The year is 1870, the place is Kansas, and the hero is Bat Masterson. As Liberal’s new sheriff, he must bring the rowdy cowtown under control. But an evil cattle baron plots the lawman’s demise even as he vows to tame its mean streets. Is Bat doomed? Can he make the town safe? In the end, will good triumph over evil?

You don’t have to see the movie *Trail Street* to know the guy in the white hat wins. In fact, if you’ve seen one 1940s Western, you’ve pretty much seen them all. The genre’s strength is in fast-paced action rather than creative plots. And if gunfights, chases, and a little romance are your idea of a good time, then these movies are bound to please.

Kansas was the subject of many films during the Western’s heyday (1930s–1950s), when Hollywood writers and directors had just enough knowledge of the state’s history to be dangerous. They inserted famous people and place-names into a formulaic outline, blurring the line between “reel” and “real” history. Thus, generations of youth who spent Saturday afternoons at the local theater came to believe that Bleeding Kansas and the Civil War were one and the same, Jesse James was just an unfortunate victim of circumstance, and longhorns still roamed the streets of Dodge City.

*Shootouts, Showdowns, & Barroom Brawls*

“Real” to “Reel” history—that was the formula during the heyday of the Hollywood Western. And in the fantastical mix of gunfights and fistfights, good guys and bad, Kansas often played a starring role.

by Rebecca Martin

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This fictional Kansas shaped how generations viewed the Old West. Scripts for Westerns followed patterns based on moviegoers’ expectations. The plots varied slightly (two favorites are Quantrill’s raid and farmers versus cowboys), but typically all featured showdowns, fistfights, and snappy dialogue. The following are a few other devices common to mid-twentieth-century Westerns.

Gunfights

It’s hard to imagine a Western without a duel in the sun, and the cachet of Kansas’s best-known cattle towns proved irresistible to scriptwriters. Abilene, Wichita, Dodge City, even Topeka (not a cowtown at all) repeatedly host the same basic plot—lawman battles lawbreaker while innocent citizens get caught in the crossfire. Even the titles vary little from movie to movie, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between them: Gunmen of Abilene (1950), Gunfighters of Abilene (1960), Gunfight in Abilene (1967).

The last example in this list features, of all people, singer Bobby Darin in the lead role of Cal Wayne. During the Civil War (in which he fights for the Confederacy), Wayne accidentally shoots a childhood friend from Abilene.
This causes him to swear off gunplay forever. But when Wayne returns to his hometown, the brother of his dead friend convinces him to take on the job of sheriff. No movie marshal—especially one in a film with “gunfight” in the title—has ever tamed a cowtown without a gun, and our hero is no exception. The final showdown sequence is unremarkable except for a close-up of Wayne’s hand quivering hesitantly over the gun’s grip. The suspense is palatable, and it makes the ending (that is, bad guy gets what he deserves) even more satisfying.

Chases

It’s an unwritten rule for Westerns that at least two chases on horseback are mandatory, with five or more preferred. The reasons for this are simple: the bad guy must escape the grasp of the good guy for the sake of dramatic tension, and racing horses are great fun to watch. It’s also entertaining to catch the same chase clip repeated in a single film, although it often isn’t particularly challenging in “B” Westerns. In Topeka Terror and Desperadoes of Dodge City, for example, an identical wagon chase depicts both the Oklahoma Land Rush and settlers escaping a cowboy gang, respectively. The only difference is the addition of gunshots on one audio track. What makes these clips truly annoying, though, are the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the background. Kansas natives may have a hard time forgiving such gaffes.

The title of the 1955 film Seven Angry Men refers to John Brown and his sons, but the movie, set in Bleeding Kansas, is more about the romance between Owen Brown (Jeffrey Hunter) and Elizabeth Clark (Debra Paget).

Women play good guys, bad guys, and everything in between in Woman They Almost Lynched, released in 1953. Kate Quantrill starts out bad, but in the end saves good girl Sally Maish from being lynched. Kate rides off into the sunset, and Sally gets the guy.

Wyatt Earp (Joel McCrea) is hired as marshal to clean up Wichita, in the 1955 film by the same name. Earp also romances good girl Laurie McCoy (Vera Miles). Viewers of Wichita will be interested to know that Vera Miles is from Wichita and won the Miss Wichita and Miss Kansas pageants in 1948.

In the 1953 film Topeka, bank robber Jim Levering (Wild Bill Elliott) forces a competing gang out of town. Residents make him sheriff, and Jim decides to walk the straight and narrow.

Sidekicks

Movie cowboys probably would rank sidekicks in the following order of preference: horse, quirky old man, woman, Indian. It’s a sad fact that most Westerns never rise above common stereotypes of the 1930s and 1940s. Predating the era of civil rights and feminism, they definitely are products of their time.

