Chapter 9

Bill Hart

THE LIFE OF Scoop Conlon in Hollywood in the early days of his career was closely tied with that of Bill Hart. Scoop was friend, manager and audience for this great and puzzling personality who, as much as any individual, created nation-wide viewer interest in the infant motion picture industry.

"My old friend, Bill Hart, was truly a remarkable man," Scoop said. "In the history of motion pictures, I do not believe that any one star has ever enjoyed the respect and devotion of as many fans. When he passed away in 1946, at the age of eighty-three, he was still receiving scores of letters from loyal friends, despite the fact that he had been retired from the screen for nearly twenty-five years.

"When we first met in 1915, Bill and I took a great liking to each other. We became intimate friends, and this close bond endured for life. It had been my good fortune to see the man who was to become Bill Hart, the 'Two-Gun Man' of the movies, many times on the stage, both as audience and critic, and I had great admiration for his acting. After we became friends, it was only logical that I should become first his publicity manager and later his personal and studio manager.

"His long and eventful life was extremely colorful, ranging from a boyhood with the Sioux Indians in the Dakota territory, to a young manhood of Broadway stage fame, as a great romantic and Shakespearian actor; to the crowning achieve-

ment of fame and fortune as one of the five most popular stars in the history of motion pictures.

"On the stage, he was the leading man for such famous actresses as Mme. Modjeska, Mme. Rhea and Julia Arthur. He played 'Armand' to Modjeska's 'Camille' and 'Romeo' to Julia Arthur's 'Juliet.' He was the original 'Messala' in 'Ben Hur,' the greatest stage production of its time; he won stardom in 'The Man In the Iron Mask.' He made westerns popular on the stage with his performance of 'Cash Hawkins' in 'The Squaw Man,' as 'The Virginian' and in other roles.

"Nature gave Bill Hart a matchless physique and figure, straight as an arrow, six feet one and one-half inches tall in his stocking feet, lean and powerful. In his younger days he was an outstanding athlete for the Manhattan Athletic Club in New York. All through his life he was extremely proud of his robust health and physique.

"He had a long, strong face with craggy features, a face that could be grim and saturnine, or gentle and kindly. His small, twinkling, blue eyes, amazingly expressive, could glitter with all the traditional deadliness of the western two-gun men he so often portrayed.

"Bill was uncommonly graceful in his movements for so big a man. He never got over his Indian habit of movement, silent and graceful.

"He became a superlative actor, much finer than his motion picture audiences or his screen colleagues ever knew. Possibly he lived before his time because he had a superb speaking voice.

"Few people associated the W. S. Hart or the William S. Hart of the Broadway stage with the Bill Hart, two-gun man of the movies, so completely did Bill submerge himself in the character he played in the western movies.

"He played the part to the hilt in real life, and people loved it. His 'Yes, Ma'am' and 'Thank you, Ma'am' became as natural to him when speaking to a woman as it was to say 'Hello' and 'How are you?' He dressed in what the country westerner calls 'store clothes,' ready-made suits and shirts,

plain ties, and sometimes a plain, unattractive cap (when not wearing the traditional Stetson).

"In real life, Bill was quiet and gentle. He had a robust sense of humor, chuckling at conversation and laughing uproariously at a joke. He laughed by throwing his head back and hollering with glee.

"There were also times when he raged in anger over studio injustices, or, perhaps, the misdemeanors of someone in his company at an inopportune time, BUT the public never saw him angry or in a rage, or in an undignified position. He played the role expected of him.

"Behind the scenes, Bill lived a simple, almost austere life.

"Once he quit the stage, in 1914, to star in 'The Bargain' for his old room-mate, Tom Ince, he gave it up forever. Bill was offered $400 a week by Eugene Walters to co-star with Charlotte Walker at the time, but he made the plunge into the lowly movies for $125 a week.

"He arrived in Los Angeles with his sister, Mary Ellen, and their old English bulldog, Congo, and took residence at a downtown apartment. On my way home from the newspaper office I would meet Bill for breakfast at 5:30, at a 'greasy spoon' called Chili Mike's. I would be on my way to bed and Bill on his way to Inceville, which was thirty miles away by street car and bus. That was quite a trip to make every day. Bill would be made up and on the set or location between eight and nine o'clock. At night he had to make the same trip back to Los Angeles, and still get to the Round Table, at the Hoffman, for dinner. It was rugged.

"But from the moment Bill decided to gamble on the movies, he went all the way.

"While waiting for the returns on 'The Bargain,' Bill had to be content with making two-reelers. His first, 'The Passing of Two-Gun Hicks,' was regarded by such discerning critics as the late Harry Carr as the best two-reeler ever made. Early in the spring of 1915, after Bill had made more than twenty two-reelers, the Triangle Company was formed, headed by D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and Thomas H. Ince.

