

FILMS

in Review



**WM. S. HART'S
COMPLETE CAREER**

**THE INGREDIENTS
OF A GOOD TITLE**

**MAKING MOVIES
OUT OF NOTHING**

**THE PROBLEMS OF
TV FILM EDITING**

**CARL DREYER
ON COLOR FILM**

**April 1955
40c**

FILMS

APRIL 1955
VOLUME VI
NUMBER 4

in Review

EDITED BY HENRY HART

Cover

Glenn Ford and Eleanor Parker in "Interrupted Melody"

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Published monthly except June-July and August-September, when bimonthly, at 13 West Church Street, Washington, N. J., by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Inc., 31 Union Square, New York 3, New York. Annual subscriptions: \$3.50 in U. S.; \$3.75 in Canada; \$4 elsewhere. Entered as 2nd class matter at Lancaster, Pa., May 8, 1953. Application for reentry as second-class matter at Washington, N. J., is pending.

*Address all communications and editorial matter to the Editorial Office,
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WILLIAM S. HART

The Foremost Actor In Silent Westerns Knew And Loved The West

By GEORGE MITCHELL

THE MAN who did most to raise the Western from its haphazard beginnings, and to make a real film form out of this vital American tradition, was William S. Hart. From 1914 until his retirement in 1925 he produced, starred in, and sometimes also wrote and directed, movies that are still unsurpassed for their depiction of the way life *really* had been during the opening and settling of the West. In this, indeed, Hart's pictures are the filmic equivalents of the Frederic Remington paintings and the drawings of Charles M. Russell.

Hart was born on December 6, 1870, in Newburgh, New York. His middle name—Surrey—was for his father's brother, an Englishman who had always opposed the rest of the family. "He's always on the Surrey side" is a colloquial expression used in Britain to describe a stubborn man. In many ways, if the adverb 'always' were eliminated, the phrase could apply to Hart. And from his Irish mother he inherited a strong sentimental streak.

Hart's father, Nicholas, was an itinerant miller and travelled about the country searching for new water sites. The family led a nomadic

existence until they settled in Dakota territory near the Sioux reservation. As a very young boy Hart had Sioux playmates, learned their language and customs, and acquired a respect for them he carried through life.

His boyhood was rich with unusual experiences. His father and he were once caught, in the middle of the main street of Sioux City, in the cross-fire of the local sheriff and two gunmen. While still a boy he worked as a hand on a trail herd in Kansas.

In his autobiography, *My Life East and West*, Hart describes the death of a baby brother when the family was pioneering in Dakota. The baby was buried near the headwaters of the Mississippi by the father, Hart, and a younger sister, and the passage describing its harsh reality will stir the sympathy of even the most cynical. The Harts were very poor, but they were also very close to each other, and they had dignity.

When Hart was fifteen his mother's illness forced the family back East. The father became janitor of an apartment house, in the basement of which they lived. The son had a variety of odd jobs. He also sang in the Trinity Church choir and took

to athletics. At nineteen he went to London with the fabulous track star, Lon Myers, and there set a world record for the three-and-a-half-mile walk.

At that time Hart had two ambitions: to go to West Point, and to go on the stage. West Point was out because he lacked the schooling. "The stage idea just came," Hart said years later, "and always remained, and will be with me when the final curtain is rung down."

While working as a postal clerk in New York City's main post office he took acting lessons, and F. F. Markey, one of the finest actors and teachers of the day, was one of his teachers. Daniel E. Bandemann, an actor-manager, gave Hart his first part on the professional stage—in *Romeo and Juliet*. By coincidence, it opened in Newburgh, the city of his birth.

For the next twenty years Hart earned his living as an actor. He toured the US and Europe, and was leading man to Mme. Rhea, Julia Arthur, and Modjeska. His first personal critical acclaim was as Messala in the original *Ben Hur* company. He played in *Ben Hur* for several seasons, and then, like many another actor, hit a series of flops. At this juncture he shared a room in the old Hotel Harrington, on Broadway at 44th Street, with a young and struggling actor named Thomas H. Ince.

Then Hart got the Cash Hawkins role in *The Squaw Man*—his first "Western" role on the stage, and he played it to the hilt. Next came *The Barrier*, followed by the lead in the road company of *The Virginian*.

It was these plays, and an occurrence in Cleveland while he was playing there, that gave his career its direction and his life its goal.

