

Cowboy heroes of Republic Pictures and my day of infamy



Author Patrick Curtis and Dale Evans, the Queen of the West.



Dale Evans.

By Patrick Curtis

The whole Republic Pictures lot was excited. For the first time, many of our cowboy heroes were going to appear in the same picture, 1945's *Bells of Rosarita*, starring Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Gabby Hayes. Roy was finally going to fulfill every kid's "what-if" fantasy. What if Roy, along with his pals Wild Bill Elliott, Bob Livingston, Don "Red" Barry, Allan "Rocky" Lane and Sunset Carson, saddled up together to fight them outlaws? Every cow kid on the planet wouldn't sleep a wink until he or she saw this film.

I heard the news from neighbor, character actor Tom London, and knew I had to be in that picture. I was in luck, as my dad was the comptroller (the money guy) at Republic, and I was sure that somehow I could find my way onto the set.

By the next week, my dad let me know that, yes, they did need dozens of young boys in the cast, but they were members of a boys' choir. I, who couldn't carry a tune in a horse bucket, thought I was out of luck. Then Dad smiled and said, "Son, I'll drop you off at the studio school bright and early Monday morning. You're in the picture, playing one of kid actor Billy Cummings's buddies." The film's director, Frank McDonald, must have owed my dad a whole lot of nickels from Repub-

lic's never-ending poker game. After all, I really did sing like a miniature Smiley Burnett ... with a bad cold.

Studio school was never fun, but for the first few days, it was particularly rough. Because the boys' choir hadn't started working yet, there were only three students at that moment: myself, Billy Cummings and Bobby Blake, who, because he was working on a Red Ryder movie, was dressed as Little Beaver. The teacher, Mrs. Kelbo, was really strict about six-guns and bows and arrows in the classroom. She had *no* sense of adventure at all. Bobby was three or four years older than Billy and me and was really smart. So, while Billy and I slaved over our multiplication tables, Mrs. Kelbo worked with Bobby on algebra and the American Constitution.

Having too much time on my hands, I spent most of it looking out the window at the studio workers pouring cement for a new walkway around the old executive building across the way. This wonderful wood and plaster structure, which still stands to this day, was used in hundreds of pictures made at Republic. Captain Marvel was always flying out the window, or Spy Smasher was being thrown from the roof. This bit of trivia was unimportant to me at the moment, as a plot was forming. Who actually came up with the scheme is still in question, but not to me, and I still



On the set of *Bells of Rosarita*. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans with Gabby Hayes in the background. Patrick Curtis is the second child on the left.

All images courtesy of the author



Bobby Blake as Little Beaver.



won't tell.

Little Beaver and I, (Billy was too scared) worked our way from under a great oak tree, toward the fresh mortar at the far corner of the building. No one was in sight as I took the stub of my No. 2 pencil and wrote my initials and the outline of a bullet in the wet cement. Bobby drew a large BB, with an arrow straight through it. Then, with a whoop, we made it back to the small schoolhouse by the end of recess, without being discovered.

Our initials are probably still there, after almost seven decades, for anyone who takes the time to look. They were 50 years later when I showed them to my kids. The years had certainly taken their toll, but if you gazed really hard, with young cowboy eyes, Little Beaver's arrow is still straight and true. And my crude bullet still looks like dog poop.

Production started the next day, and there was the wonderful Mitchell Boys Choir, who sang to a recorded playback. Director McDonald put me in one short singing scene. All I had to do was stay in the corner, in the back, and (silently) mouth the words, while the rest of the boys sang like angels to the playback. I felt like a frog among the canaries. We spent the rest of the time in a lively old circus tent, but often all the stars were there, too. What a time the kids had between school sessions. Republic wasn't known for its box lunches, but even that was overlooked by my newfound pals and me.

All that was forgotten as Roy, Dale, Gabby and the rest of the cowboy

heroes arrived for their big action scenes. The script, written by Jack Townley, called for six bad guys, so each hero had his own personal villain to vanquish. And vanquish them they did, each in his own special way. Roy and his pals saved Dale from the evil clutches of Roy Barcroft, Grant Withers and their sinister gang.

In the story, Dale, as Sue Farnum, inherits a circus and, of course, the evil villains hold the mortgage. Roy, seeing what trouble she's in, telephones his pals at Republic, and they all head for the circus to put on a big show and get rid of the mortgage. Of course they're successful, but not before a fight royale. Once again Roy and his pals saved the day. As an interesting aside, in the more than 20 films Roy and Dale did together, Dale was never Dale. She was usually a gal from the east with a different name in every film. But Ol' Roy was always Roy.