"Stage stars arrived in Hollywood in droves, all at fancy stipends, and the only one who made good was Douglas Fairbanks. He received $2,200 weekly, made a smash hit in his first picture, 'The Lamb,' while Bill was still getting $400 a week from Tom Ince. I recall that Bill's picture, 'The Disciple,' a five-reeler, followed 'The Lamb' in New York, and it only cost $8,000 to make. It was also a big hit, so even the wily Ince had to do something about his one great star, or wind up behind the eight-ball. Bill had a stubborn streak of loyalty a mile wide, but he finally woke up to the fact that a tremendous fortune was being made out of him, while he was barely getting by.

"After weeks of wild bidding, Bill stuck by Tom Ince and settled for a raise of $8,000 a week from $400, though a rival organization offered $10,000.

"These figures should give you a rough idea of what a Klondike Hollywood was in those days, and why the four first great stars—Bill, Doug, Charlie and Mary—made more money for their backers and for themselves than anyone has since in motion pictures.

"Coming in to lesser fame with Bill in his pictures were such players as Dorothy Dalton, Louise Glaum, Bessie Love, House Peters and Robert McKim. I must add that Bill Hart made one discovery who became famous. He was a young actor getting fifteen dollars a week, and he attracted Bill's attention in a small role in 'Hell's Hinges,' which was one of Bill's best westerns. Bill insisted on giving the boy the part of his younger brother in 'The Apostle of Vengeance,' which Ince fought tooth and nail because it was the best part in the picture. He threatened Bill with loss of salary if the boy failed, but Bill stuck to his guns.

"The boy was Jack Gilbert!

"When Bill Hart started on his own producing-starring contract with Famous Players-Lasky, he broke with Ince, although Tom collected fifty-fifty for two years. Bill leased his own studio in Hollywood, located on the corner of two streets with very romantic names—Bates and Effie.

"Mack Sennett had originally built it for Mabel Normand.

It was a funny old place, with a telephone pole running up through the center of the stage, but we loved it dearly. In all, we made twenty-seven feature pictures there, during which time Bill Hart became one of the greatest figures in motion picture history.

"Bill was on a Liberty Loan tour when I completed my contract with the Arbuckle company. I was supposed to leave for an army camp on November fifteenth. My contract expired on the ninth, Bill wired me to join him as publicity director on the tenth, and the Armistice was declared on the eleventh. So, I just missed the train.

"When I first joined the Bill Hart company, I was much impressed with his policy of surrounding himself with the best available players.

"Among the girls were Anna Q. Nilsson, Jane and Eva Novak, Katherine MacDonald, Mary Thurman, Phyllis Haver (of the Sennett bathing beauty school), Seena Owen and Vola Vale; among the men was a newcomer named Lon Chaney.

"Bill always cast the 'heavy' with the finest actor he could find, such as Tom Santschi. Bill knew his own powers as an actor and he wasn't afraid of a scene being stolen from him. He could take care of himself. This is why he cast Lon Chaney in 'Riddle Gawn.' At first, Lon couldn't believe it when he played his first scene with Bill, and Hart told him to go ahead and take the scene if he could. Once Chaney got it through his head that Bill wasn't kidding, there was a battle worth seeing. Later Lon told me, when he was making 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame,' that it was Bill's encouragement that hastened his own stardom.

"We had kangaroo courts on every location. It was on this picture that both Lon and Bill were chapped so hard they were hardly able to sit down for days. If you were the defendant, you were always guilty in the kangaroo court, and I recall that we chapped Bill for loaning his leading lady five dollars with which she got in the crap game and took money away from honest cowboys.

"Bill usually rode his famous little pinto pony, Fritz, in his pictures, particularly after 'The Narrow Trail,' the first

picture he made for Famous Players-Lasky and in which he and the little horse performed several thrilling stunts. How people used to rave about the pinto pony—he even had a fan club. With Bill, it was love me, love my horse."

Speaking of "love," Bill Hart, like so many prominent male stars of the period, had more than his share of troubles with movie-struck women who imagined they were in love with him. Scoop cites an example:

It was always possible for a person without principles to accuse a movie star of practically anything and make it stick. This invariably resulted in bold, black headlines. If the star wasn't ruined, he or she was close to it. You were, in effect, guilty until proven innocent.

Bill Hart was accused once by a famous Chicago judge's spinster sister of being the father of her child. The story became wonderful material for yellow journalism, crowding more conventional news off the front pages. Bill doled out munificent sums to attorneys and detectives. William Randolph Hearst came to his support. Yet his vindication was a slow and bitter fight.

