

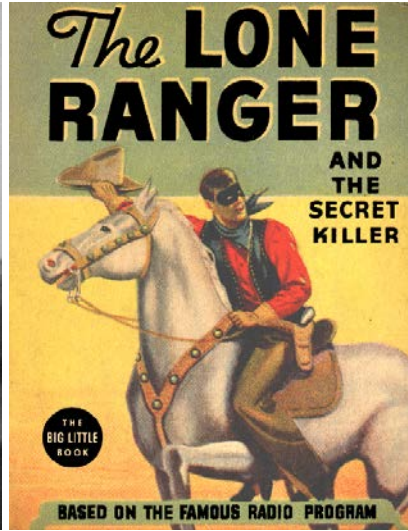
“The Lone Ranger” (Episode: “The Osage Bank Robbery”) (December 17, 1937)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Fran Striker



An early program tie-in



Earle Graser

A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty Hi-Yo, Silver! The Lone Ranger!

Before his personal campaign for good spread to other media (including movies, television and books, comic and non), the inextinguishable, unmistakable western hero “The Lone Ranger” would first be heard over radio station WXYZ in Detroit, Michigan, on January 31, 1933. The Masked Man would go national in 1934 and would be heard over the national airwaves for the next 21 years.

Today, across all media and all generations, he is one of America’s most recognizable heroes, its greatest western star and an indelible part of Americana.

As inspiring as “The Lone Ranger” would prove to be, his origins were less mythological than practical--and a little calculated. WXYZ station owner George W. Trendle was working to keep his station afloat in 1932 when he decided that his signal, then a CBS affiliate, would be better off jettisoning its network connections and producing its own programs. With the assistance of station manger Harold True, dramatics director James Jewell, and, most importantly, New York-based radio writer Fran Striker, the WXYZ team dreamed up together a hero, and a series, who would be equal parts Zorro and Robin Hood--but firmly on the side of good.

A small history was created for their character: he was a former Texas ranger but one who now worked alone. Hence his moniker—the Lone Ranger.

Later, via his first film appearances in 1938, the Ranger’s back story was even more fully fleshed out. His real name was John Reid. He, his brother, Dan, and four other Texas Rangers had been ambushed in the Badlands by the outlaw Butch Cavendish and his gang. Only John survived. He was discovered and nursed back to health by a friendly Indian named Tonto, and had then decided to dedicate his life to the fight for justice. He adopted his trademark mask so as not to be recognized by any of the Cavendish hoods.

More back story arrived later: Reid funded his crusade via his family’s silver mine. It would bankroll him and serve as the origin of his famous silver bullets as well as give a name to his trusty white stallion.

Early on, the stoic and slightly humorless Lone Ranger was even given a personal creed with which he conducted himself. Among his rules:

--I believe that to have a friend, a man must be one.

--I believe that all men are created equal and that everyone has within himself the power to make this a better world.

--I believe in being prepared physically, mentally, and morally to fight when necessary for that which is right.

Along with everything else, it was also decided that the Lone Ranger would only speak in perfect English. No bad grammar for this masked man, though companion Tonto continued with his pidgin form of the white man's tongue. Additionally, in order to downplay the inherent violence in these tales of western outlaws, the Lone Ranger, when he fired his weapon, would never shoot to kill—only to disarm his assailants by shooting the guns out of *their* hands. (An approach later followed by TV's "Annie Oakley.")

Even the show's theme music was stately and classic—the "William Tell Overture" by Giochino Rossini. Found floating around WXYZ, the music was hastily adopted before "The Lone Ranger's" first broadcast due to its "galloping" feel and, notably, because it was also firmly in the public domain. Today, more people know these strains as the "Lone Ranger's" theme than as part of the 1829 opera.

All in all, with its high morals and operatic theme, "The Lone Ranger" was pretty heady stuff, especially for a radio show originally aimed at children. But whatever the formula, "Lone Ranger" soon caught on with listeners, young and old. Not long after its local debut, the program began being exported to other Midwestern stations including WLW in Cincinnati and WGN in Chicago. They, along with WOR in New York, would eventually form the nucleus for the new, coast-to-coast Mutual Radio Network. Founded in 1934, Mutual was the network that "The Lone Ranger" built. Mutual would go on to become the long-time aural home not only of "Ranger" but also of "The Shadow" and "The Adventures of Superman" as well as Major League Baseball.

With this expansion, "The Lone Ranger's" Michigan success—which saw a 1933 offer of radio premiums from the show pull in 25,000 requests from listeners—would be repeated across the nation.

Writer Fran Striker wrote the majority of the radio scripts in the show's early days—formulating the character of Tonto and coming up with the Ranger's famous catch-phrase of "Hi-yo, Silver, away!" Later, the prolific author would also pen the film serials, the novelizations, and the texts for the comic books.

The first actor to play the role was George Steinus (a.k.a. George Seaton). He was later succeeded by Jack Deeds (a.k.a. Lee Trent) (perhaps for just one performance); station director James Jewell (who did double duty at the station and also played the role only once); Earle Graser (who helmed the role from 1933 to 1941) and, finally, Brace Beemer (who was the Ranger from 1941-1954).

