



James Stewart and Audie Murphy in *Night Passage*.

All access: Researching Western movies

By Robert Nott

It was the autumn of 1956, and Durango, Colorado, was alive with the colors of fall and the activity of movie-making – but actor James Stewart was not a happy man.

On location to shoot the Western *Night Passage*, the actor halted production several times to hold impromptu story conferences with director James Neilson. Stewart was dissatisfied with the script, which was about two brothers – one (Stewart) hired to deliver a payroll, another (played by Audie Murphy) determined to steal it.

On November 15, Stewart, a consummate professional who had already called for several stops to the shoot to discuss scripting problems with the director, left the set “unable to continue” until some rewrites to the script were made.

Other problems troubled the production, based on a look at the Universal film production files for the picture, housed at the University of Southern California’s Cinematic Arts Library. Those files tell the tale of a film shoot gone wrong: unexpected early winter weather slowed the production, and sometimes it took between 90 minutes and nearly three hours – one way – to get to location.

Stewart wrenched his neck in a fight scene. The equine double for his own horse, Pie, got hurt in a run-through, delaying things. Murphy got the flu, slowing him down, and Murphy’s 4-year-old son swallowed a penny while visiting the set, causing more distraction and concern. Actress Elaine Stewart got the flu, actress Dianne Foster got an ear infection, and then the darn sun showed up 90 minutes late one day, ruining a planned shot.

No wonder the film – which went way over budget because of all the problems and delays – is considered a misfire, a “shoulda been better” production that still has its share of fans.

But that’s the joy of researching studio film archives for the modern-day film historian. It gives that person the chance to lay out the production history of a film, see what was working and what wasn’t, separate fact from fiction and find small but fascinating bits of trivia that make writing and reading about old films a lot of fun.

For example, did you know Alan Ladd wore a hairpiece for *Shane* (1953)? Or that stuntman Bobby Hoy loosened some of actor Joel McCrea’s front teeth in a fistfight on the set of Universal’s *Border River* (1954)? Or that George “Gabby” Hayes suffered a heart attack while filming RKO’s *Trail Street* (1947)? Better yet, many of the archives may include various versions of the script, memos on casting decisions, salary and budget information, press materials, interoffice missives about publicity ideas and notes from directors, actors and others detailing their thoughts on improving the production in question. In many cases you’ll even find audience preview cards and letters from exhibitors telling the studio how well a particular film was doing in their town.

Several noted film historians say these archives are the only place to go when covering people and productions from the golden age of Hollywood.

Especially since just about everyone who took part in the making of those films is dead.

“What makes this approach unique is the film files from the mid-1930s onward ... into the 1950s are very, very complete and gave you a window into the whole process of how movies were made,” said author Alan K. Rode, who relied heavily on the Warner Bros. studio archives for his 2017 biography *Michael Curtiz: A Life in Film*. Rode also reviewed Paramount and 20th Century-Fox film files for the book.

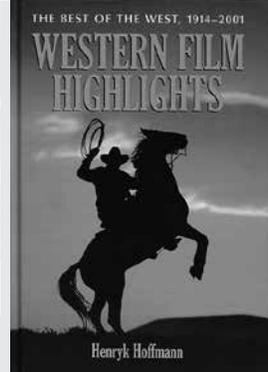
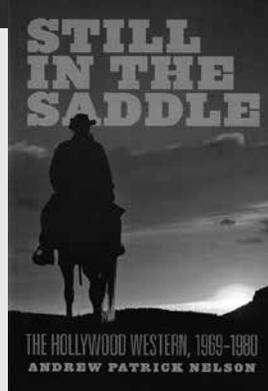
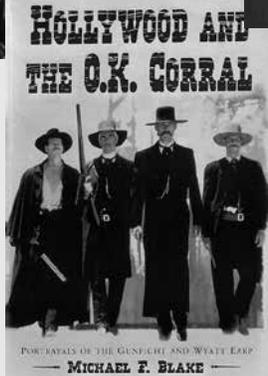
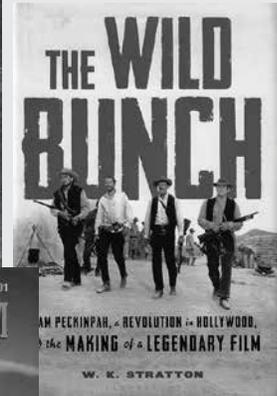
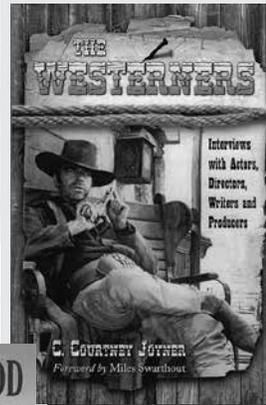
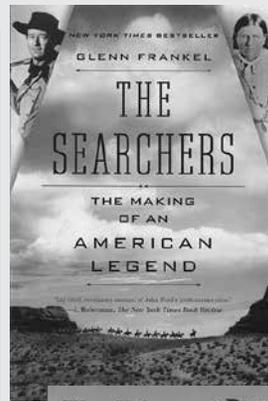
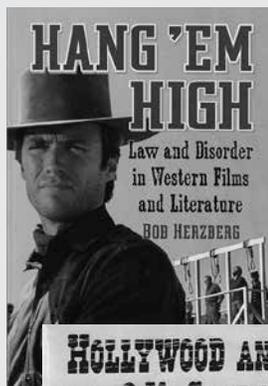
“Let’s say it’s a 20th Century-Fox movie and you read [producer and studio head] Darryl Zanuck’s story notes and his comments on the script. That’s when you find out what he really did in terms of shaping his films and how, in contrast, a guy like Jack Warner didn’t. It’s really vital from a historic perspective that these archives are maintained and used.”