Only a miracle saved him. One of the secretaries at Bill's studio, who was in charge of answering fan mail, strolled into his dressing room one afternoon with a crumpled letter in her hand.

"Mr. Hart," she said timidly, "I threw this letter away at first, and then when I realized it might be important, I went back and got it. It's from some crazy woman."

She handed the letter to Bill. The words were scribbled on cheap paper, and the signature was that of the real mother of the child. She explained that she was a poor immigrant woman, and she wanted Bill to help her force the judge's sister to return her baby. The child, she said, had only been borrowed.

That was all of the evidence Bill needed. It smashed the case wide open. Bill was cleared of all charges. The damage was done, however. The newspaper stories telling of Bill's vindication were printed in smaller type and did not enjoy the same front-page space the accusing stories had. Consequently many decent Americans failed to read of Bill's innocence, and they

stopped seeing his movies. It was a high price to pay for fame.

The ink on the sensational Chicago story was hardly dry when a beautiful girl got past the front gate of Bill's studio and stole into his dressing room. Bill at the time was busy on stage shooting a scene. When it was time for the noon break, Bill went back to his dressing room. Scoop and E. H. Allen, the company manager, followed Bill a few minutes later, entering the dressing room from another door. Just as they opened the door this eye-filling dame yanked down her hair and ripped at her blouse. She had her mouth open to scream just as the unexpected visitors walked in. Scoop still remembers the scene: Bill Hart, standing helpless with his mouth gaping in astonishment as if to protest; the girl burning with frustration, her beautiful face contorted with rage. Scoop escorted her to the door—none too politely—but it was some time before Bill stopped shaking and color returned to his face. He sat down in a studio chair. "Sometimes," he told Scoop, "this celebrity business gives you a pain, and I've got one right now in the part that fits in the saddle."

What happened to the girl? Some of the company's rough-and-ready cowgirls asked if they could have the privilege of escorting her out. "I have no idea where they took her," Scoop said, "but knowing how those cowgirls handled leather chaps, it was a safe bet that the girl took her meals standing up for a few days."

* * *

They were sitting around a table in Scoop's playhouse (a combination bar, rumpus room, office), discussing this book,

Scoop and Edwin Schallert, that distinguished drama-music critic of the *Los Angeles Times* for 41 years. Behind them, on the wall, hung a framed autographed picture of Bill Hart. Now, this wasn't an ordinary picture. Bill's solemn expression was haunting. The eyes, clear and intelligent, bore into you, grabbing and not letting go. No matter the angle from which you studied the face, those deep-set eyes stared *straight* at you, almost alive. It was as though he were in the room with them, flesh and blood. Well, in a way, he *was* there. He was still Scoop's and Edwin's favorite topic of conversation.

"Of all the famous figures I've worked with," confessed Scoop, "none has outshone Bill. To me, he'll always remain the original Mr. Westerner. He had no peer."

"That's right," echoed Edwin Schallert, "he'll remain in a class alone. The nearest to him today is Gary Cooper. Bill would still be a big star today."

"He had one of the greatest speaking voices we've ever heard," Scoop said.

"Yet," Schallert pointed out, "his voice ironically never was heard publicly on the screen; and all because of that long fight he had with his studio. You were in on it, weren't you, Scoop?"

"Yes," Scoop said. "I remember the particulars well. I was handling Bill's personal affairs and he had always given me a free hand. One day Jesse Lasky called Bill and told him the Famous Players-Lasky studio was establishing a new policy for its stars."

That meeting with Lasky was one of the most important movie conferences ever held, for the strain and tensions of that conference were to have a lasting effect on Bill Hart's career. This is what happened and this is what Lasky told Bill:

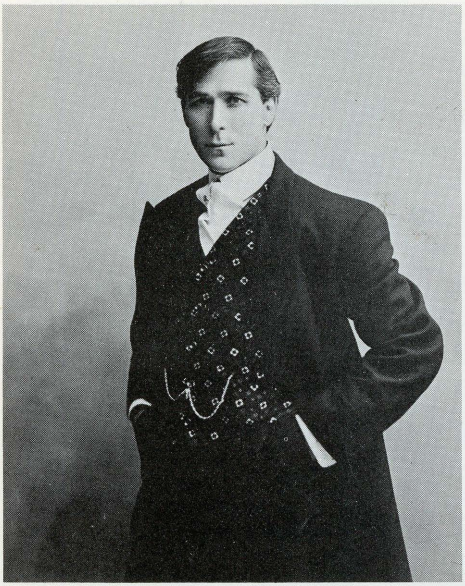
"Bill," Lasky said, "you are an actor. You're among the highest paid actors in the business. You produce your own pictures . . ."