Graser was essaying the title role when the episode "The Osage Bank Robbery," which was named to the National Recording Registry in 2006, was first broadcast. It's a half-hour tale of two low-rent robbers hiding out in an abandoned mine. In the end, they are out-witted and captured by the Lone Ranger. Though the program had been on the air for five years by the time this episode came along, prior installments were always done live and never recorded. Hence,

five years of western adventures featuring the Masked Man and Tonto had been performed and already vanished, like so much smoke, out into the ether. “Osage” has the distinction of being the earliest surviving episode of the series. Interestingly, it was recorded--not for the purposes of posterity—but in order to be used as playback in an upcoming episode of WXYZ’s other popular radio show, “The Green Hornet.” For that series, a soon-to-be-produced script called for the Hornet to be listening to the radio, specifically, listening to an episode of “The Lone Ranger”! (Episodes of the radio series would start to be regularly recorded, for syndication, beginning in mid January 1938.)

Though its radio incarnation would remain the character’s bread and butter—at least until TV came along—“The Lone Ranger” was just too big to be contained to one medium. The Masked Man got his first visualization in 1938 when Republic pictures produced a 15-part serial titled, appropriately enough, “The Lone Ranger.” Interestingly, while Chief Thundercloud (born: Victor Daniels) played the role of Tonto, the identity of the actor playing the title character of “The Lone Ranger” was kept secret or attributed to a variety of actors (Hal Taliaferro, Herman Brix, Lee Powell, Lane Chandler, George Letz) to build suspense for the masked one’s big reveal in the serial’s final installment. A feature length film (69 minutes long), edited together from the serial installments, came out in 1940.

Despite its radio and theatrical success, perhaps the Ranger’s most successful incarnation arrived via television. Starring Clayton Moore as the Masked Man and Jay Silverheels as his trusty companion, Tonto, TV’s “Lone Ranger” aired from 1949 until 1957, 217 episodes total. (Actor John Hart played the lead for 52 episodes from 1950-1953 due to a temporary contract dispute between Moore and the show’s producers.) Moore and Silverheels recreated their characters for the big screen in two feature films, “The Lone Ranger” in 1956 and “The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold” in 1958.

Long after TV’s original “Lone Ranger” ceased original production, the show became a staple in reruns, entertaining a new generation of kids...and adults.

In 1966, the “Lone Ranger” even got animated. A cartoon version of “Ranger” ran on CBS Saturday mornings until 1969; the lead character was voiced by actor Michael Rye. From 1980 to 1982, the “Lone Ranger” was revived yet again in animation form for “The Tarzan/Lone Ranger Adventure Hour.” This time the Masked Man was voiced by William Conrad (also the voice of Matt Dillon on radio’s “Gunsmoke” and later TV’s “Cannon.”)

In 1981, Wrather Productions (who produced the old live-action series) and film company ITC partnered for a big screen revival of “The Lone Ranger.” “The Legend of the Lone Ranger” is today recognized as one of Hollywood’s greatest flops. Produced for just over \$18 million, the film earned less than \$3 million at the box office and received some of the worst reviews in cinematic history. Along with an unknown, untried actor (Klinton Spilsbury) in the lead (who had to have the majority of his dialogue dubbed by another actor, James Keach), the film also suffered from some deadly pre-production controversy regarding former “Ranger” star Clayton Moore.

As the film was gearing up, early Ranger Clayton Moore was still making public appearances as “The Lone Ranger.” Anxious not to have any of their thunder stolen, the Wrather company, who owned the rights to the character, ordered Moore to cease and desist. Though Wrather won the eventual lawsuit, it proved to be a public relations disaster as audiences firmly sided with Moore.

Still, despite that debacle, in 2012, Disney put before the cameras a new incarnation of the hero. Actor Arnie Hammer played the Ranger while Johnny Depp was cast as Tonto. The film, titled simply “The Lone Ranger,” was directed by Gore Verbinski and was released in the summer of 2013. *The Lone Ranger rides again!*

Sadly, this film version was only slightly better received than the 1981 one and was also a box office dud.

In any version, via any medium, “The Lone Ranger” has, over the years, been the subject of some complaint and criticism (slings and arrows?) due to its rigidly straight hero, its formulaic structure and, most often, its approach to Native American culture and identity via the character of Tonto.

But, still, the “Ranger,” as persona, endures. He’s the epitome of the good guy, white hat and all. His commitment to justice imposes order on a literal or figurative lawless old west. His commitment to his cause often at the risk to his own life predisposes a generation of other square-jawed heroes like “Superman” (debuted: 1938), “Captain America” (created: 1941), and a host of comic book and TV crime stoppers.

“The Lone Ranger” is perhaps most directly, logically, linked to “The Green Hornet.” The alter ego of Britt Reid, “The Green Hornet” was created by Fran Striker, George W. Trendle and James Jewell, the same team behind the Lone Ranger. “Green Hornet” begun in 1936. Seeking synergy with their new creation, “Hornet’s” hero, Britt Reid, was created to be the great nephew of “The Lone Ranger.” Like his distant relative, the Green Hornet (and his sidekick Kato) has also migrated to other media—comics, film serials, and television. In 2011, Seth Rogan starred in the latest big screen adaptation of the character.

Despite the “Lone Ranger’s” frequent (and successful) galloping to other media platforms, it is on radio that he began and first made his first mark. It would also be where he would prove to be most enduring. Radio’s “Ranger” would be the foundation on which all other “Rangers” would be built, the true origin of this great American multi-media myth.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).