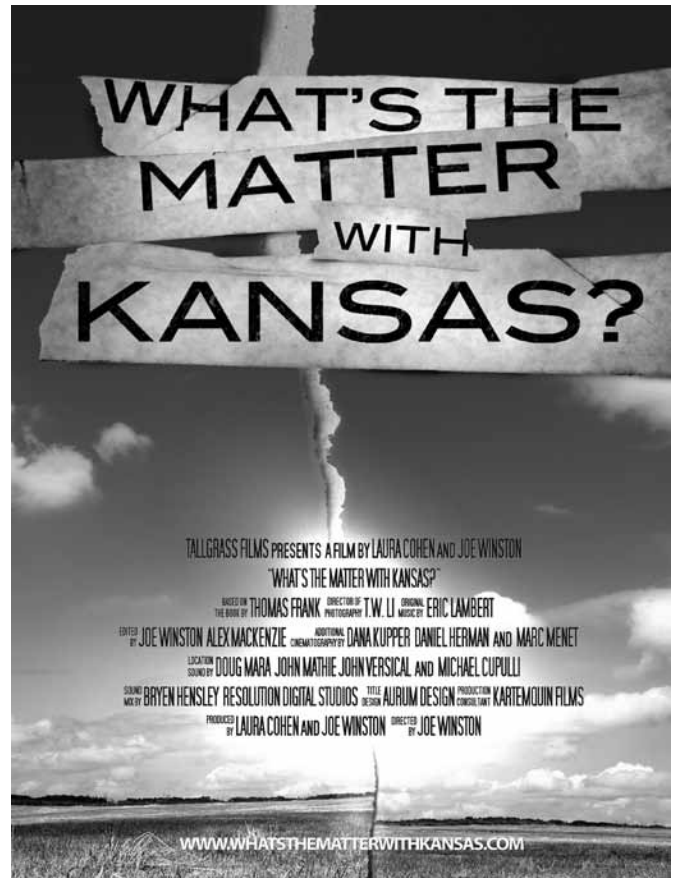
complexities of evangelical politics, the Christian Right, abortion, populism, and the lives of plainspoken Kansans.

Given the strong neo-Marxist ideological bent of Frank's book, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), the film presents his arguments in understated terms, often almost by implication rather than through direct statements. The voices of ten or twelve Kansans dominate the film, and while many are true believers, their perspectives are complex and grounded in experience, an element of the book that was easy to ignore. Yet emphasizing individual voices is true to Frank's initial vision: his interviews with social conservatives were always a strength of the book. Some of the film's most important voices do come across as stereotypes, but the best portraits—of Angel Dillard, the farmer turned evangelical singer, or Donn Teske, the ex-Republican head of the Kansas Farmers Union—are well developed and sympathetic.

Both Dillard and Teske are farmers, although Dillard is married to an emergency-room physician, which takes the financial burden off her; their lives are filled with work, community, and family. Neither relates much to the traditional Republicanism of a Bob Dole or an Alf Landon. Rather, Dillard's politics are motivated by evangelical Christianity in general and antiabortion in particular; to hear her 2006 statements helps one understand the 2011 politics of Kansas, dominated by social conservatives in the wake of the 2010 elections. While Dillard focuses on her immediate family, Teske's family focus goes back 140 years to his great-grandparents, who emigrated from Germany. Even now, his relatives own the acreage surrounding his farm, and he remains highly connected to the land. At the same time, this "populist without a party" works to represent the economic interests of small farmers, traveling to Capitol Hill to testify before a congressional committee.

The film has barely any narrative arc, although it is loosely organized around the 2006 statewide elections, in which Christian Right favorite Phill Kline lost his bid for reelection. Simultaneously, the film addresses the falling fortunes of Reverend Terry Fox, whose Wichita megachurch dismissed him. He subsequently found quarters in a Wichita Wild West theme park, which later declared bankruptcy, taking with it hundreds of thousands in church members' investments.