"What are you driving at?" interrupted Bill.

"We've decided"—and here it came—"that you must stop being a producer and become an actor. We will do the producing. We'll select your stories, casts and directors. All you'll

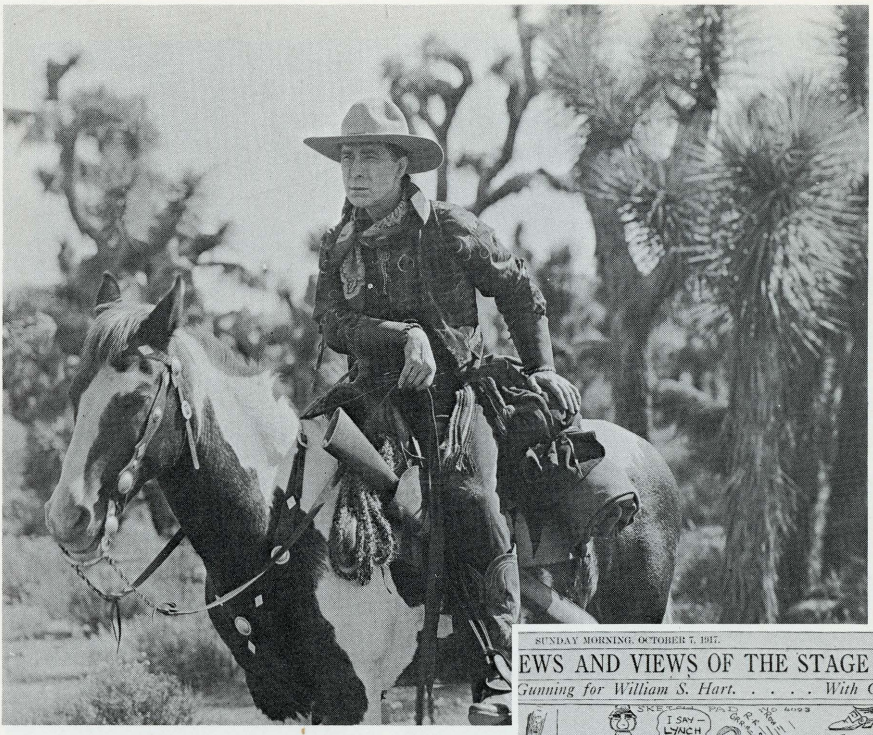
WILLIAM S. HART as "The Virginian" on the stage in 1905 . . . painting by J. M. Marchand.

William S. Hart as the original "Messala" in "Ben Hur" at the Broadway theater, New York, in 1899. (Left to right) Adeline Adler, Mabel Bert, Edward Morgan as "Ben Hur," Mary Shaw and William S. Hart as "Messala" . . . (Bill was young and rugged in those days).



WILLIAM S. HART in one of his handsome "dude" leading-man roles on stage.

WILLIAM S. HART as "ROMEO" . . . of all people . . . scored a sensational success in New York opposite Julia Arthur's "JULIET" . . . and this is the actor who became the "Two-Gun Man" . . . the greatest western hero of them all.



BILL HART and his famous Pinto Pony.

