**Hittin' The Trail**

*By Bill Miller, Friend of Hart Park*

I feel very honored that Bill West has asked me to contribute what hopefully will be an entertaining and informative read for the Friends of Hart. Being a long time member of Friends of Hart Park, I have developed a great admiration for William S. Hart and his wonderful movies. Well, you've all heard the expression, "one thing leads to another..." With that in mind, my love of western movies includes exploring the locations where western movies were filmed. It is one thing to enjoy a western movie in the comfort of your home. It is yet another to get out and visit the places where these movies were filmed. As I like to say, "Let's saddle up and hit the trail."

Location, location, location. Where have you heard that before? Our destination on this trip is the Alabama Hills. Many of you know about this wonderful place, some may have heard about it but never visited, others perhaps have never heard of it. From Hart Park you will board Hwy 14 and head North. From the Santa Clarita area, you'll be traveling approximately 185 miles with travel time estimated at about three hours before you enter the town of Lone Pine, CA.

No visit to Lone Pine and the Alabama Hills would be complete unless you stop at the Lone Pine Film Museum, which will be on your left as you enter the town. After paying a nominal fee of $5, you'll enjoy a brief film history of the Lone Pine area in their theater and be amazed at the many displays of film artifacts the Museum has to offer. Be sure to pick up a tour map of the Alabama Hills while there. After visiting the Museum, you'll continue North through Lone Pine to the only stop light where you will turn left. You are now just moments away from the Alabama Hills.

What a beautiful sight it is! Mt Whitney and the Sierras are the backdrop to the wonderful visual experience of the Alabama Hills. Hundreds of movies have been filmed there with the first being "The Round-Up" with Fatty Arbuckle back in 1920. The majority of films shot in the Alabama Hills were westerns, but the Alabama Hills have been the backdrop to all types of movies. "Samson and Delilah," "High Sierra," "Gunga Din," Adventures of Marco Polo," "Jungle Raiders (serial)," "Tremors" and "Iron Man" to name just a few.

The first names that comes to mind when thinking of westerns from the silent era are William S. Hart and Tom Mix. To my knowledge, Hart never filmed in the Alabama Hills but Tom Mix was there for both silent and talkie westerns. Probably the most familiar name of the western genre is John Wayne, and the Duke himself starred in lots of B-Westerns back in the 1930's that were filmed in the Alabama Hills. To the locals of Lone Pine, CA probably William Boyd, (Hopalong Cassidy) could very well be their biggest hero. He filmed over thirty of his sixty-six "Hoppy's" there and in the surrounding areas. My personal favorite western star of movies filmed in the Alabama Hills is Randolph Scott. "The Tall T" and "7 Men From Now" starring Randolph Scott are two of my favorites. Stars like Hoot Gibson, Ray Corrigan, Ken Maynard, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Bob Steele, Audie Murphy and so many others took to the Alabamas on more than one occasion. The very first "Lone Ranger" was filmed there as a serial back in 1938. My particular favorite location in the Alabama Hills is called Lone Ranger Canyon. A great place to enjoy a very leisurely hike. By referring to your Alabama Hills map, you'll see the "Hoppy" rock along the trail and also the "Gene Autry" rock, sometimes referred to as "Pickle" rock. You'll know it the moment you see it. The Lone Ranger Canyon is a perfect place to take pictures with the contrast between the rocks and the mountains making it one of the most beautiful places in the entire area.

Did you bring a picnic lunch and some folding chairs? Hard to find a better place than the Lone Ranger Canyon for enjoying some leisure time and maybe even daydreaming a little. Am I hearing thundering hoofs? Did Hoppy just go by, turn the corner and head up the trail to hide behind his rock. More thundering hoofs as the bad guys go by, turn the corner but mistakenly take a left turn just before the Hoppy rock. Fooled 'em again Hoppy! If you make the effort, you can really get into the spirit of being exactly where some of these great western films were shot. By referring to your Alabama Hills map, you'll find many wonderful sights to explore.

Is there more than just the Alabama Hills to enjoy while you're in the area? Yes indeed. If you are visiting from mid to late May thru very early October, the main paved road should be open to allow you to go up to Whitney Portal. We're talking about a fifteen minute drive up a twisting road that will take you to another world. At Whitney Portal you'll enjoy a beautiful waterfall, numerous picnic tables, a fishing pond and a hiking trail. You'll also immediately notice a drop in temperature. If the temperature in the Alabamas is 90-100 degrees, you can subtract 15-25 degrees at Whitney Portal. During the Winter months, the Whitney Portal Road is closed because of snow and sometimes rock slides. It is always best to inquire by calling the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce first before making plans to visit Whitney Portal. There is always the chance the road could open earlier and stay open later than normal or vice versa. Mother Nature dictates when the road will be closed.

Some final thoughts before saddling up and hitting the trail. A trip to the Alabama Hills can be a one or two day trip depending on whether you are an early riser and don't mind a three hour drive back home late in the day. You might consider an overnight stay in Lone Pine if you want a more leisurely pace to enjoy the Alabamas, Whitney Portal and the Lone Pine Film Museum. It's always helpful to gather some information prior to any trip and taking time to visit www.lonepinefilmhistorymuseum.org and www.lonepinechamber.org will provide you with plenty of information to make your trip a memorable occasion. Don't forget to take plenty of water, folding chairs and the essentials for a picnic lunch. Now, go ahead, saddle up and hit the trail.