In Cleveland Hart saw his first Western film. The thing that impressed him most was the terrible misrepresentation of the Old West. "I was an actor and I knew the West," he wrote later. "The opportunity that I had been waiting for years to come was knocking at my door . . . Rise or fall, sink or swim, I had to bend every endeavor to get a chance to make Western motion pictures."

He kept this ambition to himself, and for the remainder of the season went to the movies whenever possible and studied what he saw.

While he was touring in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* the company played California and Hart discovered that his old friend, Tom Ince, had become the head of the New York Motion Picture Company's studios. He told Ince of his determination to make Westerns. Ince said Westerns were a drug on the market. When Hart persisted, Ince agreed to give him a chance. He completed his tour with *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and returned to California in the summer of 1914.

The New York Motion Picture Company was owned by Adam Kessel and Charles Baumann, and included Mack Sennett's Keystone Company. Their studios were located in what was called Inceville, at the mouth of the Santa Monica canyon, along the present Roosevelt Highway. There were several open air stages, a few open air sets of Western towns and the like, a building to house props, stables, and

some sheds. The principal players were Charles Ray, Frank Borzage, Tom Chatterton, Sessue Hayakawa, Gladys Brockwell, Rhea Mitchell, Enid Markey, Louise Glaum, Tsuro Acki, Clara Williams, Dick Stanton, and Walter Edwards (the last two also directed). The regular directors were Reginald Barker, Raymond B. West, Charles Giblyn, and Scott Sidney. Ince supervised all production and released through Mutual Film Exchanges (John R. Freuler and Harry M. Aitkin) under the brand names of Bison, Domino, Kay-Bee, and Broncho.

Hart's first two films were *His Hour of Manhood* and *Jim Cameron's Wife*. They were two-reelers starring Tom Chatterton, who also directed, with Clara Williams as the heroine and Hart as the heavy. They fell far short of what he had hoped for and Hart told Ince so. Ince put him in a feature written by C. Gardner Sullivan, one of the first great scenario writers, called *The Bargain*. Reginald Barker, a young Scot, directed. It was a good picture and Hart was pleased. It was quickly followed by *On the Night Stage*, which Barker also directed. After it was completed Ince released Hart, who returned to New York. His sojourn had been unprofitable, and, he thought, unsuccessful.

But *The Bargain* was a hit. Ince called him back at once and put him under contract as a director-actor at \$125 a week. Hart took his sister Mary with him, convinced he was now going to stay in movies.

The first picture he directed, and starred in, was *The Passing of Two Gun Hicks*. It was followed by a



Hart in WILD BILL HICKOK (1923)

score of two-reelers, plus several features. Some of the best—*Mr. Silent Haskins*, *The Darkening Trail*, *Pinto Ben*, and *Keno Bates Liar*—had a success equalling that of the films of Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charles Chaplin.

In the spring of 1915, after Hart had completed over twenty films, Harry M. Aitken formed the Triangle Film Corporation by absorbing the New York Motion Picture Company, Reliance-Majestic, and Keystone. D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett, and Thomas H. Ince were the director generals.

Hart's Triangle films are the most typical of all his pictures, and some are among his best. *The Aryan* and *The Return of Draw Egan* are still in circulation today. Both were written by C. Gardner Sullivan and directed by Hart. They are similar in form, and in both there is accurate reconstruction of atmosphere, meticulous characterization, and a slow build-up of tension rather than



Louise Glaum, Robt. McKim & Hart . . .

straight, fast-moving action. There is a real feeling of Western space and dust, and a sense of the elements of nature. The moving camera was used with intelligence. Shot-compositions were forceful and arresting. Skillful cutting gave both films dramatic pace.

Those were the ingredients that made all Hart's pictures classics of their kind—and as big box-office draws as the films of Griffith, Fairbanks, and Pickford.

A great deal has been written by both American and European film historians (notably the French) about Ince being responsible for the success of the Hart films. The facts are otherwise. Ince *never* directed Hart in a *single* film, and after the first few productions, had little to do with the supervision of any of them. Hart was introduced to filmmaking by Ince and undoubtedly acquired the basic techniques from him. But, as time passed, Ince had nothing whatever to do with the Hart productions, although he continued to receive screen credit as

the supervisor or producer. Moreover, the relationship between the two men became strained as Hart's films earned millions for Ince, while Hart continued to receive a relatively meager salary. It was characteristic of Hart that it was an argument over Hart's pony, Fritz, that ended their personal relations. For some unexplained reason Ince had taken a violent dislike to the little pinto.

