

Max Evans: From Rounder to King of Taos



Martin Schaefer's publicity photo of Max Evans, 1960. Courtesy of Pat Evans

By Johnny D. Boggs

Max Evans, cowboy, World War II veteran and longtime rapschallion, was making a name for himself in Taos, New Mexico, with his watercolors and oil paintings when, being a self-proclaimed “dirty old son of a bitch,” he told his wife, Pat, that he was shucking it all to become a writer.

Typical Max Evans.

“I could see the shock there, justifiably so,” Evans said in 1999. “In fact, she would have been a lot better off just taking a damn .30-30 and blowing my head off, but, in less than two minutes, she got over the shock and said, ‘Well, let’s get after it.’”



Pat Evans with her Rounder Award, 2014. Johnny D. Boggs

Typical Pat James Evans, who married the old rounder in 1949. On their first date, Evans took her to a gallery opening – of his own paintings. “There wasn’t much to do in Taos,” Pat said with a smile.

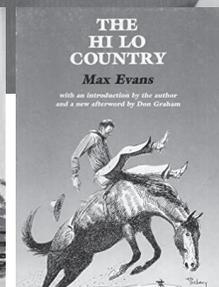
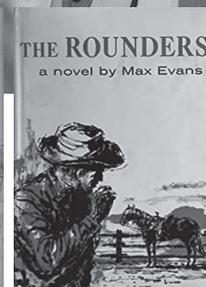
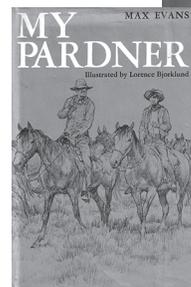
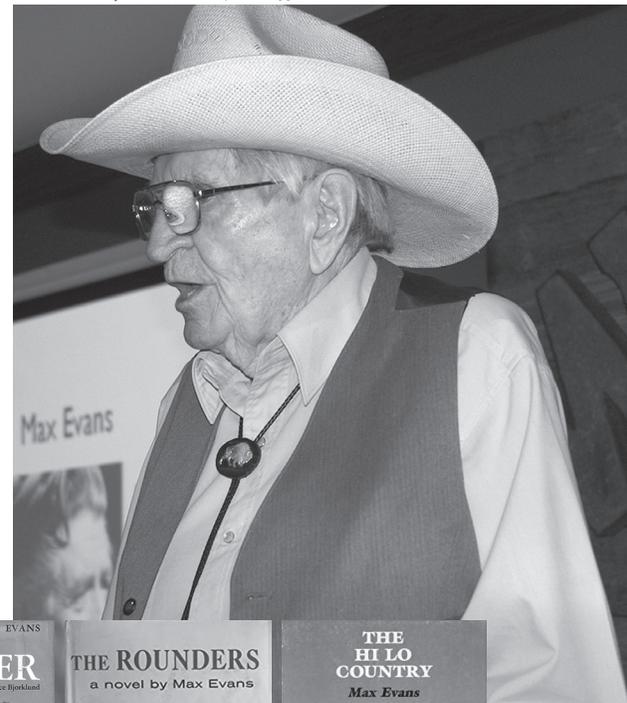
But the world of American letters and Western literature became a whole lot richer because of Evans’s move from paint to prose. Two Spur Awards (“Super Bull” for short nonfiction; “The Orange County Cowboys” for short fiction) ... three Western Heritage Wrangler Awards (*For the Love of a Horse* for nonfiction book; *Bluefeather Fellini in the Sacred Realm* for novel; “Showdown at Hollywood Park” for magazine article) ... WWA’s 1990 Saddleman Award (now the Owen Wister Award) ... induction into the Western Writers Hall of Fame in 2015 ... and two movies based on his works (*The Rounders*, *The Hi-Lo Country*) with another (*My Pardner*) in development.

Max Evans – alias Ol’ Max – died August 26, just three days before his 96th birthday. Which would have been, as he might put it, roughly 1,219 in Max Evans Years after all of his hell-raising and horse wrecks.

“He is a member of the Western Writers Hall of Fame and the Greatest Generation,” WWA executive director Candy Moulton said. “His literary contributions, while immense, pale in comparison to how he enriched my life with his stories and his friendship.”

“Max Evans lived life the same way he wrote about it – from the ground up,” Spur- and Emmy-winning screenwriter Kirk Ellis said. “He drew his inspiration and characters not from the storied and famous, but from the ordinary folks whose tales are rarely told, and from the landscape that defines them. A ‘Western’ writer who eschewed tradition, Max could write with simple elegance about war, romance, the natural world, even the day-to-day business of prostitution

Max Evans, 2015. Johnny D. Boggs



in '30s-era New Mexico. His love for his chosen land and its people was reflected not only in his novels, but in his tireless advocacy for New Mexico’s film industry and the Hi Lo country he immortalized.”

