

The Big Trail

By Marilyn Ann Moss

Raoul Walsh's "The Big Trail," released by Fox Film Corporation in 1930, is the director's most far-reaching epic adventure. As if the scope of the film wasn't large enough—cutting across seven U.S. states during filming—Walsh's personal challenge was no less epic. Less than two years earlier he'd lost his right eye in a jeep accident while on location shooting what would have been his and Fox's first outdoor talkie, "In Old Arizona."

Yet now, with his monocular vision, he produced a film huge in landscape and breathtaking in its vistas.

The legend has been printed that a script for "The Oregon Trail," later to become Walsh's "The Big Trail," was first offered to Walsh's Fox colleague John Ford, who was not pleased with it—and so it was passed to Walsh. It was not uncommon at Fox for projects to float from one director to another; oddly enough, at this very time Ford took over direction of "The Seas Beneath," a project intended for Walsh. Still, "The Big Trail" had some large acts to follow—for one, John Ford's silent "The Iron Horse" (1924), a railway saga that boasted the largest location shooting to that time. One year earlier, the director James Cruze's "The Covered Wagon" (1923) dramatized the westward push from Kansas City to Oregon. And, though each of these pictures turned out to be somewhat ponderous, as stories they nevertheless impress with their great reach.

Walsh collaborated on the script for "The Big Trail" with Hal Evarts, who wrote the initial story. Evarts also recorded the saga of making "The Big Trail" his eighty-eight-page log of the film's production. The adventure began on the one-hundredth anniversary of the Oregon Trail, the historic event this film meant to re-enact. Walsh and Evarts had mapped out the general storyline and considered suitable locations. Walsh wanted complete accuracy in detailing the



A two-page spread in the May 31, 1930 issue of Motion Picture News depicts the grandeur of the "Immortal Epic of the Pioneer West." Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

pioneers' march from the Mississippi to the Pacific Northwest.

"The Big Trail" is, at heart, a simple story of adventure and romance that grows into a large historical cinematic document. The story offers little complexity of plot and character as it tells the tale of a huge wagon train that departs the banks of the Mississippi River and travels to the northwest corner of America. In his first starring role, John Wayne (a Walsh discovery) plays the simple, honest, almost Cooperesque trail scout Breck Coleman—a man who embodies the innate goodness of American manhood, a type Wayne would go on to etch in stone in his long film career. As Coleman tries to keep the wagon train on track during the sometimes horrendous trek, he also fights a personal battle. He has taken the job of trail scout in part to seek revenge on the wagon master Red Flack (Tyrone Power Sr.), an evil sort whom Coleman knows killed Ben Grizzel, the father figure in Coleman's life. Coleman is out for revenge, along with the simple pleasure of getting a good job completed. Along the way he falls in love with a young single mother named Ruth Cameron (played by Marguerite Churchill), who is making her way west and often needs Coleman's protection. The wagon train encounters all kinds of setbacks and tragedies, including attacks from hostile Native Americans, not to mention threats from Mother Nature herself.

From the time filming actually began, on April 20, 1930, through the next four months, and until filming finished, on August 20, 1930, Walsh found himself in the midst of a shoot complex enough in its technical requirements that it threatened to topple one of the best movie minds in the business—his. The picture required shooting at upwards of fifteen separate locations, including Buttercup Dunes, Imperial County, California; the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona; Grand Teton Pass, Wyoming; Hurricane Bluffs, Zion National Park, Utah; Imperial County, California; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Moise-National Buffalo Range, Montana; Moise, Montana; Oregon; the Sacramento River in California; Sequoia National Park, California; St. George, Utah; Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming; and Yuma, Arizona.

The picture was to be shot with the Grandeur (70 mm) process in addition to the old standard cameras. In the standard, a good amount can be blocked off and camouflaged. Not so with the Grandeur, where, as Evarts described it, "one may portray a couple making love in the foreground yet so universal is the focus that a cabin on a mountainside miles away shows up with microscopic distinctness." The cinematographers Lucien N. Andriot, who shot the thirty-five-millimeter version for general release, and Arthur Edeson, who shot the Grandeur, seventy-millimeter version, easily captured Walsh's spectacular setups, each painstakingly composed. Since sound editors at the time did not have experience in dubbing, Walsh had to shoot four more thirty-five-millimeter versions—Spanish, French, Italian, and German—each using different casts and directors, each of which Walsh oversaw. El Brendel, who played Gus, a foolish but lovable pioneer, repeated his performance in German. All five versions were shot simultaneously, and the feat of actually finishing the film—or films—was as spectacular as the journey itself. Fox made a promise to help equip theaters in order to run the Grandeur version of the film, but the results of that promise remained to be seen.

The number of actors used was staggering, not to mention the extras, even animals needed for the shoot: 20,000 extras, 1,800 head of cattle, 1,400 horses, and 500 head of buffalo traveled with the production. Walsh used 725 Native American extras from five separate tribes and almost enough props to warrant the movie documentary status, including the 185 wagons. The production crew was equally impressive: a staff of 293 principal actors and 22 cameramen. Then there were the 12 Indian guides and the 123 baggage trains that trekked over 4,300 miles

in the seven states used for locations. Also brought along were the picture's 700 barnyard animals, including dogs, pigs, and chickens.

There were painstaking scenes to master—for one, reenacting the slow, labored chore of lowering humans, livestock, and wagons down the side of a cliff, the only way to get the wagon train off the mountain and onto the next part of its destination. Walsh insisted that all shots, all sequences, be true reenactments of the original journey taken decades earlier. The technical challenges were staggering, as Evarts noted:

Microphones were arranged to carry the sound to the sound trucks. A great sled was constructed, on which six cameras, from different angles and elevations, were trained on the subjects. Twenty odd mules were hitched to it. Then the chain that pulled the sled was extended on through to the tongue of whatever wagon was to be the setting for that particular bit of dialogue. In that manner, naturally, sled and wagon had to move together so that the cameras would not be thrown out of focus. But there was a problem with massive drunkenness off and on the set. Sometimes the cast members downed so much liquor that Walsh (who didn't drink much) began to call the film "The Big Drunk." There were also instances of actors and extras getting seriously hurt. But Walsh created a masterful work that still stands the test of time.

Elegant vistas and all, at the conclusion of this massive undertaking, Walsh needed to cut loose and get rid of his bottled-up energy. When he put his signature in cement at Grauman's Chinese Theatre (one of only two theaters in the country equipped to show the Grandeur version), he dramatically punched his fist into the cement—then signed his name.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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