The Juvenile Cowboy Hero: Mass Media, Role Models, and Marketing

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Largely building upon the prototype provided by Owen Wister, the juvenile Western emerged as a phenomenon in its own right and as a vehicle by which innumerable products were promoted. From the 1920s until the 1950s, the juvenile Western hero enjoyed a long career in movies, radio, and television and served as a major marketing tool for selling products to young boys. Here the careers of Tom Mix, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers, and William Boyd provide a taste of that era and the marketing efforts it spawned.

In recent years, consumer researchers have typically embraced what can be called “poststructural” models in order to explain what products people choose to consume and how they do so. Such tools focus upon the distinctiveness of specific people and groups and tend not to focus on “overarching structures” of humanity and society. While that research agenda has met with many successes in recent years, some marketing historians such as Walle (2000, 2002) have focused upon the social structural model inspired by the classic British structural/functional school of anthropology and the cultural configuration school of classic American anthropology.

The present analysis, embracing such a perspective, focuses upon the impact of culture and society upon the consumption of popular art. It argues that although these structures can evolve over time, they often exert a compelling influence over large segments of the population. Expanding upon that model, this paper deals with patterns of marketing and consumer response that resonate from icons of popular culture, that in turn, stem from the prevailing structure of national character. Not merely dealing with heroic figures, this paper also considers marketing efforts that were built upon these icons during a specific historic era.

There is a general recognition that media heroes often aid marketing efforts; indeed, this strategy has become a staple of promotion. In this paper, these techniques are traced back to the 1920s in order to show that sophisticated marketing strategies designed to use media heroes to sell products to young boys is a generations old tradition. Specifically, this paper focuses upon structures of belief and cultural patterns in order to show how they can impact both the heroic persona and marketing efforts based upon it.

OWEN WISTER’S LEGACY

The classic cowboy hero of innumerable juvenile Western movies, radio shows, and TV series largely reflects the plot formula popularized in the early 20th century novels of Owen Wister, where contact with the rugged frontier transforms the hero into an invincible and moral superman.

During the early 20th century, the cowboy was used to portray the American spirit. During this era, the cowboy hero was depicted as a product of the frontier and as an example of the personal strength and moral individualism that this environment creates. America, by analogy, was portrayed as an inherently superior culture that chooses a moral path and does so in pragmatic ways that appropriately respond to circumstances. This portrait was used to counter claims made by elitist Europeans that America was a cultural backwater and a pale reflection of Old World traditions, standards, and achievements. This theme has been dealt with by critics such as Richard Slotkin (1973, 1985, 1992), Leslie Fiedler (1960, 1967), and Walle 1973, 1991, 2000). Such sentiments, products of their eras, emerged as key components of cowboy stories that catered to both adult and juvenile audiences.

Two classic critiques of the formula Western movie are Harry Schein’s “The Olympian Cowboy” (1954-5) and Robert Warshow’s “The Westerner.” (1954). Although writing independently of each other, Schein and Warshow both discuss the
formula Western in parallel ways that resonate from prototypes that had been suggested by Wister.

Schein suggested that over the years the Western had been transformed into an American mythology or folklore and that “Somewhere between William S. Hart and Hopalong Cassidy, a change occurred” (309) in the Western.

Schein continues: “the simple, upright, and faithful cowboy became more and more decked out with silver spurs and guitars; he sang much and talked little; he never worried about women even while protecting them. Almost imperceptibly, he was changed into an omnipotent father symbol” (309.)

William Boyd, mirroring Schein’s analysis, once described the Hopalong Cassidy character of his films as “part philosopher, part doctor, part minister - he’s everything.” (Parish 1976 25)

In a similar vein, Warshow asks, “What does the Westerner fight for? We know he is on the side of justice and order and, of course, it can be said he fights for these things... If justice did not continually demand his protection he would be without a calling...The Westerner is the last gentleman.” (194).

Both Warshow and Schein recognize that the impact of the formula Western lies in its repetition. As Schein observes, “Characteristic of the Western is the public’s relationship to it. The desire to experience the same thing time after time implies on the part of the public a ritualistic passivity similar to that which one finds in a congregation at divine service. It cannot be curiosity which drives the public to the Western, there is no wish for something different and unfamiliar, but a need for something old and well known...The Western has the same bewitching strength as an incantation; the magic of repetition” (311.)