Evans was born August 29, 1924, in Ropes, Texas – now Ropesville – southwest of Lubbock. In 1930, his father



Max Evans, age 9, on Cricket. Courtesy of Pat Evans

bought a ranch in Lea County, New Mexico, and founded a town, Humble City, with dreams that either Hobbs to the southeast or Lovington to the northwest would grow and Humble City would boom. "It did," Evans wrote in "The World's Strangest Creature," published in *Southern Horseman* in 1984. "A couple of decades after most of them were gone, the land was covered with irrigation and oil pumps, and finally the oil-rich ranching town of Hobbs grew around Humble City, and left its actuality only on road maps."

Evans's life changed at age 11 when he went to work on a New Mexico ranch on Glorieta Mesa. The bunkhouse had a rack of books, many by Honoré de Balzac, whose *Père Goriot* hooked Evans on literature.

Those cowboys had "never read 'em, never intended to read 'em ... but I read every one of those damned books, and I couldn't believe it," he said.



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"That was pure magic to me, and it hasn't changed."

Time passed, however, before Evans decided to try to write for a living. He cowboied, becoming a top calf roper. He brawled (a lot). He joined the Army, fighting in France from D-Day till he was sent home a few days before the Battle of the Bulge, wounded by a mortar explosion, the side effects staying with him for the rest of his life.

After the war, he cowboied and ranched in northeastern New Mexico, part of a region that stretches into Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas that he named the Hi Lo Country (Hollywood added the hyphen for the 1998 movie) for its wind-swept grasslands and rugged mesas and arroyos – not to mention the highs and lows of anyone in the cattle business. In 1949, he arrived in Taos.

"As a little kid, I was always sketching or drawing something," he said, "but I'd had only three art lessons in my whole life." Yet his expressionistic oil-on-canvas, *Normandy Night Fire*, was accepted into a juried art show and won honored placement alongside several "Taos masters."

Potawatomi Indian artist Woody Crumbo became Evans's mentor. But Evans wanted to write. Eventually, he found markets in magazines and newspapers. A short story collection, *Southwest Wind*, was published in 1958. *Long John Dunn of Taos* followed a year later. *The Rounders* came in 1960. To finance his writing dream, Evans did other things like prospecting and smuggling.

There was a deeply personal story he wanted to write, "a huge book," he called it, told "in a tiny amount of space." The plot involved Wiley Chandler "Big Boy" Hittson Jr.,

Evans's cowboy pal near Des Moines, New Mexico, who was shot to death by his younger brother on November 5, 1949. After finishing a draft, Evans knew something was wrong with the novel but couldn't find the problem. He asked Pat for help, and though she was busy with twin daughters, she read it and told him that three chapters were in the wrong place. Evans made the corrections, and *The Hi Lo Country* was published in 1961. And promptly died on the bookshelves.

But director Sam Peckinpah found a copy, loved it, optioned the novel in 1962 and began a long-running admire/despise/want-to-kill-one-another relationship with Evans. Once, Evans said, he broke Peckinpah's ankle but meant to break his neck.

Peckinpah took out multiple options on *Hi Lo* before his death in 1984. Burt Kennedy directed and wrote the film adaptation of *The Rounders*, which starred Glenn Ford and Henry Fonda and became a sleeper hit in 1965; a short-lived ABC-TV series followed in 1966-67. The Evans family moved into a two-story home in Albuquerque, but Evans spent a lot of time in Hollywood, working deals and doctoring scripts under-the-table. He took to producing and even acted as a stagecoach guard in Peckinpah's 1970 Western *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*.

In July 1961, Evans was introduced as a new WWA member. "Max admits to some four books and half a hundred short stories and articles in various magazines," *Roundup* reported, "says he enjoys calf roping and prospecting. ..."

He held court at many WWA conventions, and whenever saying goodbye, in person or on the phone, he'd close with: "Have fun."

With Luther Wilson, Peter Ford, Robert Nott and L.Q. Jones at the 2012 WWA convention.

Johnny D. Boggs



“Max Evans was a great friend for 47 years because he was so damn much fun,” Owen Wister Award recipient Win Blevins said. “He was always ready to say or do something wildly funny. I never tired of hearing him tell me he was more than a thousand years old. Each time he wrote a book, he said, in a reverential tone, ‘Win, I think this one is my masterpiece.’ Some of them probably were masterpieces.”