As a film, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* is more rumination than tract. It roams around the Kansas landscape, both literally and symbolically. We get declining



What's the Matter with Kansas? is a film adaptation of Thomas Frank's 2004 book examining plains politics, which itself is in part a reflection on William Allen White's 1896 editorial against Populism. In its latest iteration, the question has been asked in an atmosphere of intense partisanship, both in Kansas and nationally. Watching the 2009 film in 2011 offers a useful perspective on the continuing complexities of evangelical politics, the Christian Right, abortion, populism, and the lives of plainspoken Kansans. Poster courtesy of Tallgrass Films.

towns and abandoned buildings, and a fair bit of grass-roots art, sometimes larded with turn-of-the-century populism and socialism. These are a part of Kansas's heritage, and Frank himself makes some appearances in an effort to weave this history into the film. But the linkages are a bit forced and do not define the film, in contrast to the more systematic arguments presented in Frank's book. In the end, the film lets Kansans—students and abortion advocates, evangelists and folk artists—have their say.

Looking back at the film and book from the vantage point of 2011 provides a more nuanced understanding of both works of art. Moreover, this perspective helps me come to terms with some of the contradictions—real and apparent—that Frank first wrote about. My personal connection with Frank's book began in 2003, when Frank interviewed me (nothing got into the book, although

some of my research was footnoted). The publisher sent me an early version of the manuscript, which was a mess; much to my surprise, I received an uncorrected proof a few months later, and it had become remarkably coherent. I provided some comments, which made it onto the hardcover's back flap, right next to those of comedian Janeane Garofalo. In 2006, my son worked for Paul Morrison against Phill Kline in the attorney general's race and served in his office for a while, leaving before Morrison's sex scandal drove him from office. I have talked to and written about Kline off and on for years, and the film brought back memories of his political skills, as well as his reckless approach to public service.

When the film came out, I served as a moderator of a post-film discussion in which Donn Teske was the featured guest. He came across with the gruff honesty and charm that help provide a center for the documentary. Even after testifying in Washington, addressing a bunch of Lawrence lefties remained a bit of a foreign experience. Donn seems truly at home on his family's homestead, not in the netherworlds of Capitol Hill or the University of Kansas.

Finally, the murder of abortion provider Dr. George Tiller casts a shadow over the film when viewed in 2011. The animosity of some evangelical Christians toward Tiller presaged the killing, underscoring that words can have serious consequences. Two electoral cycles have come and gone since filming of *What's the Matter* ended in November 2006. Barack Obama won the presidency, with no help from Kansas, and in 2010 socially conservative Republicans swept into most of the state's executive offices and dominated the Kansas House of Representatives. Both fiscal and social conservatism are in full bloom in the Sunflower State, as Governor Sam Brownback and the right-wing house place tremendous pressure on the senate, the last bastion of the moderate Republican-Democratic coalition that has governed the state for the past forty years.

Strangely enough, Frank's original vision has been turned on its head, in that economics dominated the 2010 campaign, while social issues have been more important in the first few months of legislating. In this sense, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* as a film, with its focus on social conservatism, may help us understand Kansas politics more than the economic determinism of the book. Still, these conservative strains appear, increasingly, to go hand in hand. Perhaps we are not in Kansas anymore.