Warshow, again mirroring Schein, observes the Western: “is an art form for connoisseurs where the spectator derives his pleasure from the appearance of minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order. One does not want too much novelty” (198).

This working out of a pre-established order made significant use of the Wister formula that asserted that the frontier had created a heroic legacy that fostered a grassroots moral structure and honed the skills of self-reliance that are needed and forcefully advance a course of action.

Even though Schein’s and Warshow’s views are somewhat dated, their views are insightful and useful here. They can be expanded by recalling that Wister created a fictional genre that embodied the essence of the Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis of American history (1893) that suggested that the frontier legacy had transformed America in ways that made it superior to Old World prototypes (Walle 2000). Walle (2000) continues by arguing that by around 1960, however, other formulas of the Western emerged (that dealt with obsolescence and displacement, not heroic transcendence) came to dominate the Western. This reformulation is a reflection of the historic pressures of the times and it demonstrates how marketable popular art reflects the temper of the times. And yet, from 1902 until after 1950, Wister’s vision provided an almost universal formula that fed upon and reinforced widely held beliefs and attitudes that mirrored American social structure and the conventional wisdoms that sprung from it. Success in the marketplace was tightly connected with mirroring prevailing beliefs and codes of conduct

WILLIAM S. HART: IGNORING THE MARKET

Wister, Turner, and their vision of the West came to flower just as motion pictures were emerging as a major form of entertainment. As a result, the mass media transformed the cowboy hero into a widely marketed commodity. Although this was a powerful trend, some actors developed idiosyncratic styles that were more related to a personal vision and an artistic sense than to prevailing heroic types and marketing strategies built upon them. Although others (such as Bronco Billy Anderson) came before him, it is hard to deny the importance of William S. Hart. Possibly because Hart wouldn’t compromise himself by catering to the market, his work remains impressive. Refusing to adjust his films in order to broaden their appeal, Hart retired from films in 1925. A few years later he candidly described Hollywood as “only a factory.” (Van Gelder 1940).

Hart was uniquely qualified to be the seminal cowboy hero. He was a skilled actor who had drifted into theatrical roles set in the frontier such as The Squaw Man. He was athletic and did his own stunt work. Last, and most importantly, he was dedicated to presenting the West as it had actually existed. Hart envisioned the old West as a rugged place where people quickly showed their true mettle. He observes: “The men of the West lived hard and dangerously and they could be sure of themselves; there were no Aunt Nancys to tell them how to act and what to think. And the West was clean country; the people there either had a mighty clear idea of what stuff their neighbors were made of or they knew how to find out” (Van Gelder 1940).

Hart describes his entrance into films in the following way: “I saw a Western picture. I talked to the manager of the theater and he told me it was one of the best Westerns he had ever had. None of the impossibilities or libels on the West meant anything
to him - it was drawing the crowds. The fact that the
sheriff was dressed and characterized as a sort of
cross between a Wisconsin woodchopper and a
Gloucester fisherman was unknown to him... Here
were reproductions of the old West being seriously
presented to the public - in almost a burlesque
manner - and they were successful. It made me
tremble to think of it. I was an actor and I knew the
West. The opportunity that I had been waiting for
years to come was knocking at my door." (Van Gelder
1940.)

Hart went to Hollywood in 1914, but was told by
Thomas Ince that the Western was out of vogue and
had become a "drug on the market." (Van Gelder
1940) Nevertheless, the studio was committed to
continue making Westerns because of a contract with
the Miller 101 Ranch that provided sets, stunt riders,
and animals. Hart won a job and revitalized the
gende. In doing so, he helped lay the groundwork for
the formula Western that others, such as Tom Mix,
came to exploit. As other movie stars, Hart gained
publicity (such as being on the cover of Photoplay
Magazine in 1917) and products based on his image,
such as trading cards, were sold. Nonetheless, due to
the early era in which Hart worked and the fact that
he eventually drifted away from catering to public
demands, these marketing/PR/merchandising efforts
are not particularly numerous.