Film historian Marilyn Ann Moss, who has written definitive biographies on directors George Stevens and Raoul Walsh, agrees. “You can find out what happened on a production day by day and if you are good at psychologically analyzing material, you can put a picture together of a person or production coming out a certain way because of those archives,” she said.

For example, she said the Warner Bros. archives – also under the auspices of the University of Southern California – for *Giant* (1956) show that Jack Warner was “fed up with Stevens because Stevens did things his way ... because he took so long doing everything.” She said at one point Warner wanted to fire Stevens. Studio officials were also “sick and tired” of star Elizabeth Taylor’s behavior on the film because she was showing up late or not at all.

“That may substantiate things you may have heard that she was so much trouble to work with, that she was picknickety and selfish,” Moss said. But the truth, Moss added, is that Taylor was sick during much of the shoot.

Tom Weaver, author of some 35 books about movies –



1. *Hang 'Em High: Law and Disorder in Western Films and Literature*
Bob Herzberg
2. *The American West on Film: Hollywood History*
Johnny D. Boggs
3. *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend*
Glenn Frankel
4. *The Westerners: Interviews with Actors, Directors, Writers and Producers*
C. Courtney Joyner
5. *The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood, and the Making of a Legendary Film*
W.K. Stratton
6. *Hollywood and the O.K. Corral: Portrayals of the Gunfight and Wyatt Earp*
Michael F. Blake
7. *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969-1980*
Andrew Patrick Nelson
8. *The Films of Budd Boetticher*
Robert Nott
9. *Western Film Highlights: The Best of the West, 1914-2001*
Henryk Hoffmann

mostly horror and science-fiction titles, though he loves Westerns — has used the Universal archives repeatedly for his books, including his in-depth look at the *Creature From the Black Lagoon* film series. In many cases, he said, these archives are all a historian has to rely on these days.

“Where else are we gonna go to look up *Battle of Apache Pass* (1952) or *Cult of the Cobra* (1955)?” Weaver said. “We’re at the mercy of those documents. They are absolutely invaluable because with everyone who worked on those movies being dead, what do you have if you don’t have them?”

Those archives can also put a more truthful spin on what really happened behind the scenes as compared to interviews with those who worked on those movies. For example, several directors — Joseph H. Lewis, Budd Boetticher and Howard Hawks among them — often

told stories about the making of their films that may not exactly jibe with the “just the facts” documentation in those archives, Rode said.

A sample: Boetticher wrote in his autobiography that a raging bull got loose and caused havoc on the Universal backlot during the shooting of his 1952 rodeo film *Bronco Buster*. But the daily production log for that film — so detailed in other matters, such as how long it took to set up and shoot a scene featuring actor John Lund’s character mounting and riding a horse — says nothing about such an incident, casting doubt on the tale.

Those production logs and other documents also say a lot about how a studio viewed some of its star players. Researching the Warner Bros. archives of the Randolph Scott films, one can see a steady decline of interest, commitment and financial support

from the studio from about 1954 on, suggesting the studio was tired of him or was incapable of freshening up the Randolph Scott formula.

The files for Scott’s 1954 film *Riding Shotgun*, for instance, paint a portrait of a studio trying to make its own version of *High Noon* before the cameras started rolling in March of 1953. Instead, thanks to repeated rewrites and tinkering from just about every studio official on the lot, the picture came off as a so-so story of a shotgun driver (Scott) tried and sentenced by his fellow townsmen because they believe he took part in a stagecoach hold-up. (Being Randolph Scott, of course, he didn’t.)

When director Andre DeToth began playing around with the dialogue to spruce things up during production, Jack Warner chided him with a memo, saying, “There will not be any



The Cecil B. DeMille Reading Room at the Margaret Herrick Library. Nate Christenson

changes of dialogue or scenes in *Riding Shotgun* without my personal okay. The script is very good and you should shoot it without changes.” DeToth responded, according to those archives, by moving through the film at break-neck speed, knocking it off fast and getting it out of the way without trying to improve it so he could move onto

something else.

Mind you, some archive collections are more in-depth than others. Rode and Moss find the Warner Bros. archives, which date from the silent era to 1968, the most comprehensive, partially because, as Moss put it “they did everything by memo. If you are looking for the actual word, you’ll find

it only at that studio’s library collection.”