Scoop Conlon's BILL HART feature in the *Los Angeles Times.*

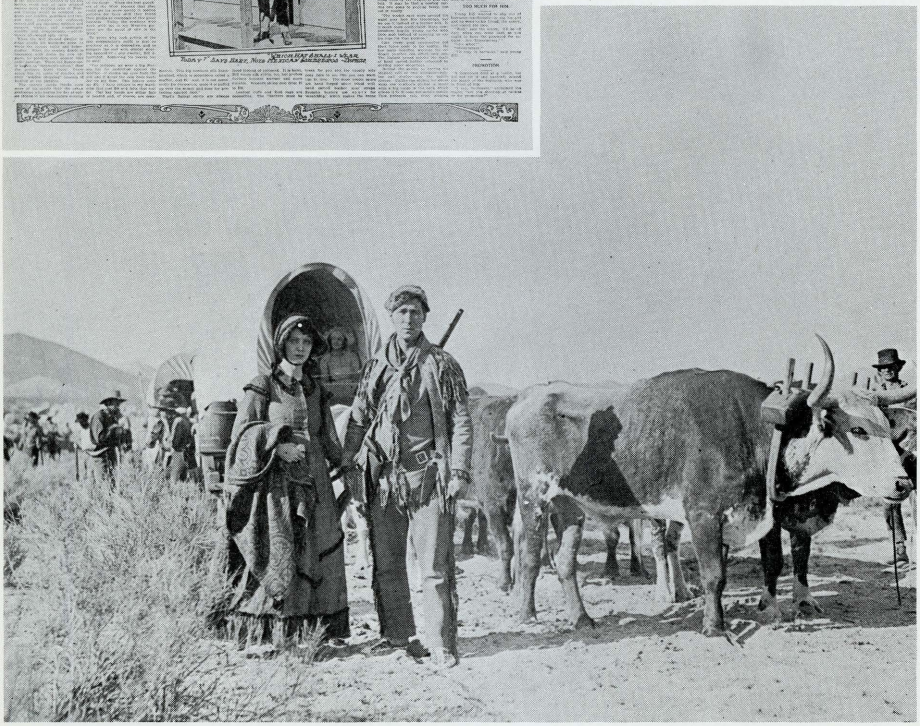
THE GAZETTE TIMES HOME JOURNAL

AMERICAN COWBOY DANDIES ARE AS STYLISH AS CITY BEAU BRUMMELS

CHEYENNE, AMARILLO OR PENDLETON VIE WITH NEW YORK, PARIS OR LONDON AS LEADING CENTERS OF FASHION.

BY PAUL H. CONLON

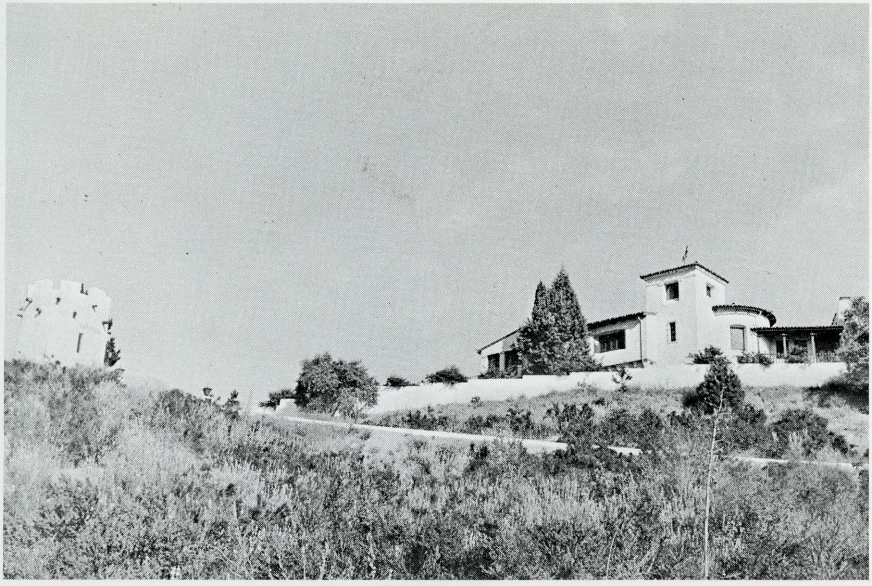
One of Scoop Conlon's amazing full-page features of Bill Hart, syndicated in more than 100 newspapers in the United States.



WILLIAM S. HART and his favorite leading lady, JANE NOVAK, in "Wagon Tracks."

WILLIAM S. HART as the "Two-Gun Man."

Two great westerners . . . BILL HART and CHARLES RUSSELL,
the famous painter . . . they were close friends.



The Bill Hart ranch at Newhall, California . . . now a museum.

BILL HART at home on his ranch.

ANNA Q. NILSSON,
the fine Swedish
actress of silent days,
a star in her own right.

JANE and EVA NOVAK, the famous sister beauties,
who were Bill Hart's favorite leading women.

have to do is act. As far as money's concerned, Bill, it won't make any difference to you. You own your company."

"Nothing doing, Jesse," Bill snapped. "I'm going along as I always have or I'm through. If your decision is final, it's good-bye." He shook hands with Lasky and walked out of the room.

Remembering the story, Scoop grimaced. "All this happened at the peak of Bill's career. He could have made his studio many more millions of dollars, but he quit on the spot. That was in 1922."

Three years later Bill had one more fling, making an independent picture, "Tumbleweeds," for United Artists release. It wound up in a legal battle over distribution. Fourteen years later Bill was awarded $375,000, but all of it went to pay his legal fees. That was the end of Bill's movie trail, and he never appeared on the screen again.

"He never regretted his action," Scoop said. "It wasn't the money he cared about. He put his pride before wealth. So when his bosses attempted to win him back with promises of more money, Bill ignored them. He couldn't forget how they got together and roasted him publicly to make an example of him. His final answer came one morning when he called me to his home and asked me to take his last answer to the heads of the studio. He had just been informed that he could write his own ticket if he'd go back to work. This is what he told me to tell them: 'Scoop,' he said, 'go over there and tell them—to go to HELL!' "

Bill Hart's one-man battle with the studio moguls demonstrated, among other things, that sincerity can be wrong as well as right. Even though it meant the finish, Bill sincerely believed he was doing the right thing to hold out for his independence. His fight was hopeless, however; in the end, the original Two-Gun Man saddled up his pony and faded off into the sunset.