Hart increasingly abandoned his market. In 1920
he released The Toll Gate (Paramount/Aircraft)
where the hero, a reformed outlaw, returns to crime
and is killed. Audiences rejected such plotlines and
Hart’s audience dwindled. As a result of box office
disappointments, Adolph Zukor encouraged Hart to
follow the example of Tom Mix, a flashy showman
who catered to public taste. Hart flatly refused and
continued to make personal statements in his films.
Because his films were out of touch with the
demands of the public, Hart’s work became
increasingly unpopular and he ultimately left the film
industry as a result.

William S. Hart is representative of true artists
and innovators who cannot sustain their success
because they refuse to respond to consumer demands.
As usually judged by professional critics, the very
films that doomed Hart’s career are his masterpieces.
Nonetheless, since these films did not please the
public, they failed as marketable products. The
culture and the social structure dictate what will be
successful in the marketplace even more than the
quality of the product.

THE INNOVATIONS OF TOM MIX

While William S. Hart initially revitalized the
cowboy movie, it remained for Tom Mix to bring the
Wister formula to full flower in the movies. In doing
so, Mix transformed the Western movie into an
idealized mythology. Along the way, he began to
consciously cater to children. Like Hart, Mix lived
an adventurous life and (according to his PR director)
he had been a Texas Ranger; the marshal of Dewey,
Oklahoma, and a participant in The Boer War, the
Spanish-American War, and The Boxer Rebellion.
Throughout his career, Mix did his own stunt work
and he suffered numerous injuries as a result
(including various fractures of his arms and legs).
Because Mix encouraged exaggerated stories about
himself, it is hard to know where fact ends and
legend begins. These events, however, seem to be
ture.

Nevertheless, Mix rejected realism and made
colorful Westerns that portrayed a flawless and
invincible hero. Mix is the man most responsible for
transforming the Western movie into a juvenile
morality play. He once had a fan club numbering
2,000,000 children. On screen, Mix adhered to a
code of ethics that included no smoking or drinking
on stage: a strategy later adopted by other "B"
Western stars including Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and
William Boyd. By providing this kind of wholesome
role model, Mix was obviously reflecting the ethos
and mores of American culture. By doing so, Mix
won fame. The Early on, however, Mix catered to an
adult market. He did so by teaming up with Max
Brand, a prolific author who merged European
mythology with the cowboy story. Brand’s first
novel The Untamed (1919), although based in large
part on European mythology, concludes with the
same message as Owen Wister’s The Virginian:
effete Eastern authority is depicted as inferior and is
rejected. In a chapter entitled “Real Men”, for
example, we learn, “some people pointed out that
Sheriff Gus Morris had never made a single
important arrest in... ten years... These ‘knockers’,
however were voted down by the vast majority... They
liked him for his inexhaustible good nature, the
mellow baritone in which he sang the
range songs at anyone’s request, and perhaps more
than all, the laxness with which he conducted his
work... Before his election as an office holder began,
he ran a combined general merchandise store, and
hotel” (1919 180).

The complacent embrace of this incompetent
storekeeper, turned lawman, is shaken when Morris
admits he had known the whereabouts of Jim Silent,
a known outlaw, but fear had prevented him from
leading a posse to make an arrest. After Morris’
cowardice is exposed, the town’s citizens: “trooped
back to the dining room and gathered in a silent circle
around the sheriff whose little fear-bright eyes went
from face to face. ‘Ah, this is the swine that was
guardin’ our lives...’ The flat of a heavy hand struck
with a resounding thwack across his lips. He reeled back against the wall, sputtering the blood from his split mouth” (1919:170).

Just as Owen Wister’s The Virginian affirms that Eastern law cannot function in the rugged West, Brand’s Westerners reject a duly appointed official who possesses legitimate authority but lacks the substance to back it up.

The basic elements of Brand’s novel are preserved in Mix’s film version and are highly successful on the screen. An early review observes: “It is quite an upward step from riding a bronco behind a herd...to the position of movie star of sufficient importance to command stellar place on the program of the world’s largest theater...When a Mix film goes to the Capitol, it is to be taken as proof that the ex-cowpuncher has arrived” (Easton 1970:80-1).

Mix and Brand continued for an additional 6 pictures.