After the break Ince's career went steadily downward. He quarreled with Triangle and was forced out of the company. Because he had Hart under personal contract, Ince was able to make a deal with Adolph Zukor, of Paramount-Famous Players, who had formed a company called Artcraft to release special productions with big stars. To get Hart, Zukor was forced to take Dorothy Dalton, Enid Bennett and Charles Ray, whom he did not want. It was this that later lost Ince his suit

*. . . and Margery Wilson & Hart in
RETURN OF DRAW EGAN*





Hart, Gardner Sullivan & Lambert Hillyer
BRANDING BROADWAY (1918)

against Hart for breach of contract. Although Ince was a full partner in Hart's first sixteen Artcraft productions, Ince's contributions were zero. He didn't even have a say in the cutting room.

After Hart left Triangle that company flooded the country with his old pictures under different titles, and sometimes built up two-reelers into features. A dummy company called W. H. Productions was formed to handle them. Hart obtained from the Federal Trade Commission a ruling that the former titles must be displayed along with the new ones.

At Triangle Hart had directed his own films with Cliff Smith, a cowboy, as his assistant. At Paramount-Artcraft he met Lambert Hillyer, who had written several stories especially for Hart. When Hart found out that Hillyer also directed, he asked for and got him. In three and a half years Hillyer directed twenty-five of Hart's Artcraft pictures and wrote sixteen of

them. He was a perfect director for Hart.

Hillyer was in his mid-twenties, but behind him lay an adventurous career. He had been a track star at Drake University, a newspaperman in New York, and a short story writer. He drifted into the movies via Ince and was a cameraman and stunt-man before he wrote scenarios. Hillyer is still active and today directs the *Cisco Kid* and the *I Led Three Lives* series for TV.

The Hart pictures that Hillyer directed began with *The Narrow Trail*. *Riddle Gawne* had Lon Chaney and lovely Katherine MacDonald in support. *The Poppy Girl's Husband* was not a Western but a "Blackie Daw" story shot on location in San Francisco, in which Hart played a

Pinto Fritz & Hart in PINTO BEN



returned prisoner who discovers that he had been framed by his wife and a cop and decides to brand her with an etched plate depicting a convict crawling out of a grave. *Wagon Tracks* was a story of a pioneer trek to the West Coast in the 1850s with Hart as a frontier scout. *Sand* was President Woodrow Wilson's favorite Hart film.

In *Cradle of Courage* Hart portrayed an ex-crook who, returning from World War I, became a cop. *The Toll Gate*, still shown at NYC's Museum of Modern Art, contains some of the most spectacular stunts ever in a Western. *The Whistle* was not a Western and had Hart as a factory worker.

Hart soon had his own producing company, which, when not on location, worked in a separate studio—

the old Mabel Normand lot where *Mickey* was made. He surrounded himself with men who greatly contributed to his success. Lambert Hillier was director; E. H. Allen, studio manager; Paul H. (Scoop) Conlon, publicity director; Joseph H. August, first cameraman; David Ragin, Dwight Warren and Victor Milner, assistant cameraman; Jack Nelson, assistant director; LeRoy Stone, cutter. August was one of the greatest American cinematographers and later shot John Ford's *The Informer*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and *They were Expendable*. He died in 1947. Milner is still active and is now with Cecil B. DeMille.

In 1919, while Hart was in San Francisco for *The Poppy Girl's Husband*, Mary Pickford visited him and suggested he join Douglas Fairbanks, D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin and

Hart & Hillier (at camera) at work on WAGON TRACKS





Jane Novak & Hart in WAGON TRACKS

herself in the formation of United Artists. For three months Hart seriously considered the proposition. Then Adolph Zukor persuaded him to remain with Paramount.

