

Red River

By Michael Schlesinger

Ask anyone with even a passing knowledge of film who the greatest director of westerns is, and almost invariably the reply will be John Ford. Second greatest? Now it gets tricky. Modernists will say Leone or Peckinpah, auteurists Anthony Mann or Budd Boetticher, B-western devotees Joseph Lewis or William Witney. But more often than not, the answer will be Howard Hawks.

The power of reputation! In his entire 45-year directing career, Hawks only completed four (five if you count "The Big Sky;" I don't). But their impact continues to define him as one of the category's leading artists—and "Red River" was as bold a genre debut as one could imagine. Much of this was serendipity: The Golden Age of the Western was just beginning, John Wayne at 39 was entering his peak years as a star and actor, and a young fella making his screen debut turned out to be Montgomery Clift. The stars were in alignment, but the path was still filled with rattlesnakes.

Hawks, never comfortable as a cog in The Machine, decided to produce it himself, shooting mostly in Arizona with thousands of cattle to recreate the historic first drive from Texas to Abilene via what became known as the Chisholm Trail. It cost him an insane \$2,840,000; even with the Duke in the lead, it was a fearsome gamble.

Borden Chase wrote the initial draft, from his "Saturday Evening Post" serial, but treated every request for change as a spit in the face; Hawks finally turned to Charles Schnee to craft the script. Even so, it was essentially "Mutiny on the Bounty": Wayne grows increasingly tyrannical and unhinged during the months-long trek, forcing Clift to eventually lead the other hands into leaving him behind so they can safely finish the job. Wayne, unsurprisingly, vows revenge.

Not since he had become a star had he gone this dark. Visiting the location, Ford famously muttered, "I never knew the big son-of-a-bitch could act." Indeed, Wayne is simply tremendous, going from romantic to



This ad for the film appeared in the October 1948 issue of Screenland. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#)

paternal to stern to frightening and most stops in between. One of his finest moments comes while talking to Joanne Dru, who has a gun hidden in her arm sling. Eventually he tells her, "You can take that gun out now." She does, and then he casually drawls, "Wouldn't-a done ya any good" as he tosses out his own pistol, which he'd been holding unseen under the table. It's a positively chilling delivery.

Clift is remarkably relaxed, especially bantering with pal John Ireland, and the supporting cast is filled with familiar folks: Walter Brennan, Harry Carey *pere et fils*, Noah Beery Jr., Hank Worden, Tom Tyler, Paul Fix and Glenn Strange. (In a nifty touch, all the men wear different hats, making them easily distinguishable.) Though Brennan is his usual grizzled comic relief, he does play much of it straight; one of

his key lines is a simple, direct, “You was wrong, Mr. Dunston,” and it carries the weight of a lifetime of wisdom. Sadly, it turned out to be the Careys’ only film together, though they share no scenes; Senior passed away soon after, before it was released.

For the women, he selected newcomer Dru and rising star Coleen Gray—and you might spot Shelley Winters as an extra. (Supposedly she and Wayne were having it on inside a covered wagon between set-ups.) Dru earns her place in the Hawks Women Hall of Fame for the moment when she takes an arrow in the shoulder without even flinching, but she was also shredded for her climactic scene, which many find silly. Hawks believed it was foolish for someone to learn a lesson only to be killed immediately afterward, and ultimately his decision was the correct one, though he later conceded she overacted.

He also had magnificent help from cinematographer Russell Harlan, who produced some of the finest B&W work ever, especially in the celebrated funeral scene where a cloud passes over a mountain in the background—Hawks saw it approaching and said, “We’re shooting now,” instructing the actors to just move their lips and “we’ll make the sound afterwards.” (And that famously long pan at the start of the drive is in fact faked: if you look ver-r-ry closely, you can see a matte line every time a fence post passes by.) And Dimitri Tiomkin wrapped it all up with a soaring score, punctuated by a male chorus, that remains one of his most cherished works; Hawks liked the main theme so much he later reused it, with lyrics, in “Rio Bravo.”

Yet Hawks’ real ace-in-the-hole was editor Christian Nyby, who came through when the chips were really down. (It was in post-production for so long that Cliff’s next film, “The Search,” was released first.) But just as it was finally about to open, disaster struck: Howard Hughes, who’d never forgiven Hawks for walking off “The Outlaw,” slapped an injunction against “Red River,” claiming Hawks had plagiarized the ending. It was a nuisance suit, obviously, but the release could not be delayed. (The foundering United Artists also desperately needed a hit.) Nyby suggested letting Hughes re-edit the final reel. With nothing to lose, Hawks sent it over. Soon after, Hughes summoned Nyby to look at it. It was a mess, but if it got the suit withdrawn... Nyby was given permission to add a couple of reaction shots to cover badly mismatched cuts, hundreds of new reels were printed and messengered to theatres, and to everyone’s relief, it opened on time and was a smash, becoming the year’s third-biggest grosser. (Gerald Mast suggested Hawks thanked Nyby by letting him direct “The

Thing,” thus launching his own directorial career.)

That might have been the end of it, but it started a whole new controversy, one that persists to this day. We now have two distinct cuts, which Mast dubbed “The Book Version,” in which scenes are separated by written pages, and “The Voice Version,” with transitions handled by Brennan’s narration. This latter was prepared for overseas, because it’s easier to dub voiceovers in another language than to try and subtitle or replace written material. However, it was done using the dupe negative with Hughes’ final reel, not Hawks’; the camera negative remained untouched.

Now this is where it gets dicey. Almost everyone believes that the longer “Book” version is the definitive one, as it represents Hawks’ original intention. But a handful of folks, notably Peter Bogdanovich, think the shorter “Voice” version is the correct one (he bases this largely on a 1972 interview with Hawks, when the director, already infamous for spinning tales, was 76 and in declining health). Buffs will fight over this till the end of time—Mast, for one, notes that unlike the third-person viewpoint of the book, Brennan’s narration presents scenes his character could not possibly have witnessed—but even if the dust never settles, we should always be grateful that both survive for us to enjoy.

The greatness of “Red River” is that, like most classic movies, it is foremost a tale well told. Everything else, from Biblical interpretations (crossing the Red River = crossing the Red Sea) to the symbolic bracelet that passes among five different characters to the distinctive “Red River D” belt buckle, which Wayne wore in subsequent westerns and has been reproduced for the consumer market, simply add grace notes to its overall impact as a masterpiece of adventure. A big, sprawling bear of a film, much like its star, it should be treasured like a good Swiss watch or a woman from anywhere.

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

Michael Schlesinger is widely acknowledged as the dean of classic film distributors, having spent more than 25 years at MGM, Paramount and Sony, keeping hundreds of vintage movies in theatrical release (and later DVD). He oversaw the completion of Orson Welles’ “It’s All True,” wrote and produced the American version of “Godzilla 2000,” co-produced such Larry Blamire parodies as “The Lost Skeleton Returns Again” and “Dark and Stormy Night,” and has written, produced and directed several shorts featuring the faux-1930’s comedy team of Biffle & Shooster.