Mix, furthermore, is the cowboy hero who first capitalized upon merchandising that was built upon his reputation and image as a cowboy hero. Early on, Mix-related products catered primarily to adults (such as paper weights). As time went on, however, his marketing efforts were increasingly directed at young boys. Catering to this market, Ralston Purina (a breakfast cereal) used the Mix character to market its products. Part of this strategy involved providing premiums to those who sent in box tops. These premiums, promoted via newspapers advertisements that resembled the “Sunday comics” transcended films and gave Mix a wider appeal, including decoder/autograph rings and decorative plastic arrowheads. Eventually, a wide array of consumer products were marketed using the Mix image; they include hobby horses, cowboy boots and other products that were connected to the old West. After retiring from pictures he continued making personal appearances until his untimely death in a car wreck in 1940. Tom Mix comic books continued to be published well into the 1950s, long after Mix’s death.

In many ways, Tom Mix created the template for future juvenile heroes who sought to use their image as role models in order to market themselves, promote products, and sell “tie in” merchandise. Starting with mementoes of interest to adults, Mix went on to embrace the juvenile market and he positioned himself accordingly. Reflections of these strategies can clearly be seen in other juvenile cowboy heroes who followed Mix and such tactics continue to have their parallels even today. Although the cowboy story was marketed to juvenile boys, however, the adult Western was far from dead.

Although many cowboy movies were targeted towards young boys, other actors aimed at adult audiences. John Wayne is the best representative of the adult western heroes that flourished during the era when juvenile Westerns were big business.

Thus, even though the Saturday matinee was becoming the province of young boys, actors such as John Wayne provided Westerns that catered to an adult audience. In doing so, Wayne did not change the mythic or symbolic theme of the Western, but he did emphasize mature themes. He recalls: “When I started making Westerns, the hero was a guy like Tom Mix who always wore a white hat and rode a white horse. It he knocked a guy down, he’d stand there patiently for him to get up before he knocked him down again. And he never, never kissed the girl” (Ramer 1973:181).

Wayne’s contribution was reintroducing a degree of realism into the cowboy hero: “If a guy in a movie...hit me with a vase, I’d hit him with a chair and that’s the way we went from there. I knocked the stuffings out of the goody-goody Boy Scout cowboy hero and made him a believable guy” (Ramer 1973:181).

Wayne’s career as a major actor began with his leading role in John Ford’s Stagecoach. According to William Everson: “Stagecoach was not the screen’s first adult Western, its first poetic Western, or the first literary Western, but it was the first in a long while to combine these elements so effectively” (Everson 1969:164).

Ultimately, Stagecoach exerted a profound impact: “What in fact did happen to the genre after Stagecoach marked a direct shift from many of the standard treatments of the thirties in both content and approach. Content focused on a restored interest in historical and biographical subjects, providing a rather curious mixture of authenticity of and romanticism”. (Parks 1982:94).

After Stagecoach, Wayne continued to make Westerns that possessed strong adult themes and, as a result, he did not portray invincible heroes who were completely pure of heart. Included among these features are Red River and The Searchers. Perhaps, Wayne’s most memorable adult roles, however are what is generally called his “Calvary Trilogy” made up of Fort Apache, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, and Rio Grande. Significantly, the plotlines of these films deal with the fact that although America had transcended the frontier era, our national character still owes a vast debt to that legacy. These adult have an almost identical in structure and message to juvenile Westerns. By providing these images, he came to emerge as a national icon. As Roberts and Olson observed in 1995: “Middle America grew up with him in the late 1920s and 1930s, went to war
In the 1930s, Cowboy movies were experiencing another downswing in their product life cycle and the decline in popularity led movie producers to experiment with ways to revitalize the genre. After sound pictures came to dominate the field, one tactic was to introduce music into Westerns. During the initial, experimental phase, various noted actors (including John Wayne) became singing cowboys, although the lyrics were sung by somebody else and lip-synced by the actors. Movie producer Nat Levine wanted to continue with the singing cowboy idea, but believed that the earlier efforts had failed because the actors were not professional singers. As a result, Levine hired Autry, then a well known singer with a national following, to join Ken Maynard in the movie *In Old Santa Fe*. The success of the film led Autry to win the starring role in "Phantom Empire" and to go on to be the leading man in approximately 100 films...

