

TWO-GUN BILL

The Story of William S. Hart

by KATHERINE H. CHILD

William S. Hart not only got that chance to make Western motion pictures, he made the best of it. In spite of their early popularity, Western films were, as Hart had seen, exercises in mediocrity. When Hart came to California in 1914, he brought with him a fresh approach to Western film making. He added authentic costumes and locales to a heretofore popular, highly idealized image of the West to create a truly original style for his films. Much as the work of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell has come to be emblematic of the West in the art world, so does the work of William S. Hart symbolize the West on film. Though he was not the first Western actor/film maker nor the last, he was surely one of the most important, achieving both commercial success and artistic recognition for his films.

William Surrey Hart was born in Newburgh, New York, sometime between 1862 and 1865. There is some controversy about the exact year of Hart's birth. During his later career he gave his year of birth as anywhere between 1870 and 1876, but his death record and his civil service record both indicate that he was born in 1864. Hart was the eldest of eight children born to Nicholas and Roseanne (McCauley) Hart. Two brothers died shortly after birth and another, Nicholas, Jr., died as a small child. The other four children were girls, Frances, Nettie, Lotta, and Hart's lifelong companion, Mary Ellen.

Hart's parents were both of European descent. Nicholas was raised in England and emigrated to the United States as a young man, and Rose was born in Ireland and raised in Newburgh, where she and Nicholas met. A miller by trade, Nicholas traveled from town to town in the midwest setting up millsites for others. He was always in search of the perfect site for his own mill where he could not only build his fortune, but could at last make a home for his family. The uncertain nature of his work, along with his quick temper, made the family's existence a precarious one. Memories of childhood poverty were never to leave Hart.

Nevertheless, in his autobiography,

"While playing in Cleveland [in 1913], I attended a picture show. I saw a Western picture. It was awful! I talked with the manager of the theater and he told me it was one of the best Westerns he had ever had. None of the impossibilities or libels on the West meant anything to him—it was drawing the crowds.... I was so sure that I had made a big discovery that I was frightened that some one would read my mind and find it out.

Here were reproductions of the Old West being seriously presented to the public—in almost a burlesque manner—and they were successful. It made me tremble to think of it. I was an actor and I knew the West.... The opportunity that I had been waiting for years to come was knocking at my door.... Rise or fall, sink or swim, I had to bend every endeavor to get a chance to make Western motion pictures."

William S. Hart (My Life East and West, 1929)

My Life East and West, Hart seems to look back on this period of his life as a great adventure. Many times the family's only neighbors were Indians. Nicholas worked with Indians whose children were often Bill's playmates; he learned to speak the Sioux language from these children, although he was by no means fluent. He also gained a respect for Indians and their culture that he never lost.

But times were hard, and his father's employment was always uncertain. When Bill was a small child, Nicholas began slowly losing his eyesight, making it increasingly difficult for him to find work. A risky operation saved his sight, but he was separated from the family for an extended period. In turn, Rose succumbed to a series of ailments that necessitated her return to New York on several occasions. Life in remote settlements was not easy on her, and several difficult childbirths with no one but an Indian midwife to attend to her had taken their toll.

Shortly after Nicholas, Jr., was born,

Mrs. Hart left Bill with her husband in Minnesota and returned East for medical care with the girls and the baby. Nicholas worked long hours and Bill was often left with little or no supervision. He enjoyed very little success in school—he much preferred to spend his time riding horses or fishing. He worked briefly with local farmers, but always returned home discouraged.