"It was a tragic way for Bill to bow out of the movies," Scoop said. "Call it iron will, stubbornness, whatever you prefer, but any other actor would have come to terms with the studio.

Not Bill Hart. He never got over the incident. He carried it to the grave with him.

"In an attempt to forget, Bill staged entertaining dinner parties. He tried to give his guests the impression that he was a happy man, content in his retirement after years of hard work on the stage and in front of the movie cameras. I knew better. I knew he was eating his heart out. The acting virus was in him deep. For a while he surrounded himself with old friends, people like Will and Betty Rogers, Bill Fields, Mack Sennett, Ruth Chatterton, Amelia Earhart, Harold Lloyd, Billie Burke, Louis Dresser, Jack Gardner, Leon Errol, Joel McCrea, Paul Whiteman, Harry Carey and Rudy Vallee. Bill was a wonderful host. My wife, Lilian, acted as his hostess at these parties. His guests learned after a while never to discuss certain subjects with Bill, because he'd become bitter and we'd have a devil of a time getting him off these topics. Bill grew so bitter in the end that he became virtually a recluse. He went to the grave a very lonely man."

Bill must have thought a lot about death and life hereafter in those final years. One night looking out over the beloved mountains, he said to Scoop: "I am willing my ranch to the public as a museum and park—the same as my old friend Will (Rogers) did. And on my tombstone you can put the words: Mite oihanple canku ksan, ye yin na i hanke."

It was the language of the Sioux Indians, one of the most beautiful tongues on earth. Bill spoke it fluently.

"What does it mean?" Scoop wanted to know.

"It means," explained Bill, "trail . . . long . . . winding . . . to land of dreams."

In 1958 the nation's newspapers carried a story about the official opening of the William S. Hart museum of western lore. In compliance with the terms of his will, his famous Horseshoe ranch at Newhall, California, was presented to Los Angeles County.

Scoop never goes to the ranch. He has never seen the Museum. He has little desire to awaken old, sad memories. He prefers to remember his old friend as he knew him.

Chapter 10

On Location

"LOCATION" WAS A MAGIC word in the silent movie days. It meant fun, and adventure, as well as hard work.

Bill Hart's pictures were mostly made on location.

A wave of wonderful memories sweeps through Scoop's memory box when those location days are mentioned.

The pioneer producers speedily found out that California offered every conceivable kind of location, from the deserts to the High Sierras, from the big trees to tropical palms, from mountain streams to the ocean. If the producer was wealthy and wanted a change of scenery, he could experiment in Utah, Nevada and Arizona.

To Scoop, "location" was something of a vacation. An outdoors man, the longer he stayed on a location the more he liked his work. A western troupe like Bill Hart's virtually lived on location in the silent days. Even though he took advantage of nearby locations like the strange rocky country called Chatsworth, the bleak mountain ranges between the Pacific Ocean and San Fernando Valley, or, even some of the desert canyons, Bill always managed to think of some beautiful locale like the Santa Cruz redwood country in northern California, the high Sierra lakes, or, Victorville in the Mojave desert.

The Hart company discovered Victorville and made several pictures there before it became populated with movie outfits. The Mojave country around Victorville offered a different type of desert scenery because it had the Mojave River, and

huge rock formations as well as the yucca and Joshua tree-dotted desert sands.

In the winter it was heaven, pleasantly warm in the daytime and bitter cold at night; in the summer, it was hotter than the hinges of hell in the day—110° being a fair average temperature—but cool enough at night to sleep under blankets.

On location today is quite a different experience.

Several years ago Scoop visited Howard Hawks on location in Rain Valley, fifty miles south of Tucson, Arizona, where Hawks filmed the last of the great westerns, "Red River."

The Hawks' company lived in a miniature tent town in solid comfort, everything from hot and cold showers to a menu which offered both sirloin steaks and friend chicken for dinner. They had some three hundred people on that location. It cost approximately $150,000 to construct the tent town alone, and $2,300 a day to keep the workers well fed and contented. Besides, there was a remuda of some 200 horses, and last but not least, 2,500 head of hungry cattle. Each animal could eat fifteen pounds of hay daily and drink fifteen gallons of water. Bill Hart made his most expensive picture, "Wagon Tracks," for approximately $90,000, and it cost Hawks $150,000 to build the tent city alone!