Eventually it became obvious that a major segment of Autry’s audience was young boys. Autry embraced his status as a role model and doing proved to be more effective; by 1940, "thousands of Gene Autry clubs...pledged to live the good life, and police departments used his name to impress their safety campaigns on school children" (New York Times A). Autry adds, "Acting like a true American is very important...These young people watch me very carefully and there are certain things they expect me to do and not to do" (New York Times A).

In a nutshell, Gene Autry took the formula Western, influenced by Owen Wister and granted other forms of entertainment onto it. A typical film included musical entertainment, good stuntwork which gave an implausible plot flavor and excitement, and a sub-heroic sidekick (Smiley Burnett), who provided comic relief. This variety allowed the moral message of the film to be simple and childlike while providing humor, excitement, and music for an otherwise bored adult audience. This combination made Autry a fortune; until his death he was one of the nation’s richest men.

Autry emerged as the #1 ranking Western star from 1937 to 1942 when he left Hollywood to join the army. After World War II, Autry returned to the screen and made numerous Westerns until the demise of the “B” Western in the early 1950s. With the “B” Western dead, Autry turned to television and influenced yet another generation of children.

Being a well known musician, many Autry-related products revolved around music. Early in his movie career, for example, a wide variety of Gene Autry music and song books appeared, no doubt capitalizing upon his popularity as a singer. Autry continued to sell records and was made immortal by his version of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, a
novelty Christmas song that “clicked” and became a classic.

Most of the products associated with Autry are tied in with the West and the cowboy motif in some way (such as boot, belt buckles, knives, etc.) Even generic items, such as watches, lunch boxes, and T-shirt transfers make reference to the West and cowboys. Autry became associated with a variety of food products (such as Sunbeam Bread) and a Gene Autry/Sunbeam Bread button was produced and disseminated. Thus, Autry, a noted singer, initially drew upon his music to gain notoriety, but as young boys emerged as his primary audience, the products his was associated with were adjusted accordingly.

ROY ROGERS REFINES THE FORMULA

Due to a salary dispute with Gene Autry during the late 1930s, Republic Pictures decided to protect itself by grooming a second singing cowboy who would be available to make pictures in case Autry refused to come to terms. As a result, Republic recruited Roy Rogers, another professional singer. The studio, having learned marketing lessons from Autry, applied a similar formula to Rogers and created yet another juvenile hero. Due to the largely juvenile target market of his films, however, Rogers’ films lacked the adult appeal of Autry (although Rogers is the only performer to be elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame twice: as an individual performer and as a member of the group (Sons of the Pioneers).

Rogers’ first picture Under Western Skies had been intended as an Autry vehicle, but fell to Rogers. It was successful and Autry and Rogers emerged as a lucrative duo for Republic. That situation remained until Autry left pictures for the army during World War II. Not only did Rogers meet with success as a leading man, the Sons of the Pioneers, the musical group of which he was a part) provided the music.

Like Autry, Rogers was a singer, he had a sub-heroic sidekick (Gabby Hayes), and the action took place in contemporary times. Soon Rogers and Autry were the #1 and #2 ranking Western stars. When Autry joined the army, Rogers inherited the #1 position and maintained that status until the eclipse of the “B” Western in 1954. According to the Christian Science Monitor Rogers’ films consisted of “a little song, a little riding, a little shooting, and a girl to be saved from hazard” (1944).

In 1947, Rogers wed Dale Evans, his perennial leading lady. At the time of the marriage, an executive for Republic made a statement that reveals the marketing approach the studio utilized for his films. The communication reads in part, “Roy plays a strong silent man of the West who never kisses his leading lady. No one would believe it if Dale played opposite him now” (Current Biography 1949 572). As a result, it was announced that Roy and Dale would no longer appear in the same picture. Nevertheless, public demand reunited the husband/wife team. Rogers was now mature enough for young boys to accept him as a surrogate father and Dale Evans, “the queen of the cowgirls” as a surrogate mother. By adopting these new images, they could kiss without seeming mushy.