Said two-time Spur winner David Marion Wilkinson: “I learned a lot from that old man. He may have been far down the river when I first met him, but his charisma and spirit were still at high tide at WWA’s 2000 convention. When Max said most anything to me, I listened. He was a blessing in my life. A mentor. And a friend. I just adored him.”

Wherever he was, Evans told stories.

“Max had a colorful story to go with about any topic you could bring up,” WWA member Ollie Reed Jr. said. “In my 35 years as a newspaper reporter in Albuquerque, he was the person I called if I needed a quirky angle or anecdote to breathe life into a story. The sentences that came right out of his mouth were as funny, engaging and beautifully wrought as those he might have spent hours on wrestling into shape for his novels and short stories. You might not always be able to print everything he said in a newspaper, but you could bet it was going to be lively and original.”

Evans said his Glorieta Mesa bosses were “old farts ... out of the 1880s and ‘90s.” But rather than write about the late 1800s, which dominated the Western fiction market in the 1950s and 1960s, Evans stuck to the era he knew, the Great Depression and post-World War II.

His 1963 novella *My Pardner* was based on Evans’s misadventures as 10-year-old boy on a Depression Era horse drive with a cantankerous character named Boggs.

Evans did not confine his tales to cowboys and wranglers. *Xavier’s Folly* (1962) tells the story of a plumber who dreams of bringing a ballet star to his small town. The hero of *The Mountain*

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Holding court at lunch. Johnny D. Boggs



Inducted into the Western Writers Hall of Fame, 2015.

of Gold (1965) is a Hispanic miner. *Bluefeather Fellini* (1993), *Bluefeather Fellini in the Sacred Realm* (1994) and *Now and Forever* (2003) delve into mysticism and the metaphysical. *Faraway Blue* (1999), his one historical novel, follows Buffalo Soldiers and Nana’s Apaches in the 1880s Southwest.

Animals often had lead roles – a cow and coyote in *The One-Eyed Sky* (1963) ... a deer surrounded by urban San Diego in *The White Shadow* (1977). As a rancher and cowhand, he had hunted coyotes. As a mystic, he called coyotes his brothers and sisters. Before he went to the hospital for the last time, he and Pat were feeding a female coyote that took a liking to their large, shady lot – no matter how much neighbors protested.

He wrote nonfiction, including *Sam Peckinpah, Master of Violence: Being the Account of the Making of a Movie and Other Sundry Things* (1972).

“*Master of Violence* was Max’s oddly

Stories about Ol’ Max Evans

“I’ve so many memories to share, but I think Paul Hutton will agree with me



Loren D. Estleman

that one from the wee hours of Sunday morning following the 1999 WWA banquet in Rapid City deserves special mention. In the hotel lobby, Max bribed the bartender to keep

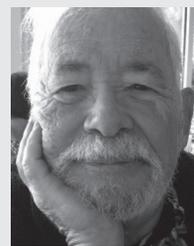
us in spirits after closing, and had consumed tumbler after tumbler of Glenlivet Scotch, when a fly started bothering him. He cursed it, swatted with one hand—and there in the center of his cocktail napkin was a dead fly. I told Paul, ‘Nobody’s going to believe this tomorrow.’ Paul said, ‘I just saw it, and I don’t believe it!’

“This was the kind of self-control and coordination Max brought to all things; his early work on the range, his writing, and his relationships. He was one of the last of those writers who conducted their research in the saddle. When it came time to transcribe it to paper, he did so with consummate skill and surpassing poetry. His work will endure; but we who were privileged to know him will miss his warmth, good humor, and wisdom.

“God bless, Max. Keep that aim sharp.”

– Loren D. Estleman,
Owen Wister Award recipient

“Once, in a bar at a WWA convention, an editor had the nerve to lecture a handful of very good writers about how we



Win Blevins

didn’t know how to write Westerns. Max said quietly to me, ‘Want to take him out?’

“‘Sure.’ We got up, but then Max rubbed his right fist and said, ‘Win, this fist

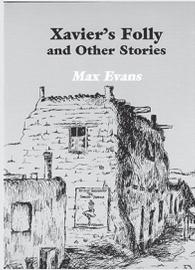
has been broke in so many fights I don’t think it’ll stand another’n’.”

– Win Blevins,
Owen Wister Award recipient

In Max's words

"I watched them lower Big Boy Matson into his grave. It was a large coffin, and yet I half expected it to burst apart from the weight and size of the man. Not only his physical bigness but from the whole of his being."

The Hi Lo Country
Macmillan, 1961



"And when the camera had shown the red satin shoes and the pink tights with the blood coming through, he'd died a thousand times more. But even so ... What a Film! What a lady! What a dance! Finally he knew what the word 'magic' really meant. It meant ballet."