Scoop made this comparison with full allowance for the vast difference in picture making, from sound equipment to much bigger salaries for everyone except the star, and for the modern high cost of living. But he made it because with all this comfort, even luxury for a location, he had never heard such "griping" and such bad sportsmanship from people.

Hawks and Scoop were talking over old location trips one night in his tent. He suggested Scoop tell some of the "gripers" how good they had it. Common sense had no effect, sarcasm but little more.

Imagine people making their choice of sirloin steak or fried chicken, or, usually taking both, and still complaining—in an isolated desert valley fifty miles from nowhere?

Maybe the movie pioneers were more naive and simple in those days, but in any event they had fun and excitement, and thoroughly enjoyed what they were doing.

No wonder Frank Capra once said, "Making pictures isn't fun any more!"

In the early days, the star or a leading lady would put up with more discomfort than some of the "extras" would today.

That "Red River" cost $2,800,000 to film more than 12 years ago is no mystery.

Fancy the fun of the good old silent days when Bill Hart once staged a big rodeo on location not far from his studio to which he invited more than 3,000 people. They all came and a few more. Result: the filming of the rodeo didn't cost the Hart company a penny for "extras."

Scooper recalls one location which was typical of the Bill Hart policy. They were filming "O'Malley of The Mounted," a departure from Bill's westerns. Bill Hart was too good an actor to restrict himself to western roles.

The Bill Hart outfit was comprised mostly of fearless, brawny characters who would fight at the sound of a door bell if they figured they were being "put upon." No prouder crew of men ever walked in boots. Only their unswerving loyalty and deep respect for their easy-going boss kept them from taking the town apart.

Bill was proud of his company's reputation. To remove temptation, Bill had forbidden the usual Saturday night dances. The booze they enjoyed most in those prohibition days was fightin' likker. But, as bad weather kept them in the village for three weeks, the constant "riding" of the local wise guys became a problem.

Nerves were worn thin from long wretched days filming exhausting fight scenes deep in the redwood forest. It had rained for days; it was bitter cold and damp in the dark of the big trees, but the company had to labor tirelessly to make up for lost time.

The location was an out-of-the-way village in the Santa Cruz forest in northern California. No motion picture company had ever been there before, and the local ranch hands and lumberjacks were inclined to poke fun at what they called the "Hollywood drugstore cowboys."

Coming into the hotel one evening after a hard day's

work, Scoop noticed one of the company's more feared men, a rodeo performer who had done time in prison, for a killing, leaning against a pillar on the front porch. He was studying the windows of a two-story house across the street—this was where some of the taunts and wise cracks had been coming from.

Bill and Scoop were talking the situation over as Hart changed boots. Suddenly a shot rang out and then another. Scoop and Bill jumped for the door, Bill tugging on a boot and cussing. It wasn't the man on the veranda. He was milling around with the other men trying to get into the dining room. Inside was a scene you'd find only in a dime novel!

Across the big room at a table next to the wall sat Bill's chuck wagon cook. He was nonchalantly fingering a six-shooter. A few tables away in the half-filled room three white-faced local men sat at a table. In their hands they held the handles of what had once been big thick coffee cups. Before Bill could shout at him, the cook calmly shot the remaining cup of coffee out of the third man's grasp. Then he leaned back and fired three shots into the ceiling. Quietly the chuck wagon cook arose, put the gun back in its holster, and left the room. Bill and Scoop were speechless.

Scoop looked at Bill. Bill returned Scoop's stare. "I know I don't belong in here, Mr. Hart," the cook said as he passed Bill on his way out, "but I heard there might be a ruckus and I just figgered to get in on it. Want you to know, boss, I was mindin' my own business when them fellers tried to jump me."

Bill's face was grave. Finally he spoke: "Boys, you all go on down to camp and I'll see you there directly."

The rest of his hired hands left the lobby. After they were gone, an excited waitress walked up to Bill. "It's all my boss' fault," she whispered. "He's been egging the local boys on."

Bill said nothing, listening. "I was just coming through the kitchen door," she went on, "with a tray of soup when I heard one of the boys yell 'Hey, drugstore cowboy, is it true you wear lace panties?' That nice man shot so fast it scared me and I dropped the soup and ran into the kitchen."

"What happened to your boss?" Bill wanted to know.

"That big jackass" she said indignantly, "ran up the stairs

at the first shot. And if I know him, he's hidin' under the bed right now."

It dawned on Bill and Scoop why the cook, in the hotel dining room, had taken careful aim at the ceiling.

Back in camp, an hour later, the cook's gear was packed, though he continued to broil steaks for the boys when Scoop and Bill returned. After a few "howdy, boys," Bill and Scoop sat down to join the others at the table. Very little was said until they had eaten; then Bill spoke to the "gunman." "Pardner," he said, "I got some bad news for you." Here it comes, Scoop thought. "Yep, sure some bad news. You *missed* that hotel feller."