Burdett Loomis

University of Kansas

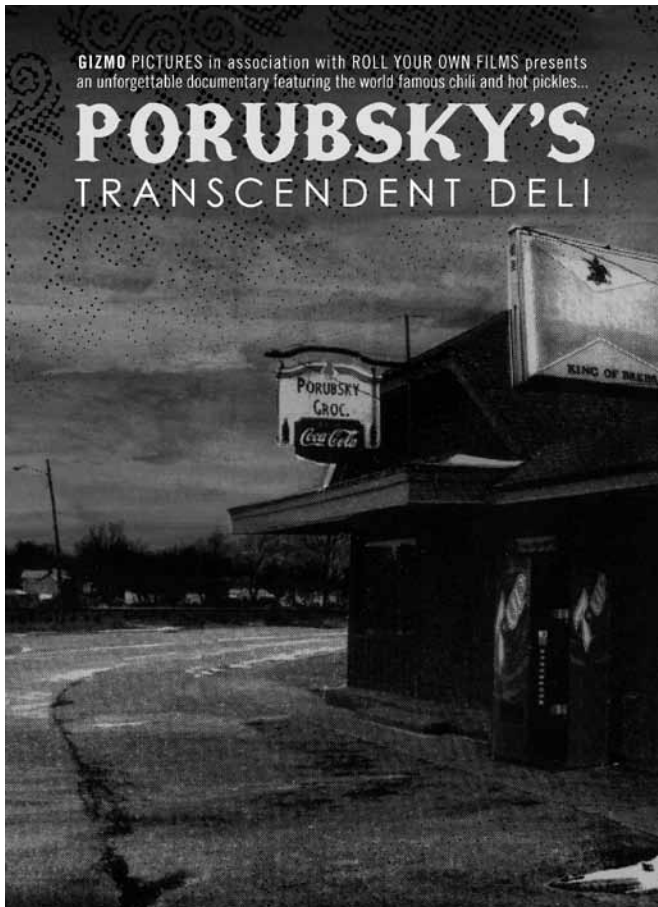
Porubsky's—Transcendent Deli. Directed by David Kitchner and Matthew Porubsky; written by Matthew Porubsky and Leah Sewell; produced by Jeff Carson and Greg Ready. 2010; color; 55 minutes. Distributed by Gizmo Pictures.

Long considered a Topeka treasure, Porubsky's Deli is an unassuming, homey place that serves up simple, good food and a welcoming atmosphere. The trademarked taglines of a certain chain restaurant, "Eating Good in the Neighborhood" and "There's No Place Like the Neighborhood," attempt to construct and trade on the very sense of hospitality and connection that businesses like Porubsky's authentically achieve. More than just a documentary about the deli's beloved chili and famous hot pickles, *Porubsky's—Transcendent Deli* is a true celebration of family and community.

Narrated and codirected (with David Kitchner) by Matthew Porubsky, grandson of the deli's founder Charles, this film traces the story of how food and family fostered a community and why the deli has such an enduring appeal. This mom-and-pop establishment opened in 1947 in North Topeka's Little Russia neighborhood, an area settled by Volga Germans that runs along the Kansas River near the Santa Fe Railroad shops. Vintage family photos and video and audio recordings, as well as interviews with longtime patrons, family members, and historians, help create visual texture and narrative depth.

A familiar refrain of those interviewed is that Charles and his wife Lydia treated everyone the same, and indeed this film shows how Porubsky's is a place where railroad workers, politicians, hipsters, grandmothers, and out-of-towners sit elbow to elbow, all eating chili out of Styrofoam bowls. Charlie Porubsky, one of the founders' sons, now runs the deli and makes thirty-five gallons of the famous chili from scratch every day (except Fridays and Saturdays and during the summer months). Having watched his mother with chili from her neck to her knees, he makes it instinctively, "nothing measured whatsoever."

Perhaps the greatest challenge of representing food in a visual medium is communicating the sense of its taste. The filmmakers admirably accomplish this by capturing Matthew giving out samples of Porubsky's hot pickles in downtown Topeka. It is highly entertaining to watch grown men buckle their knees at the heat of these



Long considered a Topeka treasure, *Porubsky's Deli* is an unassuming, homey place that serves up simple, good food and a welcoming atmosphere. *Porubsky's—Transcendent Deli*, the 2010 film made by the grandson of the deli's founder, is more than just a documentary about beloved chili and famous hot pickles, and is a true celebration of family and community. DVD cover courtesy of the filmmaker (porubskys.com).

legendary pickles. One might well guess that it is a perennial pastime of deli patrons to watch newbies take their first bite.

The persistence and integrity of the Porubsky family and its continued commitment to the Little Russia neighborhood is at the heart of this film. Repeatedly, the deli's resilience was tested through a series of unfortunate turns. The 1951 flood, which inundated Topeka and nearly wiped out North Topeka, "washed the window" of the deli, causing serious damage. An icebox from the store floated off and was later found four blocks away. Unlike many businesses in the area north of the river, Porubsky's recovered and rebuilt. In 1966, the deli suffered a fire. As a testament to communal draw of the place, neighbors and even distributors who supplied Porubsky's rallied around the family and helped them to

set the store to rights after the conflagration. They were open again for business a week later.