And products of their genre, too, for no self-respecting cowboy could live without his horse. One of the most popular equine stars of “B” Westerns was Black Jack, a truly impressive specimen of horseflesh. With his rider, Allan “Rocky” Lane, Black Jack performed incredible chases and stunts. Black Jack often received second billing behind Lane; imagine the humiliation of the rest of the cast, listed below a horse in the credits! But you only have to watch a Black Jack movie to know the glory is justified. Black Jack is more fun than the bit players, and he’s an equally good actor—in Desperadoes of Dodge City, the horse fakes lameness to stop a stagecoach!

Equine sidekicks aside, however, the treatment of blacks and Native Americans is often shameful in Westerns, particularly in early films. In The Kansan (1943), “Bones” is an African American character who provides comic relief by cowering in a corner during a gunfight. Blacks are portrayed less stereotypically in more recent films, influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. One example is a recent Quantrill’s raid film, Ride With the Devil (1999), where Daniel Holt is an ex-slave who has chosen to stand against the Union with a white friend (it is interesting to note that three black men actually rode on Lawrence with Quantrill in 1863).

Native American characterizations, too, have changed for the better over the years. White actors were cast as Indians in many early Westerns. If they spoke at all, it was in broken English, and usually they were portrayed as thieves and killers. Later films show Native Americans in a much more sympathetic light. In The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976) the main character’s extended family includes Lone Watie, probably based on Stand Watie, chief of Southern Cherokees in Southeast Kansas and the last Confederate general to surrender in the Civil War.
Plot Twists

There are many “Huh?” moments for viewers of “B” Westerns, as the stories twist and turn more than a rodeo bronc. It’s best not to waste time pondering why the bad guy suddenly decides to turn good, because you’ll just miss the next plot twist, and much of it makes no sense anyway. Character development is not a hallmark of the form.

One excellent example is from *The Kansan* (1943). Good guy John Bonniwell, severely wounded while foiling a bank robbery, wakes from a coma to discover the town has elected him sheriff. Witness the following exchange from the movie:

Eleanor Sager: “Apparently John Bonniwell has just been elected Marshal of Broken Lance.”

John Bonniwell: “But, that’s me?”

The contemporary phrase “you snooze, you lose” applies perfectly to this situation. Our hero is up to the challenge, however, and he faces off with the bad guy. Alas, cleaning up the town does not come without cost, for Bonniwell is shot a second time and sinks into yet another coma. When he regains consciousness the final time, Bonniwell finds himself engaged to be married. The good guy gets the horse, the job, and the girl—the happiest of endings!

Quantrill

Although he’s not in every film, William Quantrill definitely is a Hollywood staple. In “reel” history, though, Hollywood gets very little of the story right. Even the raider’s name changes depending on the scriptwriter’s whim. It’s Will Cantrell in *Dark Command*, John Quantrell in *Red Mountain*, and Bill Quantrill in *Kansas Pacific*. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of Hollywood’s spin on the Quantrill story is that the character usually is stripped of all political motivations. What’s left is just plain bad, or if you prefer Ma Cantrell’s turn of phrase from *Dark Command*, “You’re no good, Will!”

In real life William Quantrill cast his lot with the South at the outbreak of the Civil War. He brought guerrilla warfare to Kansas, first raiding Aubry in 1862 with thirty men in his command. Raids continued throughout the year, including one at Olathe in which several men were killed. But Quantrill’s most famous (or infamous) success came in 1863 when he led his raiders against the city of Lawrence. In the end, more than 150 Lawrence men died and 200 buildings were destroyed.

*Dark Command* (1940) is an interesting study for its characterization of the notorious Confederate guerrilla. The film tells the story of William Cantrell (nicely played by Walter Pidgeon) during the turbulent years of Bleeding Kansas. A lowly schoolteacher in Lawrence, Cantrell decides to act on his ambitions by running for sheriff. When he loses the election to illiterate cowboy Bob Seton (John Wayne), the villain vows revenge. He forms a gang to terrorize people on both sides of the Kansas-Missouri border as well as the Union-Conederacy conflict. The Cantrell/Quantrill character is completely apolitical. He works raiders into a frenzy by shouting, “You’re not fighting for the North, and you’re not fighting for the South, but you’re fighting to take what’s coming to you.” The Civil War, Cantrell explains, is only a conflict between the “fine gentlemen of Kansas and Missouri.”

The sympathetic characters in *Dark Command* are all Southerners. Only bad-guy Cantrell is from the North. Although African Americans
The Jayhawkers, released in 1959, tells the story of Luke Darcy, a bad guy with a bad attitude. His character was inspired by the real William Quantrill, and the film is set in Bleeding Kansas, but that’s where the connection to Kansas history ends.

The 1940 film Dark Command is a study of the notorious Confederate guerrilla William Cantrell (Quantrill) during the turbulent years of Bleeding Kansas.

