



WHERE THE WEST WAS WON

Alice Watts

CONTACT:

MOBILE:
916-284-1080

WEBSITE:
www.wattscopywriting.com

EMAIL:
alicewatts@wattscopywriting.com

A Look at Hollywood's Back Lot in the Alabama Hills and Lone Pine



The 1962 epic movie *How the West Was Won* told the story of how the pioneering Prescott family won their piece of the American West. But do you know *where* the West was won? The Alabama Hills on the eastern side of the Sierra Madre and the nearby town of Lone Pine, California, have served as one of Hollywood's popular back lots for "B" Westerns and larger studio films for almost 100 years, including major scenes from *How the West Was Won*.

Lone Pine is located in the Owens Valley approximately 200 miles north of Los Angeles along Highway 395. Mountain men such as Jedediah S. Smith probably discovered the valley as early as the 1820s and found Paiute and Shoshone Indians living there. Trapper and explorer Joseph R. Walker is credited with being among the first white men in the area when he led an expedition sent by John Fremont in 1833/34 to find an overland route to California from Missouri. A team from the California State Geological Society discovered Mt. Whitney in 1864; team member Clarence King named the mountain after his boss Josiah Dwight Whitney

Settlers first came to the valley in 1842, drawn by rich deposits of minerals. Mines such as Cerro Gordo, Pinamint and Coso produced silver and lead. The boom years for the mines were over by 1879, although there was a brief resurgence for four to five years with the discovery of zinc deposits in 1911. After the mines petered out, however, many of the towns built around them also closed down.

Lone Pine remained. Founded in the mid-1880s and named after a lone pine tree that had once stood at the mouth of Lone Pine Canyon, Lone Pine was the center of commerce for many of the mines and miners. When the mines and miners left, it decided to stay, supported by the ranchers and farmers who had followed the miners into the valley and helped by the arrival of the Carson Colorado Railroad. Lone Pine was almost wiped out by the 1872 earthquake which killed about one-third of its population of approximately 100, but the town was resilient and rebuilt. Today Lone Pine is a thriving town of approximately 2,000 residents.

The Alabama Hills are located just west of Lone Pine toward Mt. Whitney. The name comes from the C.S.S. *Alabama*, a Confederate warship. Confederate sympathizers in the area named their mining claims after the ship, and the name stuck to the hills in which they prospected. It doesn't take much imagination to see Roy Rogers on Trigger (or Rogers' double Joe Yrigoyen) chasing bad guys across the dusty prairie represented by Movie Flats, or Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette stopping by that cucumber shaped rock that now bears Autry's name. What tales the rocks could tell if only they could talk.

Mt. Whitney became a popular climbing site in the late 1800s and early 1900s. And the climbers would come back home, many to Los Angeles, with their stories and pictures about not only Mt. Whitney but the Alabama Hills as well. At some point, a movie crew decided to look into the Alabamas. What they found was a rugged outdoor setting and a location that was a reasonable driving distance from Hollywood's studios.

Producers were drawn to the area by the geology of the eastern Sierra noted Bob Sigman, past Director of The Museum of Western Film History in Lone Pine. "Directors could film different scenes simply by shifting the cameras around instead of having to take them down and set them up somewhere else," he said. Also different was the lighting. Called the "Valley of the Long Shadow" because of the 20-mile shadow cast by the Sierra in the evening sun, the

Alabama Hills offered dynamic lighting throughout the day.

Also, thanks to the road system built to support the construction of the controversial aqueduct from Owens Lake to Los Angeles in 1908-12, Lone Pine was a relatively easy day trek for the film companies coming from Los Angeles. Plus, they could stop and film at Red Rock Canyon along the way and get paid for a day's work.

It was January 3, 1920. The first day of filming in the new location. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was making his Western debut in what would be his first serious role, *The Round-Up*; he had spent his career up to then as a comedic actor. Movie-making had come to Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills. Sound, and singing, came to the area with *The Wagon Master* in 1929 starring Ken Maynard as the first cowboy to sing in a movie. Of the over 400 feature-length and short films shot in the Alabama Hills area, approximately 80% have been Westerns according to Inyo County Film Commissioner Chris Langley.

"I think the townspeople loved it," said Langley. "I've heard few complaints. They [the movie companies] left money behind and didn't stay long." Filming outdoor scenes in the Alabamas only took seven to eight days and then the company went back to Los Angeles to shoot the rest of the movie. Even Lone Pine got into the action, as scenes were shot in town and around the buildings there. The Spainhower Anchor Ranch helped supply horses and cattle for the movies, recollected Sigman. "Locals served as extras and helped build sets. They were more involved in the 1930s and '40s than they are today. Today, Hollywood brings what it needs, including catering trucks."

