

# Glenn Ford: The Westerns A Conversation with Peter Ford

By David Morrell

Few actors have been as associated with quality Westerns as Glenn Ford. Recently Glenn's son, Peter, sat down with WWA member and Rambo creator David Morrell (*First Blood, Last Reveille*) for an interview about Glenn Ford's favorite film genre.

**MORRELL:** First of all, I want to say how much I enjoyed your book about your father, *Glenn Ford: A Life*. For a star of your father's stature, I was surprised that until now there wasn't a biography. I couldn't wait to read it.

**FORD:** Thank you. It took me many years to write it. My father kept journals and all kinds of other records. I had a wealth of material to draw from. To say the least, he was a complicated man.

**MORRELL:** Glenn rode a horse with more grace and skill than just about any other actor, with the exception of a real cowboy like Ben Johnson. Can you tell us how he learned to ride so well?

**FORD:** When my father was a teenager, back in 1932, he got a job at the Will Rogers polo ranch in Pacific Palisades. Basically he worked in the stables and groomed horses.

Movie stars like Clark Gable were members. So were studio executives like Daryl Zanuck, who later gave my father his first film job. Will Rogers had real cowboys working at the ranch. They taught my father to ride.

**MORRELL:** Glenn signed his first long-term contract with Columbia in 1940, and his first Western there was *Texas* with William Holden, in 1941. In your book, you describe it as "two Civil War veterans, who cross paths with stagecoach robbers, a boxer, stampeding cattle, and Claire Trevor."

**FORD:** It was the start of a friendship between my father and Bill Holden that continued throughout their careers. In the '40s and the '50s, they often

went out to the Sam Fats stable in the San Fernando Valley, where they practiced riding. My father really enjoyed being around horses.

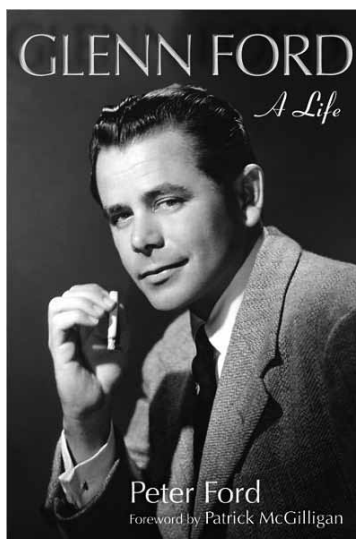
**MORRELL:** After *Texas*, Glenn made his next Western, *The Desperadoes*, in 1943.

**FORD:** That also was for Columbia, where Harry Cohn was famous for being cheap. But when it came to *The Desperadoes*, Cohn decided to invest in what was for him a big-budget production and Columbia's first Technicolor movie. My father played a reformed bandit who becomes friends with Randolph Scott, a marshal in the film. Co-starring with Scott was a major career move for Dad. *The Desperadoes* was also important in honing my father's riding skills because Ben Johnson was his riding double in that film. It's interesting that earlier you compared my father's riding to that of Ben Johnson, because Ben was one of my father's teachers. Glenn had to learn to ride like Ben so that the long shots and close-ups would match.

**MORRELL:** Eventually your father didn't need a double.

**FORD:** He loved to do his own stunts. In *Cimarron*, Anthony Mann's staging of the huge land-rush sequence had a lot of wagons and horses and was very challenging. Driving a wagon and a team of horses at top speed over rugged terrain, my father tore the ligaments in his back and shattered two spinal discs. In *The Man from the Alamo*, which Budd Boetticher directed, my father was galloping at top speed when actor Victor Jory veered sharply into his horse and forced him straight into a tree. The impact knocked him unconscious and cracked three ribs. In *Texas*, during a mishap in a stampede sequence, my father had to spur his horse into the charging cattle and rescue the assistant cameraman.

**MORRELL:** Over the years, Glenn's riding stance



changed. Most riders hold their reins just above the saddle horn, but Glenn held the reins a foot higher than any other rider I've seen. It's a graceful stance, but it's also distinctive and unusual.

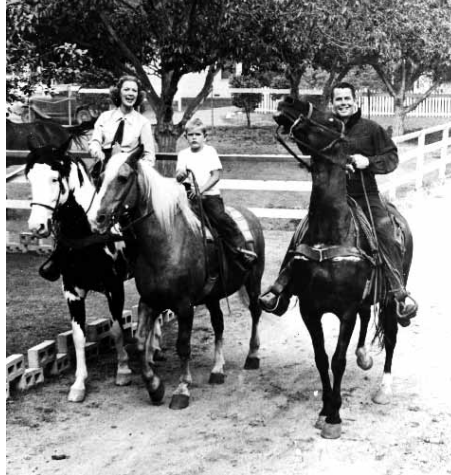
**FORD:** My father was very aware of how he looked in front of a camera. The higher reins gave him a dramatic silhouette and emphasized the triangle of the way he sat a horse.

**MORRELL:** How much training did Glenn have with guns? As with his horseback riding, he's very graceful when he handles them.

**FORD:** Grace is a quality that defines many movie stars. I think my father's gracefulness comes from the stage training he received from years of work in numerous Santa Monica Little Theater plays when he was a teenager. It taught him how to work with his body. In his early Westerns, he handled guns naturally and photogenically, but by the time he made *The Fastest Gun Alive* in 1956, he received intense training from Rodd Redwing, who was known as the world's greatest quick-draw artist, and from Carl Petti, another master of the handgun.

**MORRELL:** Thinking of the graceful way your father moved, I'm reminded that your mother, Eleanor Powell, your father's first wife, was an amazing singer and dancer. In *Glenn Ford: A Life*, you describe how she practiced dancing at home. Glenn certainly saw her perform many times. Do you suppose he learned some of his grace from watching how she moved?

**FORD:** Toward the end of their marriage, there was a lot of bitter arguing, but you raise a topic that I haven't thought about. He might indeed have learned a lot from her,



*Fun times. Peter Ford goes horseback riding with his parents, actor Glenn Ford and actress Eleanor Powell. All photos courtesy of Peter Ford*



*Peter Ford on 3:10 to Yuma: "Dad and Van Heflin [left] played off each other beautifully in the battle of wits ...."*



*Arthur Kennedy and Glenn Ford surround Peter Ford during filming of Day of the Evil Gun.*



*Peter Ford rides with his father and actor William Holden (one of Glenn Ford's best friends) and Holden's son, Peter.*

sort of like imprinting.

**MORRELL:** Did your father have a favorite western?

**FORD:** He was very fond of *The Rounders* and the work he did with Henry Fonda. He called that adaptation of Max Evans's novel "sweet and sentimental in a very nice way." His other favorites included *3:10 To Yuma*, *Cowboy*, *The Violent Men* and *The Sheepman*. For the latter, he was nominated for a British Academy acting award. That film also received an Oscar nomination for best original screenplay.

**MORRELL:** What about his least favorites?

**FORD:** He didn't care for *The Man from Colorado*, in which he played a tyrannical judge. My mother encouraged him to vary his roles and suggested that the psychotic judge in that film would be a good stretch. My father thought the result was far too harsh, although it's ironic that around the house he could be as tyrannical as that judge.

**MORRELL:** What about *The Fastest Gun Alive*?

**FORD:** It wasn't a favorite, either. That movie felt like a television drama from *Playhouse 90*, with a lot of speeches. My father said, "Movies talk too much." The first thing he did when he received a script was to cut all but his most essential dialogue. He also often worked with other actors to get them to minimize their speeches and say everything visually.

**MORRELL:** Peter, this was fun. Thank you. Anyone who's interested in your father will find many more fascinating backstage stories in your excellent biography about him.