Weaver is a fan of the Universal collection, which also starts in the silent era and runs to 1961, though he says the production files begin to taper off, in terms of quality and quantity, around 1957-1958. Weaver, who is working on a book about Universal horror films of the 1950s, found that “there are reams and reams of material on each movie up to about 1957 and then it just drops down to near zero. Around ’58, ’59, ’60 it’s just crickets.” (While researching the films of Audie Murphy for my book *Last of the Cowboy Heroes*, I found a wealth of info on most of his films up until about 1957 or 1958. From then on, the individual film files began to simply report shooting dates, budgets and minimal daily production notes, providing little color and detail.)

Then again, not all studios kept or donated their archival production material. While historians can still access studio archives for Universal and Warner Bros. (both at USC), RKO

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(at the University of California-Los Angeles campus) and Paramount (the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy for Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences), many other studios did not save or donate their archives, leading to a dearth of production information for such studios as Republic, Monogram and Columbia – all of which made lots of Westerns.

“When I get a bee in my bonnet to write about a particular movie and realize it is a Columbia or Republic or Monogram production, my enthusiasm instantly dips because I know I have to go to press books and puff pieces and all the ‘crap’ places to research them,” Weaver said.

Access to other studio archival material is hit and miss. The University of Wisconsin’s research center on film and television has a collection of material from United Artists, for example. But given so many independent producers released movies through United Artists, production files for those small indies, some of which came and went quickly, are not necessarily included in that archive.

Film historians have long bemoaned the fact that media mogul Ted Turner owns the MGM film library and archives, meaning they are often difficult or impossible to access. And while the University of California’s Film and Television Library long held archival records for 20th Century-Fox, the studio reclaimed much of that material in recent years, leaving film historians disappointed.

And it’s not as if anyone can just knock on the door, walk right in and request specific files. Researchers must contact individual archive librarians to schedule research visits and learn the rules of access. Cellphones, for example, are not allowed in some libraries.

While looking through these archives and finding previously undiscovered or overlooked gems, a researcher might feel joy. “You get waylaid,” Moss said. “It’s like being enveloped in history. You say, ‘I can’t believe I found that.’” But film historians who rely on these documents nonetheless paint a glum picture of the future of

the nonfiction film book.

“The days of these books are coming to an end,” Moss said. “They’re pretty much over.”

Weaver agrees. “I’m well into my 60s and won’t be around forever and I can see interest in these movies and books about these movies is dwindling,” he said. “I think in another 20 years it won’t matter too much if those files exist or not. I wonder if even one percent of young people really want to get on a plane to fly to Los Angeles or New York to research a book on Cesar Romero. And then what percent of that one percent would buy that book?”

Still, hope should spring eternal for those wanting to research and write about old films. Several library-oriented presses, such as McFarland & Company and Scarecrow, still produce a number of nonfiction books about film each year. Gary Mitchem, senior acquisitions editor at McFarland, said in an e-mail that the press puts out about 80 nonfiction books about film per year. For Western film fans, two forthcoming titles from McFarland are *Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen* by Flavia Brizio-Skov and *American Indian Image Makers of Hollywood* by Frank Javier Garcia Berumen.

And the University of New Mexico Press is beginning a series of film books called “Reel West,” with individual authors tackling individual films that speak to the relevance of these movies today.

Naturally, relying on studio archives to research those titles can make all the difference in terms of coloring those tomes with a “you are there” sensibility. Mitchem said those archives can yield invaluable primary-source material. “Especially for those books that aren’t primarily theoretical analyses of film content, studio archives have the potential to provide the little-known facts and details – discovered, for instance, in scripts, production records and memos and correspondence – that solid film history puts to good use,” he said.

Where to look

Besides studio production information, many of these libraries have special collections on individual performers, directors or other film professionals. *Because of closures during the coronavirus pandemic, check websites for updated information on access.*

Margaret Herrick Library

313 La Cienega Boulevard, Beverly Hills, California

Contact: (310) 247-3020

Oscars.org

Houses a vast collection of film-related data, including the Paramount studio archives and special collections on film artists including George Stevens, Budd Boetticher, Alfred Hitchcock and Alan Ladd.

USC School of Cinematic Arts

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California

Contact: Sandra Garcia-Myers, archives director, garciamy@usc.edu
Cinema.usc.edu

Home to the Warner Bros. and Universal film archives (housed at separate locales), as well as a detailed collection of material from the Hal Roach Studios.

UCLA Film and Television Archive

UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Contact: (310) 206-5388, arsc@cinema.ucla.edu

Cinema.usc.edu, guides.library.ucla.edu

Houses RKO’s film production archives from 1922-1955. Also has collections of material from Republic Pictures, Disney and some television networks, as well as the Randolph Scott Papers and the Howard Duff Papers.

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

Contact: (608) 264-6466, askmovies@wisconsinhistory.org

WCFTR.commarts.wisc.edu

Holds a collection of material from United Artists, as well as prints of historic films and many special collections, including the Kirk Douglas Papers.

– Robert Nott