Rogers used his image in order to sell a wide variety of products including Quaker Oats. He also sold a wide variety of products using the Roy Rogers image. These included comic books, coloring books, and, like Autry, a wide variety of products that were tied to the West. Rogers, however, was able to transcend products related to the West and sell a wide variety of generic items (such as marbles) using the Roy Rogers logo. And eventually, of course, Rogers developed a chain of fast food restaurants named after him.

With the decline of the juvenile “B” Western movie, Rogers entered television and continued as a children’s idol. It has been estimated that his marketing efforts are second only to Walt Disney.

In 1976, Rogers came out of retirement to make Mackintosh and T.J., a contemporary Western about a moralistic old rancher and a juvenile delinquent who eventually abandons his immoral ways and inherits the “code of the West”. In this film, Rogers play two vestiges of the past, himself and the spirit of the frontier. Rogers’ self-reflection is also demonstrated in the song, “Hoppy, Gene and Me”, where Rogers sings about the three cowboy heroes who brought the “B” Western formula to its fullest, its most influential, and its most profitable development. These three stars saturated American culture with their message and their presence; all three had radio shows, marketing campaigns which used their images to hawk merchandise, and all three survived the end of the “B Western” feature films by graduating to TV. All three, furthermore, intertwined their stage personalities with their private lives. William Boyd, for example, once said about his personal appearances, “William Boyd doesn’t go on tour -- Hoppy is going on tour” (Current Biography 1951 64). Boyd, Autry, and Rogers were true aristocrats of the “B” Western, they were the superstars who inherited the legacy of Tom Mix.

This image of Rogers survives in the minds of many baby boomers. Recall for example the words of the Elton John song “Roy Rogers”:

...And Roy Rogers is riding tonight
Returning to our silver screens
Comic book characters never grow old
Evergreen heroes whose stories were told
Of the great sequin cowboy who sings of the plains
Of roundups and rustles and home on the range
Turn on the TV, shut out the lights
Roy Rogers is riding tonight....

Lay back in my armchair, five o’clock evenings
I can hear hoofbeats ahead
Roy and Trigger have just hit the hilltop
While the wife and kids are in bed.

(Elton John/Bernie Taupin 1973)

The power of Roy Rogers was immense and, like Autry, he was a skilled marketeer who played upon his image in productive ways.

WILLIAM BOYD: A CULMINATION

Perhaps the actor who most effectively marketed his stage personality to cater to a juvenile audience was William Boyd. A silent movie star, Boyd had hit hard times by the time talking pictures arrived, in part because, among other things, he became confused with another actor named William Boyd who was connected to scandalous affairs.

Eventually, Boyd landed the part of Hopalong Cassidy in a film series that was loosely based upon the novels of Clarence Mulford. As his film personality evolved, however, the Hopalong Cassidy character drifted more and more away from the Mulford image of a drunken cripple, who swore and drank his way through the stories. Although Boyd was known as a hard “partyer” and as a heavy drinker in real life, he created a character who didn’t drink, smoke, or swear. He even came up with a “Hopalong Cassidy Creed” that emphasized clean living and was clearly aimed at children in ways that they parents would applaud:

The Romance of Marketing History

Hopalong Cassidy’s Creed

1. The highest badge of honor a person can wear is honesty.
2. Your parents are the best friends you have. Listen to them and obey their instructions.
3. If you want to be respected, you must respect others. Show good manners in every way.
4. Only through hard work and study can you succeed. Don’t be lazy.
5. Your good deeds always come to light. So don’t boast or be a show off.
6. If you waste time or money today, you will regret it tomorrow. Practice thrift in all ways.
7. Many animals are good and loyal companions. Be friendly and kind to them.
8. A strong and healthy body is a precious gift. Be neat and clean.
9. Our country’s laws are made for your protection. Observe them carefully.
10. Children in many foreign lands are less fortunate than you. Be glad and proud you are an American.

Working with Harry Sherman, Boyd made 54 Hopalong Cassidy features between 1935 and 1943. After the studios discontinued the Hopalong Cassidy series, Boyd re-created the role using his own production company and made an additional 12 films. This resulted in 66 feature films in all.

