**William S. Hart's studios and other Hollywood Haunts**

*by E.J. Stephens, author, historian and Friends of Hart Park director*

As lovers of early Westerns, my beautiful wife Kimi and I are as lucky to be residing in the Santa Clarita Valley as a Civil War buff is to be living in Northern Virginia. That’s because when it comes to exploring early “oater” locations, the place to be is Southern California.

The main sites for experiencing Western film history in So Cal are of course Hollywood, which is a name known to all, and in *Newhallywood*, which was a nickname once given by early Western filmmakers to the area around Newhall (and by extension to all of the Santa Clarita Valley) that has sadly fallen out of usage.

Kimi and I have been honored to serve as tour hosts for the Santa Clarita Cowboy Festival for the past five years. For the previous four festivals we hosted tours of Melody Ranch along with a bus tour of the film sites of the Santa Clarita Valley. This year, with Melody Ranch unavailable to Cowboy Festival patrons due to filming, we decided to expand our venues outside of the SCV and to take our show down the road a piece to Hollywood, where the Western film was born.

To be accurate, I should say where the “*Southern California* Western film” was born. The very first “Westerns” were filmed in the wilds of … New Jersey! It’s true. As a matter of fact, when the bad guys are gunned down during the climax of 1903’s *The Great Train Robbery,* the action isn’t taking place in Wyoming, but in rootin’ tootin’ West Orange.

For a number of reasons, (the biggest being that New Jersey doesn’t look anything like the West) just over a century ago, Western filmmakers migrated to the real West, and settled a few miles to the north of Los Angeles in the tiny hamlet of Hollywood. They liked what they found there – lots of varied vistas, tons of open space, cheap labor, and most importantly: sunshine – which was another major ingredient that New Jersey lacked for much of the year. Hollywood quickly became the center of the infant American film industry, and the new home of the American Western film. So, while you could say that Hollywood isn’t listed as the birth location on the genre’s birth certificate, it’s where the Western moved as an infant, and grew to adulthood.

Our tour began near the home of Silent Western superstar William S. Hart, who is a familiar character to the regular readers of this newsletter. We were excited to be able to tell our bus-load of guests that we would be seeing more haunts related to “Two-Gun Bill,” including his old studio, which I had only recently learned was still standing.

I must admit, I was a bit nervous hosting this tour as I had only given it for a few family members and friends, and never for a bus-load of guests. But I was comforted knowing that if I made a mistake, the only person I knew who would likely catch it would be the dean of early Hollywood history, my friend and co-author, Marc Wanamaker. But I wasn’t really worried about this since Marc had never gone on any of our tours before. But guess who texted me a couple of days before the tour to tell me he was coming along and bringing friends!

Throughout the day, Marc was able to supply some details for our guests that enhanced everyone’s experience, and happily I don’t believe I made any major gaffs (of course, maybe I did, but Marc was just too polite to mention it.)

Another way Marc added immeasurably to the day was at our first stop, which was an unscheduled one. Back in 1913, *The Squaw Man*, a film many consider to be the first full-length Western filmed in Hollywood, was made by Cecil B. DeMille in a small barn on Vine Street. This barn was the birthplace of what later became Paramount Pictures and resided on the Paramount lot for decades. During one of the studio’s makeovers, it was decided to demolish the building. Marc, along with several like-minded friends, stepped in and saved the historic structure, which was eventually moved to its new home opposite the Hollywood Bowl and rechristened the Lasky-DeMille Barn.

The barn has been closed to the public for some time for repairs, but Marc has a key and took us all inside to show us first-hand where Hollywood’s first big blockbuster Western was made. The guests loved it, and didn’t leave before shelling out over $300 in the gift shop, much to the delight of Hollywood Heritage, the preservationist organization that oversees the structure.

Then it was back on the road to an area centered at Sunset and Gower disparagingly known as “Poverty Row.” It was here that many of the first fly-by-night producers settled, including Western makers like Trem Carr, who later founded Monogram Pictures, which was once the owner of a film ranch in Placerita Canyon. Poverty Row, also known as “Gower Gulch,” was for years the home of the B-Western, populated throughout by cinema cowboys looking for work.

Heading east, we passed the site of the original Fox studios, where Tom Mix made most of his films, and then on to East Hollywood, by the site of Triangle’s old lot, where Hart did some “shoot-‘em-ups” back in the day. Around the corner we drove past Prospect Studios, another of Bill’s cinematic homes, which is still going strong 100 years after its founding. We jogged a bit to the south to pass by Monogram’s longtime home, which is now owned by the Church of Scientology. Then we meandered the bus through a couple of congested residential streets so we could pass by a building that was once called the William S. Hart Studios about a century ago.

We continued to the area of Edendale, the home of Mack Sennett Studios, where Charlie Chaplin made his first 35 films, and where the frenetic Keystone Cops once left chaos in their wake. This was previously the site of Bison Studios, where producer Tom Ince (Hart’s discoverer) first created many of the motifs of the cinematic Western as we know it today.

We headed north towards the Autry Museum, where we took a brief bathroom break, but not before passing the bank parking lot near Griffith Park where Tom Mix’s horse Old Blue is buried. Then it was back up the 5, back to Newhallywood, to the place where Bill Hart retired after making all those genre-creating Westerns during the 1910s and 20s.

If all of our guests had as much fun taking the tour as Kimi and I (with some help from our buddy, and *Hart of the Matter* publisher, Bill West) had giving it, then a rip-roarin’ time was had by all. We hope to make it a regular part of our Cowboy Festival plans, and who knows, we might offer it one day as a way for our *Hart of the Matter* friends to ride along together talkin’ cowboys, Westerns, and all things William Surrey Hart.

See you down the road, pardners!