Xavier's Folly
University of Mexico Press, 1962

"I looked over at the corral and counted five mules and sixteen starved, ragged-looking horses of every color. Well, Papa had more confidence than I did, but I couldn't help swelling up a little when he shook hands and said, 'I ain't worried a peck.' But then Papa had lots of guts. Here we were on the edge of Starvation, Texas, living in a shack that was held up by hope, on land that the drought had singled out to make an example of. Half farm, half grassland, and only half enough of either one."

My Pardner
Houghton Mifflin, 1963

"Sam Peckinpah is the complete enigma in a wheel made of contradictions, spinning swiftly, full of spokes, with every other one in absolute opposition."

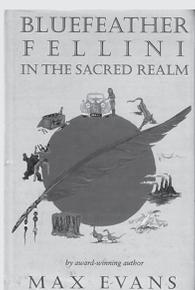
Sam Peckinpah: Master of Violence: Being the Account of the Making of a Movie and Other Sundry Things
Dakota Press, 1972

"... He would always swear he had heard voices from the sky saying, 'Lower. Lower.'

"Higher. Higher."

"He would spend the rest of his life searching for the meaning."

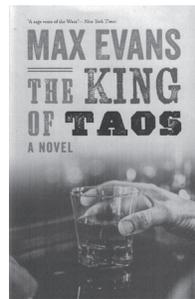
Bluefeather Fellini in the Sacred Realm
University Press of Colorado, 1994



titled account of the making of the gentle *Cable Hogue*," said W.K. Stratton, author of *The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood, and the Making of a Legendary Film*. "The production was troubled. Rain delays in Nevada left cast and crew with little to do besides drink, gamble, fight and carouse. The book offers early insights into Peckinpah's character, but Max considerably cleaned up his reporting of what happened in Nevada. Peckinpah hated the book for being too sanitary and accused Max of writing a book his wife, Pat, would approve of rather than telling the down and dirty of what really happened. Max no doubt wished he had a mulligan. He got one 40 years later with *Goin' Crazy with Sam Peckinpah*."

Goin' Crazy, published in 2004, was co-authored by newspaper journalist and film historian Robert Nott.

"Max lived his life like an ongoing story book, one with a new chapter to be created every day," Nott said. "He was curious about the world and the people in it, and he enjoyed telling stories about his own encounters with that world and those people. You couldn't always tell if the stories were true, but you really didn't care because they



were so well spun."

Other Evans nonfiction included a biography of a prostitute and madam, *Madam Millie: Bordellos from Silver City to Ketchikan* (2002); the text for Gene Peach's photo book *Making a Hand: Growing Up Cowboy in New Mexico* (2005); and much, much more.

He helped establish the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum in Las Cruces. In 1990, then-New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture Frank DuBois and Evans established the Rounder Award, given annually to people who promote, live and articulate the Western way of life. Winners have included Reed, historian Don Bullis, singer-songwriter RW Hampton and Pat Evans.

There were Max Evans Days in Hobbs (1967), Albuquerque (1985), statewide (1999) and at the state Capitol (2014). The University of New Mexico Press published Slim Randles's biography *Ol' Max Evans: The First Thousand Years* in 2004. Broadcast journalist Lorene Mills helped spearhead a 2017 documentary, *Ol' Max Evans: The First Thousand Years*, that aired on PBS.

Evans once said "If I slowed down, somebody would catch up with me and knock me in the head."

But failing health slowed him down. *The King of Taos* was released this year by the University of New Mexico Press, which has published 18 Evans titles and has a 60th anniversary edition of *The Hi Lo Country* scheduled for release in February. Evans said *The King of Taos* would be his last novel.

"I didn't believe him," University of New Mexico Press editor Stephen Hull said. "I thought he would have another couple in him."

Last fall, Evans fell at his home, breaking a hip, and was hospitalized. But he was soon back at home, making final corrections on *The King of Taos*. On June 19, however, he fell and broke his hip again. Hospitalized at Albuquerque's Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, he was moved to the facility's hospice care, where he died in his sleep. Survivors include his wife of 71 years and twin daughters Sheryl and Charlotte.

"He was a Western writer because he'd been a working cowboy from the time he was a boy, and because the West and the people of the West interested him," Hull said. "But all people interested him. I'm proud to have known Max, proud to have been his publisher for a while."

After Evans's death, Pat said, a hawk landed in a birdbath at the Evans home and sat there, watching, unconcerned even when Sheryl went out to take photographs. The hawk didn't fly away until after the Evanses left for the funeral home.

"There's no question about it," Pat said. "He came to see us. It was Max's spirit. He wanted us to know he's happy, happy."