Boyd had a keen business and marketing sense and he was quick to perceive how television was destined to exert a profound impact upon American life, leisure habits, and popular culture. Predicting the need for programming once television became a major mass media, he took a gamble and purchased the television rights to all of his movies. When television made its breakthrough in the early 50s, Boyd and his 66 feature films were ready to supply programming. Boyd, incidentally, distributed his films using what is now called the “syndication” method. Instead of selling rights to a network, he negotiated with and was paid by each station. He was rewarded handsomely for doing so.

Boyd’s strategy was to edit the film in order for them to fit a one hour time-slot. In that format, they aired on Sunday nights. His Neilson ratings were high; during the 1950-1 season, the Hopalong Cassidy show ranked 9th in the overall ratings. The popularity spawned a Hopalong Cassidy TV series. With this growing popularity generated by television exposure, Cassidy moved from TV to radio (the reverse of a migration that typically went form ration to TV), airing a show from 1950 to 1952. Comic'
books, published between 1942 and 1959, expanded his range.

It was his early entry into television however, that rapidly turned Boyd and Cassidy from an anachronism into a children’s idol. This status allowed him to market a wide variety of products. In 1950, Time Magazine observed: “Boyd made Hoppy a veritable Galahad of the range, a soft spoken paragon who did not drink, smoke, or kiss girls, who tried to capture the rustlers instead of shooting them, and who always let the villain draw first if gunplay was inevitable” (1950).

This strategy is beautifully illustrated by comparing Clarence C. Mulford’s literary Hopalong Cassidy with the screen version associated with actor William Boyd. The original Mulford character was a cripple - he literally ‘hopped along’, he was a hard drinker, and a barroom brawler, who swore and fought his way through innumerable pulp novels written, by a minor bureaucrat who had never been west of Chicago until he found literary success. Mulford describes his Cassidy: “Mine grew up in his environment in Texas.... He was the product of his environment. It shaped him. He drank whisky when he wanted to; he swore; he gambled; he bought clothes in a frontier store; his boots were bought in a frontier shoe store and not handmade by some New York or Hollywood bootmaker” (New York Times 1956:19).

The cinema transformed Cassidy. “Hopalong” became a curious nickname for a physically intact hero who didn’t drink, smoke, or swear on the screen. William Boyd went as far to embrace a moral code (discussed above) that extolled these virtues. Mulford responds, “I have a great deal of admiration for Boyd’s accomplishments. Let Bill [Boyd] have his Hopalong. I have mine, and I wouldn’t swap my Hopalong for any other cowpuncher known to man” (1956:19).

A SPECIFIC TARGET MARKET

Although Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and William Boyd all found their own special niches and adapted themselves accordingly, each simultaneously embraced a standardized role and image that catered to young boys. They were action heroes who served as wholesome role models that both represented the myth of America and exhibited appropriate codes of behavior. As a result of their role in reinforcing the social structure of the times and doing so in a standardized way, little variation can be found in their work, either individually or as a group. The career of Rogers is a case in point; while still a minor star, he was cast in a variety of roles that taxed his abilities and prevented his portrayals from becoming stagnant or overly predictable. After Rogers gained mass appeal as a clean-cut singing cowboy positioned to boys, however, Republic Studios became unwilling to experiment and his films became cliched.

Over time, however, a combination of changing social conditions came to undercut the juvenile cowboy tradition. Various of the “B” Western heroes suffered the same fate as the real cowboy; after a golden age, they found the world had changed and their place within it had disappeared. Two notable examples of this trend are Hoot Gibson, who spent his final days as a casino hawker in Las Vegas, and Johnny Mack Brown, who became a restaurant worker. Their personal fates parallel the tragedy of the frontier while their acting portrayed the glory.

Due to evolving conditions, Western movies profoundly changed. As Walle has observed: “In post World War II America, an evolving view began to undercut the frontier thesis that asserted that the rugged individualist was an all-conquering hero. A number of notable monographs analyzing American culture, including William Whyte’s The Organization Man, David Reisman’s The Lonely Crowd, and Philip Slater’s The Pursuit of Loneliness point to the fact that [the impact of the frontier was weakening. The basic premise of the Organization Man, for example]...reflects the changing temper of the times; its basic premise is that although Americans hold rugged individualism as an ideal [they no longer believe in it]” (Walle 2000:193-4).