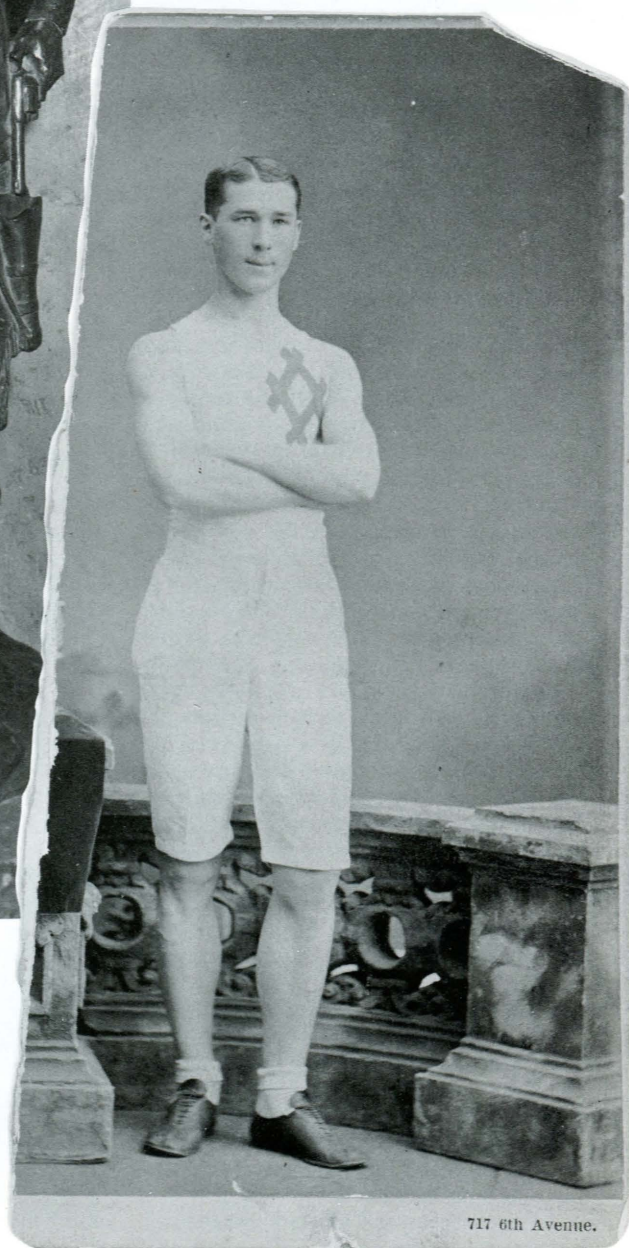
Nicholas had heard about the swift streams of the Dakotas from Indian friends, so he and Bill traveled to Kansas and the Dakota Territory in 1875 search of the perfect millsite. Nicholas's Indian contacts enabled them to travel deep into Sioux Country unmolested; while father and son spent a great deal of time with the Indians, their search for a millsite was unsuccessful and they returned home to Orinoco, Minnesota.

Christmas of 1875 was happy for the Harts. Rose had recovered, and the family was once again united. They were not, however, to settle in one place for long. Nicholas's former partner, a Sioux,