There was a twinkle in Bill's eyes. "Get your things unpacked," said Bill. "You didn't think I was fool enough to lose the best chuck wagon cook in the world, did you?"

One of the best—and toughest—stories of Scoop's unconventional career happened on a gloomy day in the Mojave desert.

Bill Hart was stretched out in bed in the Victorville hotel with a touch of pneumonia, the result of his insistence on going into the cold Sacramento River time after time, when he could have used a "double."

Director Lambert Hillyer, his assistant, Steve Roberts, and cameraman Joe August, had gone duck hunting down the river.

Scoop was sitting with several friends—wranglers, a few cowgirls—on a corral fence near the railroad tracks which ran right through the center of town. Inside the corral, some of the boys were practicing trick riding and roping.

A freight train with many tankers was pulled up on the siding next to the corral. A couple of drunken trainmen ambled by. Prohibition was in full flower and one of the trainmen chortled, at the movie people: "Too bad you guys are too dumb to be good trainmen. Lots more fun ridin' trains than trying to stay on them horses." The Hart men were suspicious.

One of the cowboys slid off the fence and under a tanker. He unscrewed a stopcock, stuck his tongue under, and came up with a big grin.

"Those boys guessed wrong," announced the cowboy, "I used to be a brakeman myself. Get some buckets, anything that'll hold good likker."

The fun was on. Cowhands, wranglers and the crew were scattering in all directions, bringing containers ranging from new garbage cans bought in the Emporium, to sugar bowls swiped off tables at the hotel.

Pandemonium? First thing Scoop knew he was standing in a circle taking his turn at a big jug. Scoop nearly dropped on the spot. You see, this wasn't drinkin' likker! It was muscatel wine!

The muscatel hit the hard-drinking cowboys like a freight coming out of a blind alley, and some of the top rodeo riders mounted their ponies to let off steam. They were not long in the saddle.

The oldest working cowboy was called Jim Kidd. He had exactly one tooth in his mouth, sort of a snag. His hoss tossed him into a big cactus, landing and holding him upside down. There he hung, too, nobody paying the slightest attention to him. All Scoop remembers is that was the last time he ever saw Jim Kidd.

Shortly, excited horses were running wild and riderless over the desert. In the hotel, poor Bill Hart heard the noises. With the aid of his sister, Mary Ellen, and Lilian Conlon, he got into his boots, ignoring his pneumonia, and came outside—just in time to witness a beautiful street fight. His wranglers were happily working over a few male citizens from town.

Victorville was in a tizzy. The mayor was yelling for a posse, but nobody could find the local sheriff, he being a conveniently discreet individual.

Bill fumed. He charged into all fights, tearing men apart right and left, and shouting angry orders to stop before someone got killed. Finally, when the melee died, Bill—madder than anyone had ever seen him—fired everybody in his company.

He then pivoted and started back to the hotel. Before he had taken two strides, one of the cowboys climbed to the top of the one-story jail, and let out a long coyote yell. "I'm a curly

bitch wolf and this is my night to howl"—whereupon he promptly fell off the roof, knocking himself out.

The first hint of a smile flickered across Bill's rigid countenance as he studied the prostrate cowboy.

"Better throw Tex in the jail house," he said to the mayor. "Let him howl in there."

Meanwhile, Scoop found out that someone had actually telephoned San Bernardino and the sheriff was supposedly on the way with a posse. This was his cue.

He dashed to the telegraph office. Fortunately, Hart had upward of a hundred Indians with his company to attack a wagon train. They were quartered in old pullmans on the railroad siding.

Talk about switches. This time the Indians rode to the rescue—instead of the cavalry!

Ordinarliy Scoop would hate to make this confession, I know, but considering the fact that Bill Hart didn't have a black mark against his location record, he should be forgiven. Anyway, he gave the wire services a story that the redskins had acquired forbidden "fire water" and had gone berserk. He didn't go so far as to say they had put on war paint, and had massacred any palefaces, but it was implied. The situation was under control.

The story was printed, the posse from San Bernardino never did show up, and Bill Hart was spared from a national scandal. The duck hunters were sore as the devil because they missed the fun.

Bill was so mad he forgot about his pneumonia, and after he found a five gallon water bottle filled with aged muscatel wine cached in his room—a cryptic note attached: "Have one on us boys, boss," he gave in.

A meeting followed. Bill's only words were: "Boys, I reckon a little excitement is good for pneumonia. Looks like I'm going to live. Reckon you fellas are goin' to be able to work in the mornin'?"

The good old days on location.