Thus, after World War II, the world view of Americans changed and the myth of the Westerner as all conquering hero (a legacy from Frederick Jackson Turner and Owen Wister) became passé. The prevailing plotlines that now made sense to the public transformed Westerns from sagas of moral heroes who succeed and inspire into (1) somber tales of noble protagonists who become anachronisms and die or (2) uninspiring stories of those who abandon their heroic mantles in order to survive in the twilight of sin, debauchery, and immorality (For a full discussion see Walle 2000). While adult Westerns were able to make that transition and adjust themselves to changing times, the juvenile Western, so hinged on idealized behavior and inflexible codes of honor, could not. As a result, the Juvenile Western faded and with it the product tie-ins and

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1 Clarence Mulford authored over 100 novels, found the filmed Cassidy to be “an absolutely ludicrous character” and was unproductive for the final 15 years of his life as a personal rebellion against the graduated income tax.
advertising campaigns that had made the genre so powerful.

Looking at the juvenile Western in retrospect, one can see that, as a genre, it is largely an expansion of the fictional prototype provided by Owen Wister, who dealt with the heroic stereotype of the Westerner, not with themes of displacement, obsolescence or anti-heroism. The juvenile Western (and merchandising efforts that revolved around it) took Wister’s basic premise and linked it to a marketing mix aimed at young boys. Once America no longer embraced the myth of the cowboy as a universal hero, however, the genre (and marketing structures built around it) fell of their own weight.

CONCLUSION: MUSINGS ON AN HISTORIC ERA IN MARKETING

When Own Wister first presented his vision of the Westerner, he wrote for an audience of sophisticated adults who sought ways to envision American society as equal in stature to European prototypes. In an era when many Europeans portrayed their cultures as superior to those of the New World, American adults, seeking social parity, used the image of the cowboy to counter elitist assertions regarding the inferiority and backwater nature of American culture. By the time the juvenile “B” Western came to full flower, however, the cowboy had been transformed into a cliche protagonist that was largely aimed at children. Although Wister’s basic message was retained, the juvenile Western ceased providing complicated moral lessons appropriate for adults and the hero was transformed into simplified role model who appealed to young boys and pleased their parents. To further cater to this target market, adult themes, such as romance, were underplayed and plots were reduced to simple and easily understood morality plays.

As a result of the parallel strategies and the similar stage personas embraced by all the major juvenile cowboy heroes, the Western movie became intertwined with repetitious and predictable plotlines that responded to the desires of children while not alarming or annoying their parents. Some individuals (such as William S. Hart) opposed these trends and were forced out of the film industry. Tom Mix initially made films with adult themes only to emerge as a children’s idol. In doing so, Mix innovated the strategy to be followed by other movie idols of the West. As time went on, the cowboy story increasingly became a moral training grounds for children and it was tightly niched to fulfill this role.

As a result, the juvenile sub-genre of the Western largely abandoned the adult market and it evolved accordingly. In spite of this transformation, the juvenile Western clearly reflects the social structure of the era by celebrating conventional role models that supported and justified American culture as it then existed. By doing so, the genre was successfully marketed to several generations of young boys.

This juvenile cowboy movie and marketing efforts built around it, however, could not continue successfully in a world where the image of America, as presented by Owen Wister, was no longer believed in, valued as relevant, and embraced by society. Sometime between 1950 and 1960, that myth faded and its impact upon the consciousness of American society weakened. Cowboys came to be depicted as vestigial individuals who evolved under the influence of a specific time and a specific place (the West of the late 19th century). As envisioned, they came to be depicted as passé. Once this image took hold, the cowboy ceased to be a juvenile role model. As this process deepened and became widely accepted, the juvenile Western hero (with its emphasis upon universal standards) came to represent a laughable triteness. And (like Santa Claus) cowboys devolved from mythic heroes worthy of emulation into childish icons for boys to reject as a sign of maturity.

The era of the juvenile cowboy hero was at an end. But before that day came, cowboy heroes and the products they promoted had made marketing history and they had developed many of the strategies of merchandising that are still widely used today.

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