Bob Livingston, Roy Rogers, Sunset Carson, Dale Evans, Don "Red: Barry and Allan "Rocky" Lane on the set of Bells of Rosarita.



Roy and Dale weren't married when *Bells of Rosarita* was being made. That happy event occurred several years later. But it seemed to the youngsters on the set that they sure were mighty friendly. To the kids, Roy and Dale were showing them by example ... it was OK to be nice to girls. Well, if it was OK for Roy, I thought it was probably all right. But what about my little sister? Did I have to be nice to her? I was dizzy enough as it was and didn't ask Roy, knowing what the answer probably would be.

In fact, I wasn't feeling very well at all. Dale, seeing my discomfort, hugged me and put the back of her smooth, cool hand to my forehead. "Why, you've got a fever, you're burning up!" she exclaimed with real concern.

What exactly happened next on that fateful day has been lost to history. The facts are, unbeknown to anyone, I was coming down with the flu and had a terrible bellyache and chose the exact moment of Dale's concerned snuggle to get sick to my stomach. Now, here's where the stories diverge. According to the Queen of the West (who loved to tell a good yarn, especially this one), I, in great agony, disgraced myself *in* her boots! I, while always admitting to my everlasting humiliation, am positive that my very untimely eruption was sadly misdirected sort of *on* her boots. Now, who to believe

Here's Dale's side of this infamous tale: "*Patrick's stories and escapades are representative of all who grew up in the 1940s and '50s, experiencing and being influenced by the wonderful, wide-eyed innocence of the*

Saturday matinee. This was a time when patriotism proudly flourished; when life was a grand adventure; and when there were many heroes available to blaze a path paved with honor, decent values and a code of conduct that would last a lifetime. And Patrick was able to live what other children of that era dreamed and fantasized.

"He, like our own children, Cheryl, Linda Lou and Dusty, practically grew up on the back lot and sound stages of Republic Studios. Stars, wranglers, stuntmen and film crew were all one big family, and very effective babysitters. The kids were allowed to be kids, but discipline was always at the ready, and justly dispensed by the nearest

adult. What great memories Patrick's stories inspire.

"Now, about his Bells of Rosarita story and my boots, I'm not saying exactly how it happened. Let's just say that forgiveness has never been an issue, for how could you not forgive Patrick, for just being a kid?"

EMIL FRANZI'S

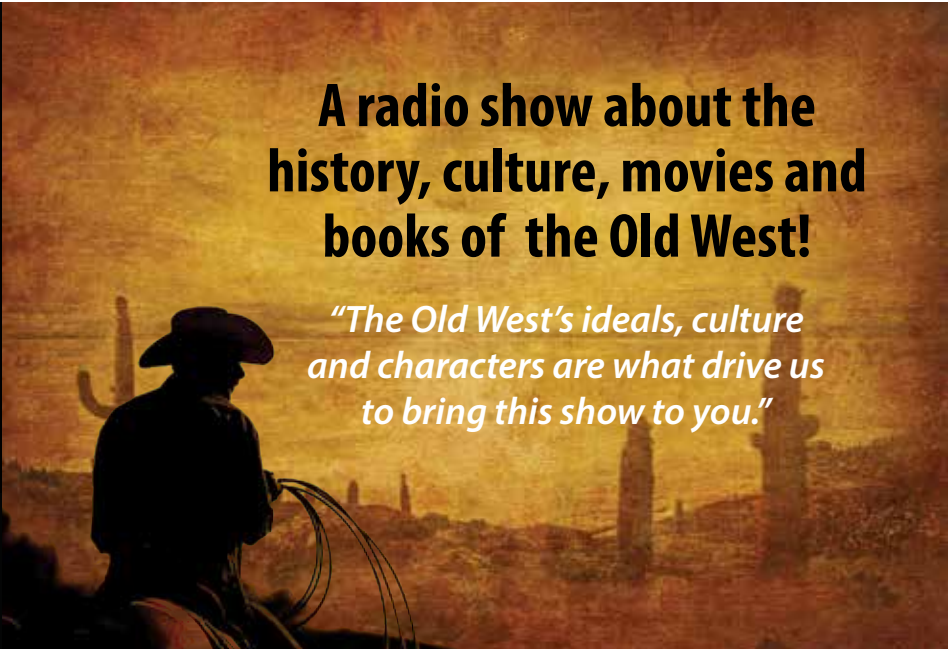
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