Although the deli has survived both flood and fire, the ultimate implied question of this film is whether it will continue to transcend in an economic climate where corporate chains dominate. Charlie Porubsky speaks of the increase in governmental regulations and the hefty time demands of maintaining a small family business. In fact, Charlie suffered a minor heart attack a couple of weeks after the filming, evidence of the strain of such hard work. Porubsky's, like so many small family-owned businesses all over the country, is vulnerable to twenty-first century economic forces, but we cannot help but root for the good guys to thrive.

In addition to the historical significance of this documentary, the original music by Sam Billen, Dan Billen, and Sam Hupp, artwork by Justin Marable, script by Leah Sewell and Matthew Porubsky, and camera work by David Kitchner all raise the artistic bar, making the film a visual and auditory delight. So familiar do we become with Porubsky's Deli that we come away feeling a regular's affection for the place and for the people who have served up that good chili in the Little Russia neighborhood for over sixty years.

Amy Fleury
McNeese State University

"There's No Place Like Home"

The Cawker City Twine-a-thon. Produced and directed by Falestine Afani Ruzik, originally as part of *Overlooked*. 2009; color; 7 minutes.

And What Remains. Directed by Marc Havener; produced by Tim Ellis, Marc Havener, and Rick Cree; script adapted by Marc Havener and Jenea Havener from the writings of Rick Cree. 2009; color and black and white; 10 minutes. Released by Resonate Pictures.

Rebuilding Greensburg. Produced by Jim Kelly, originally for KTWU's *Sunflower Journeys*. 2010; color; 8 minutes.

"As Big As We Think"

Bauer, Baker, and Baldwin City: Electrifying A Small Town's Identity. Project director Joanne Tolkoff;

produced by Hometown Collaborations (Brendan Glad, Chris Ordall, and Brad Roszell); script by Susan Emel and John Richards. 2009; color and black and white; 11 minutes.

Mariachi Estrella: Ad Astra Per Aspera. Directed by Peter Jasso; produced by Marlo Angell and Hometown Collaborations (Brendan Glad, Chris Ordall, and Brad Roszell). 2010; color; 12 minutes.

Clyde Cessna: From the Ground Up. Project director Prisca Krehbiel; produced by Gary Krehbiel, Kansas Humanities Council, Julie Mulvihill, Tracy Quillin, and Hometown Collaborations (Brendan Glad, Chris Ordall, and Brad Roszell). 2010; color and black and white; 11 minutes.

What image comes to mind when you think of Kansas? Well, aside from Dorothy being swept up by the tornado? Perhaps it is Cawker's giant ball of twine, or railroad tracks cutting across the plains. Maybe you think of Wichita's early advances in aviation, or perhaps you recall Topeka's Fiesta Mexicana. Or you might think about a tornado-ravaged city and the emerald—or, no, green—city rising out of the rubble. The Kansas Humanities Council's new FLIKS (Film Lovers in Kansas) series of short films about Kansas are designed to expand our repertoire of such images of the Sunflower State.

To date two series have been released, each with three thematically linked films designed for discussion forums in libraries and other sites across the state. The first series, with its Oz-echoing title "There's No Place Like Home," features films that highlight the dynamics of small-town community in Kansas. The opening feature, *The Cawker City Twine-a-thon*, offers a light-hearted celebration of an annual festival during which the residents of Cawker work to ensure that their ball of sisal twine remains the world's largest, by adding more twine. Cawker resident Linda Clover summarizes the spirit of the town's roadside attraction: "The ball of twine is different things to different people. To tourists, it's something to come and see, and to the local people, it's just there." But the "thereness" of the huge—and annually a little bit huger—ball of twine embodies ideas about community,

about highway tourism, and about the shaping of local identities, which Falestine Afani Ruzik's film lightly limns in interviews with town residents and tourists gathered to partake in the annual ritual.