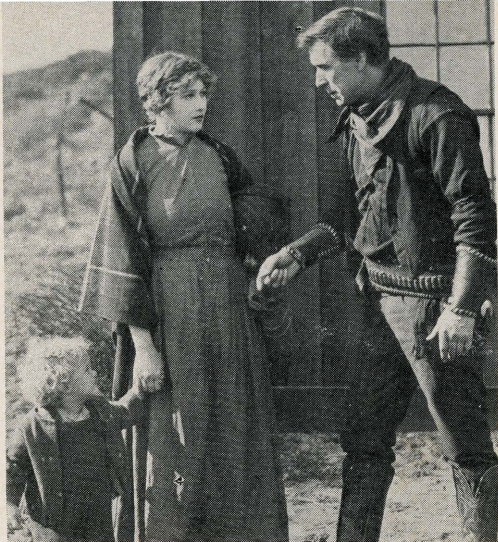
Zukor, in his *The Public Is Never Wrong* (written in collaboration with Dale Kramer), has a chapter on Hart that is not always accurate. Zukor says "Hart occasionally used doubles, but Tom Mix never did" and goes on to claim that Mix was the better cowboy.

Doubling is a necessity in filmmaking since injuries to principal players mean production delay. Tom Mix carried a complete stock company of cowboys, from cook to wrangler, and they all doubled for him. But this was "top secret" and not one of Mix's troupe ever admitted it to a stranger. Hart was doubled in certain films. "Whitey" and Clarence Sovern, two of the best

trick riders of the day, doubled for him in dangerous horse falls. Lambert Hillyer doubled him in high dives, "water stuff," falls, and vaults. Hart made his own straight rides, mounts and dismounts, and *no doubles were used in fight scenes*. Hart could hit and take a punch, and he asked no quarter. If the bumps came his way, it was all part of the scene.

Hillyer was a crack rifle shot and in picture after picture he and a sharpshooter sprayed real lead at Hart—shooting a glass out of his hand or a buckle off his gun belt. And the shooting wasn't faked!

Zukor's other remarks about Hart are even wider of the mark. He infers that Hart was a sort of Beau Brummell. The fact is Hart bought all of his suits ready-made and wore them with Stetson hats. When the script of *Branding Broadway* called



Anna Q. Nilsson & Hart in THE TOLL GATE

for full dress, a suit had to be rented for him.

It is not generally known that Hart managed to make himself believe he was in love with most of his leading ladies. Katherine MacDonald said no a dozen times. He proposed to Anna Q. Nilsson, and there was a brief engagement, but no wedding. Eva Novak said no. He was engaged to Jane Novak, her sister, but it was called off, for an unexplained reason. But one of his leading ladies, Winifred Westover, who played opposite him in *John Petticoats*, said yes. They were married December 7, 1921. William S. Hart, Jr., was born September 6, 1922. On February 11, 1927, Mrs. Hart was granted a divorce on grounds of desertion. She was twenty years his junior.

Hart's love of animals, especially dogs and horses, was passionate, and abuse or neglect of an animal sent him into a boiling rage. A cowboy

or wrangler who spurred his horse cruelly or failed to loosen the cinch during lunch hour, was through as of that minute.

Hart lived quietly, drank like a gentleman, and loved a good game of stud poker better than any other relaxation. He was a good loser and a graceful winner. When on location he would go night-clubbing, but never at home in Los Angeles. He enjoyed a laugh, and if a gag backfired he took it in stride.

He reacted to unexpected misfortune unpredictably. When a large investment in Dakota Land Banks was wiped out he simply shrugged. When, on location in New Orleans for *John Petticoats*, he was told Ince had stolen the Hart company books, he said "I'll be damned" and went on working. However, when a woman bumped into his new car and dented a fender he wasn't fit to work with for two days.

Hart was the best actor of all the Western stars, but he was very sentimental, and if not controlled, would let a dramatic scene become maudlin. But he was wholly objective about actualizing the West, and spared no expense for authentic props and costumes. He was, without doubt, the deadliest looking man behind a pair of guns ever seen on the screen.

Hart was a courageous man, and had only two fears: a knife, because a Sioux boy had cut him up as a youngster, and a dark hole, which he would not crawl into even if he saw you dig it. Where this came from no one knows.

Hart was a loyal friend, but once an enemy, it was for life. Wyatt

Earp, "Uncle" Billy Tilghman and "Bat" Masterson often visited him, as did Will Rogers. Charlie Russell, the great cowboy artist, was a close friend. So were James Montgomery Flagg, Paul Whiteman and Rudy Vallee.