The 1949 film Sheriff of Wichita features Rocky Lane. During the course of this complicated film, Rocky is trapped in an abandoned fort, uncovers an army payroll that’s been missing for years, and helps a woman catch her father’s murderer.

A Belgian poster for the 1943 film The Kansan (Le Cavalier du Kansas) offers a most ludicrous plot. The Kansan chronicles good guy John Bonniwell, who survives two comas. He awakes from the first to find himself elected town marshal, and from the second to learn he’s not only “got the girl,” he’s engaged to her!

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That’s a “real” Kansan!

Besides Quantrill, other figures from Kansas history appear frequently in Westerns. Two favorites are Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. The historic Earp’s story has been imaginatively adapted for the screen. Depicted as a marshal in Abilene and Wichita in Badman’s Country (1958) and Wichita (1955), respectively, he’s a man of action who keeps the cities safe from desperadoes. Earp’s real stay in Kansas was much more mundane. In Wichita he was a policeman (never a marshal) who spent most of his time sweeping the sidewalks and picking up dead animals. He never was a lawman in Abilene. Fortunately, Hollywood usually focuses on Earp’s experiences in Tombstone, thereby trampling Arizona history more frequently than Kansas’s.

Bat Masterson’s Kansas career appears in several films, but at least two of them correctly depict incidents in his life. In Masterson of Kansas (1954), Bat gives up his guns and moves East to become a newspaper reporter. In real life, Masterson actually did become a New York sportswriter, dying at his typewriter in 1921. In The Gunfight at Dodge City (1959), Bat’s brother is shot while serving as marshal. This really happened to Ed Masterson in 1878.
The Western genre migrated to television when that medium appeared in the 1950s, and both Earp and Masterson were TV good guys. *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955–1961) featured Hugh O’Brian and an assortment of sidekicks defeating criminals in Kansas and Arizona. In *Bat Masterson* (1958–1961), Gene Barry doesn’t confine his good works to Kansas either. He travels the West, disarming bad guys with his wit and a cane. Neither series was much concerned with the historic facts behind these historic figures’ lives.

TV’s longest running Western was *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975). Marshal Matt Dillon, Miss Kitty, Doc, and Festus capably handled all the usual Western situations—gunfights, disagreements between cowboys and farmers, bank robberies, and saloon brawls. People all over the world undoubtedly think they know Dodge City history from watching these entirely fictional characters.

The mishmash of “real” and “reel” in Westerns doesn’t, however, interfere with their enjoyment. They still have wide appeal, and usually nearly everything about them is transparent. The dialogue is easy to understand, the bad guy’s motives are obvious, and good acts are rewarded. Look for some of these titles at your local library or video store. Most of them are available on videotape or DVD. They all feature Kansas themes or subjects—but don’t expect to see genuine Sunflower State landscapes.

**Dodge City (1939)**

This film was one of two Westerns whose world premier was in Kansas. Stars Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, and others were greeted in Dodge City, where the movie first showed on April 1, 1939. A full house listened as one of the film characters exclaims, “We’re used to death here in Dodge City.” It’s no wonder, because this film packs four gunfights, three murders, a cattle stampede, and two attempted hangings into one hundred minutes. Watch it for good performances and one of the best saloon brawls on screen.

**Dark Command (1940)**

John Wayne and Claire Trevor star in this imaginative version of Quantrill’s raid on Lawrence. Roy Rogers also has an early credited role as Trevor’s younger brother. *Dark Command* also premiered in Kansas. Citizens turned out in force to welcome Wayne, Walter Pidgeon, and other stars at Topeka’s Dickinson and Granada Theatres on April 4, 1940. A few indignant locals protested that the film was an outrage due to its inaccuracies.

**Santa Fe Trail (1940)**

Undoubtedly the worst Kansas history on film, *Santa Fe Trail* stars Raymond Massey as a fanatical and curi-
ously evil John Brown. The film also features Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, and Ronald Reagan. Watch this one to howl at the historical gaffes.

**Abilene Town (1946)**

It’s farmers versus cowboys in an all-out war on the streets of Abilene. Randolph Scott plays the marshal who settles the conflict and wins the saloon-girl-with-a-heart-of-gold.

**Renegade Girl (1946)**

Confederate spy Jean Shelby rides with Quantrill in this morality play for the 1940s. Hard to find, but very campy, this is a raider picture with a twist—a woman is in the lead role.

**Red River (1948)**

Rumors of an alternate cattle-drive route send Tom Dunson (John Wayne) and Matt Garth (Montgomery Clift) up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene. *Red River* was nominated for two Academy Awards. Watch it for the cinematography alone.

**Gunsmoke (1955–1975)**

This television classic recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Digitally remastered episodes are available on DVD in special anniversary sets. It’s a must-see for Western lovers.