Marc Havener's somber meditation on home and inheritance, "And What Remains," offers viewers a very different sense of community. "I want to take my son back to where my dad came from," the film's narrator explains, "to help him see how to move forward, to help us see what remains of who my father was, and help me reconcile his imperfect legacy and the one I'm passing on." Artistically speaking, Havener's skillfully constructed film is the stand-out feature of the FLIKS offerings, blending old home movies and contemporary acted scenes, making imaginative use of both film editing technologies (splitscreen scenes, blends of different film stocks, striking juxtapositions) and the landscape of the plains (railroad tracks, fences, fields of grain) to powerful effect, and drawing its narrative (over silent acted scenes) from Rick Cree's powerful meditative prose. As effective as the film is, however, it is in some ways the least connected to the project's purposes, or to Kansas at all. The father Havener and Cree invoke spent little time in Kansas before moving on to Phoenix and California; his Paola home turf is spoken about, but hardly represented (and, indeed, modern Paola scarcely figures in the film's dominant tropes of empty landscape).

Rebuilding Greensburg, a *Sunflower Journeys* segment originally broadcast on KTWU a year after the devastating tornado, closes out the first series. John Janssen, ex-mayor of Greensburg, cogently summarizes the problem the town faced in the tornado's wake: "Early on there were folks in the town who said you've got to build it back just like it was." Janssen warned them, however, "that's fine, but let's just put plywood on the businesses on Main Street at the same time, because that's where you're heading. We're like every other little one-horse midwestern town. We've all been on the decline since the '70s. We needed something to make this thing work." The thing that has proven successful in Greensburg is its effort to rebuild green, through a sustainable self-refashioning that has given the town new direction and new hope. The film offers an optimistic summary of progress toward that goal.

The second film series, "As Big As We Think," seems designed to open up the range of images we have of Kansas, underlining less familiar aspects of the state's history. *Bauer, Baker, and Baldwin City: Electrifying a Small Town's Identity* recounts the push Baker professor



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William Bauer made around the turn of the twentieth century to create independent electrical generation in the small town of Baldwin. Bauer was determined to bring streetlights to his town, and, as the film notes in its recollection of an editorial Bauer penned in 1905, he would not take no for an answer: "We need them and we will have them." A range of talking heads and selections from Bauer's writings are employed to recount his insistent push for electrification, which succeeded in 1906, when, the film suggests, he convinced the women of the town that electrification would make their lives easier.

Clyde Cessna: From the Ground Up presents a similar tale of a creative innovator pushing to accomplish his aims, in this case cheaper, faster, more accessible air travel. "All I ever wanted was to get from one place to another as fast as possible," Clyde Cessna declares, in the voice of Cessna reenactor (and film producer) Gary Krehbiel. And, from the launch of his first plane in 1911 to his retirement from the industry in 1936 after a close

friend's death in a plane crash, that was the goal Cessna successfully pursued, combining innovation, hard work, and successful marketing to achieve his ends.

Sandwiched between these two films is *Mariachi Estrella: Ad Astra Per Aspera*—a much shorter version of the film reviewed elsewhere in this section by Valerie Mendoza—which recalls the brief and ultimately tragic career of Topeka's pioneering all-female mariachi group. Compared to the longer version, the abbreviated film loses much of what the full version has to say about the group's powerful dynamics and its relation to the Topeka community, and above all else sacrifices much of the music. Further, the shortened version ends up underlining the tragedy of the Hyatt walkways collapse that ends the group's career far more than the fuller version does. Still, as an introduction and memorial to *Mariachi Estrella*, sensitive to its pioneering position and its place in Topeka's Mexican-American community, even the shorter version accomplishes the filmmakers' goals.

There are clear limitations to the films so far released in the KHC series. With the exception of *And What Remains*, they all follow essentially the same format: talking heads mixed with archival images, like low-budget small-town versions of Ken Burns documentaries. With the same singular exception, they uniformly express more positive aspects of Kansas history: success stories, celebratory moments, hopeful attitudes. Darker parts of Kansas's story—the short film about the Bloody Benders, or the perspectives of the state's suppressed Native peoples, or insights into episodes of oppression or injustice—

do not yet figure in the series. And, of course, the films are uniformly short, which limits their range and possibilities. Nevertheless, as a group, the films also illuminate unexpected aspects of the Kansas experience, provide good grist for discussions of issues ranging from the meaning of community to the importance of state history, and above all else give us alternative images to call to mind when we think of Kansas.

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