Hart loved to entertain, and whether his guests were celebrities or cowboys, all got the same courteous treatment. He drew no lines—racial, religious, or social—and even entertained boys from the other side of the tracks, like Pat O'Malley, who had ridden with the Al Jennings gang, and reformed. A man was either his friend or enemy, and every woman was a lady.

In 1921, after Hart's twenty-fifth picture for Paramount-Artcraft, he retired for over a year. Lambert Hillyer went to work for other companies, directing Milton Sills, Lon Chaney, Tom Mix, and Florence Vidor. Then, in the summer of 1923, Hart made *Wild Bill Hickok* for Paramount with Cliff Smith, his old assistant of Triangle-Ince days, directing. Both the public and the critics liked it and Hart immediately began *Singer Jim McKee*. Before it was completed he was surprised to be informed by Jesse Lasky that exhibitors were complaining his pictures were "old-fashioned." Lasky added that if Hart was to remain with Paramount he would have to give up his independence. Paramount would select story, director, and supporting cast. Hart would star, but not produce. Hart later declared that Paramount promised to show him the exhibitors' letters, but never did.

Hart had once said that the truth about the West meant more to him than a job, and he proved it when he

dissolved his connection with Paramount after finishing *Singer Jim McKee*.

Hart's last picture, *Tumbleweeds*, was made for United Artists in 1925. It was an ambitious and expensive film that contains one of the greatest single action scenes in any Western film, a vast land rush sequence depicting the opening of the Cherokee strip. *Tumbleweeds* had a stormy career. Joseph M. Schenck, then with UA, wanted to cut it from seven to five reels. Hart refused and Schenck countered by releasing the picture in second rate houses. Hart sued United Artists for mishandling, and won. But it was a Pyrrhic victory. Hart retired to "Horseshoe," his ranch at Newhall, California, and devoted his time to writing.

His not always reliable autobiography, *My Life East and West*, was published in 1929. His other books: *The Golden West Boys*, a children's series (1919); *Pinto Ben and Other*

Cliff Smith was Hart's right hand





Lucien Littlefield, Hart & Jas. Gordon in *TUMBLEWEEDS*

Stories (1919); *Told Under a White Oak Tree* (1922); *A Lighter of Flames* (1923); *The Order of Chanta Sutas* (1925); *Hoofbeats* (1933); *The Law on Horseback* (1935); *And All Points West* (1940). His sister Mary collaborated on several of them.

Hart planned to return to the screen on at least two occasions. Hal Roach proposed a picture patterned after *Wagon Tracks*, in the early '30s, and Hart agreed to do a Peter B. Kyne story at RKO with Hillyer. Both failed to materialize. In April, 1939, Astor Pictures re-issued *Tumbleweeds* with a new sound track and an 8-minute prologue in which Hart bade his public farewell.

Four years later his sister Mary, with whom he had been very close, died from automobile injuries sustained some years before. And Hart's

eyesight began to fail. He wrote his friend and longtime admirer G. W. Dunston: "At times I can scarcely see at all." His end came in a Los Angeles hospital on June 23, 1946. He was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, alongside his father, mother, two sisters, and the baby brother who had first been buried in Dakota.

William S. Hart left an estate of \$1,170,000. He made bequests to several social welfare societies, but the bulk of it he gave to Los Angeles County, with the provision that his ranch be a public park and his home a museum for the Westiana he had collected. His son unsuccessfully contested the will.

Hart's ranch is not yet open to the public. A vast deposit of oil is said to be beneath it.

WITH THANKS AND RENEWED HOPE

The response to our price increase has been heart-warming. Not only did new and old subscribers take advantage of our offer, good till April 1, of the old rate for any number of years, but a considerable number of new and old subscribers volitionally paid the new rate! We were especially pleased that more than forty subscribers renewed for two years, more than a dozen for three, and W. Wayne Smith, of Grand Rapids, Mich., renewed for five! We call this heart-warming because it is reader interest such as this, not money, that is our reward for the work—seven days a week—involved in publishing FILMS IN REVIEW.

Now about the future: Edward Connor has just finished a piece on actors who have played more than one role in the same picture; George Geltzer is at work on the directorial careers of Wm. C. de Mille and Fred Niblo; different writers are at work on the film careers of Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn and Charles Ray; George Mitchell is working on the great cameramen, and, in collaboration with Wm. K. Everson, on Tom Mix; we will soon publish a definitive article on the science fiction film. And much else.

If only each subscriber would get us one new one!

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