The townspeople respected the stars, and the actors reciprocated. The actors loved the area, and to this day their children and grandchildren tell stories about their adventures in Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills. Rogers only made six movies in the Alabama Hills, yet visited Lone Pine often. William Boyd lived in a cabin that now bears "Hoppy's" name when he was

making some of the Hopalong Cassidy movies that were filmed in the Alabamas.

Most of the major cowboy stars made movies in the Alabama Hills—Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, Tim Holt, Randolph Scott, John Wayne and Clayton Moore, to name just a few. Rogers made his starring film debut in *Under Western Stars* (1938) in the Alabama Hills. Autry made 16 movies in the area including *Boots and Saddles* (1937), and Boyd proved that good guys could wear black as Hopalong Cassidy chased outlaws in a record-setting 66 feature movies between 1935 and 1948, approximately 30 of which were made in whole or in part in the Alabamas. Boyd is also credited by film historian Dave Holland with reintroducing moviegoers and moviemakers to Westerns and the Alabama Hills by airing his Hopalong Cassidy adventures on the newly popular 1950's venue called television.

The heyday of the Western movie was the 1930's and early '40's, according to Langley, with the stars portraying the historical western period of 1870-90. Yet, as British immigrant-turned cowboy and journalist John Baumann warned adventurers and would-be cowboys in an article in 1887 for the *Fortnightly Review*, the true cowboy's life was nothing like his screen counterpart's. It was rough and harsh and dirty with long days, including weekends, in the saddle, low pay and scarce grub. It was not for the faint-hearted or romantic.

As for the movie cowboy? After all, viewers knew in their hearts it wasn't really real—real cowboys didn't have fancy horses or tack like Trigger and Champion, they couldn't sing like Rogers and Autry. But they loved the heroes, booed the villains, and ate up the action anyway. And everybody had their favorite cowboy (and horse).

Hollywood continued to make movies in the Alabama Hills throughout World War II, but the end of the war marked the beginning of the end for the "B" movie. Though Lone Pine didn't feel it immediately, "B" Western stars were pretty much out of the picture by the end of the 1950s. By the early 1960s, movie

Westerns had been taken over by television leaving the big silver screen to other genres.

By the 1950s the movies began to be feature-length, in color, and with more adult themes. The role of women changed from being part of the set and needing saving by the cowboy to more realistic treatment. Violence became much more pronounced, more graphic. Themes such as land and water control, a topic that resonated with Owens Valley residents, became bigger issues.

The early Westerns had a different kind of acting, said Sigman. There were more facial expressions, more body language, and storylines were different. There was more subtlety then. There was a different kind of actor, real action with cowboys on horses. Today we have visual effects; back then people put their lives on the line with their stunts.

“Why do we care so much?” mused Langley. “What was the importance of the Western?” They taught us how to behave, Langley continued. They taught kids right from wrong, and how to stand up for the community. They taught lessons about freedom, simple ethics and how to treat women. The stars stood for something. We see our world as much more complex. Most of the Westerns portrayed the ideal West, not the West as it really was. “The Western,” he concluded, “was one of our [American] truly original creations.”

The Alabama Hills has been one of Hollywood's, and perhaps the world's, biggest back lots, boasts Sigman. Movies and commercials continue to be filmed there under the watchful eye of the Bureau of Land Management which has had oversight of the area since 1969.

Although not as many Westerns have been filmed there as in days gone past, the West has been won many times over in large part because of Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills where the legacy of the Western lives on. For despite other genres of films shot here, it's the image of the Western cowboy that comes to mind when thinking of this patch of California.

Lone Pine celebrates its Western film heritage in various ways throughout the year. The Museum of Western Film History, opened in 2006, has hundreds of items from movies made in the Lone Pine/Alabama Hills area on display and a theater for film screenings. Buildings in town such as the Mt. Whitney Restaurant display movie posters, many of which have been autographed by the stars. Movie locations in the Alabama Hills, including the Gene Autry Rock, can be found by visitors via self-guided tour maps.

And every year since 1990 the annual Lone Pine Film Festival has brought film lovers to town from all over for Columbus Day weekend to watch a seemingly endless array of movies and to take tours into the Alabama Hills to see where their favorite films were made. It's a family affair in which new fans are made every year, many brought by their enthusiastic parents.