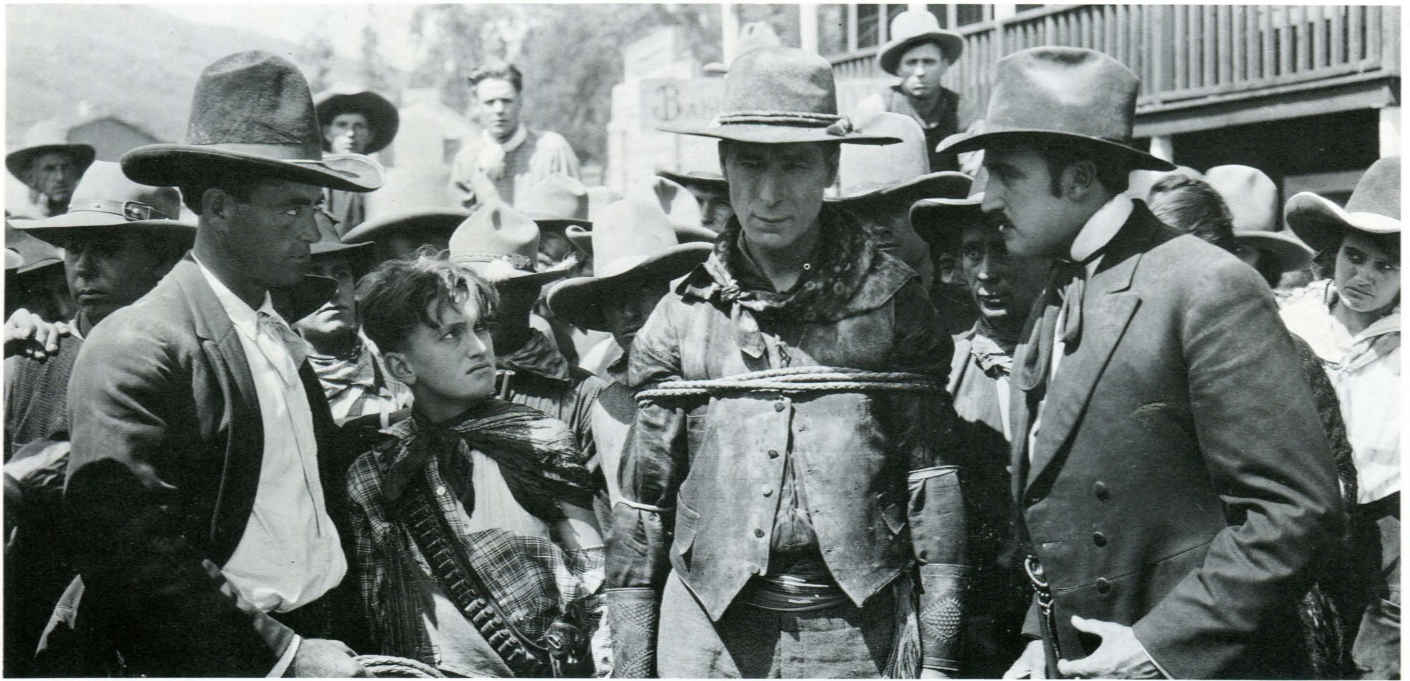


Western actor William S. Hart in his characteristic two-gun pose. A cast of this statue by C. C. Cristadoro was given to the Natural History Museum by Hart in 1936 and is now on display in the Lando Hall of California and Southwest History.

Acting was not Hart's only interest. As a young man he spent a great deal of his time at the Manhattan Athletic Club, making friends and winning his share of races. This photograph of the young Hart dates from 1879.



717 6th Avenue.



Above: In The Silent Man (1917), Hart plays "Silent" Budd Marr, who has abducted Betty Bryce (Vola Vale) to save her from a life of shame as a dance hall girl. In this scene, Marr has allowed her little brother to capture him in the hopes that the reward money can be used to help the friends who have suffered because of the aid they have given to him.

Right: Marr is tried for the kidnapping of Betty Bryce (far left). A last-minute intervention has proved Marr's innocence, but his enemies attempt to incite the crowd to hang him. A friendly officer has just saved the day by slipping a gun to Marr.

Below: In Three Word Brand (1921), Hart portrays three different characters. In this scene from the beginning of the movie, Ben Trego (Hart) is about to sacrifice his own life to ensure the safety of his twin sons. Hart also plays both of the sons as grown men later in the film.

wrote to Nicholas asking him to join him in a venture on the Zumbro River in Minnesota. Before the mill was completed, Rose again became ill. This time Bill went East with the rest of the family, while Nicholas headed for the Northwest to look for work. The family would never again call the frontier their home.

The Harts moved to New York City after Nicholas suffered a crippling accident while he was working on a farm in upstate New York. This, the death of Nicholas, Jr., and Mrs. Hart's continued illnesses precluded the realization of Nicholas's dream of a Western homestead. Bill helped support the family by working as a messenger for two major hotels. He spent his spare time at the Manhattan Athletic Club, competing in walking races with some of the best athletes of the time, and attending performances at New York's many theaters.

Family hardships, however, once again prevented him from pursuing these interests too intently. The city was not much kinder to the family than the frontier had been. By this time young Hart had become fairly successful as a racer and his connections with other athletes got him a job as an errand boy for a tailor. His father found work as an engineer, relieving some of the burden for supporting the family that had been placed on Bill.

Now Hart's desire to become an actor began to surface. Nicholas encouraged him, even suggesting that the best way for him to proceed was to travel to Europe, to "see the results of ages of proficiency in all arts." Hart worked his way to England on a steamer in 1880; once in England he entered and won a number of races and visited the theater.





Unfortunately, his primary means of support was the money he received for redeeming the cups he won in the races. He was homesick and hungry, and he returned home disappointed. He made one more trip to England and signed up for acting lessons, but never took advantage of them. He was even more homesick than on his first trip, and returned home almost immediately.

Back home he signed up for acting lessons with F. F. Markey, one of the finest actors and teachers of the day. In less than a year he secured his first acting job as a member of prominent actor/manager Daniel Bandmann's troupe performing in *Romeo and Juliet*. After his work with Bandmann, Hart spent the 1893 season touring with world-famous stage actress Madame Rhea.

Nicholas Hart died in June 1895, leaving Bill with sole responsibility for his mother and sisters. Bill struggled to support the family on his earnings as an actor, but often supplemented his income with other employment. In 1895 he won leading roles on tour with Helena Modjeska. On this tour, he determined anew that he was going to be a star. He formed his own company to do *The Man in the Iron Mask*, but in spite of good reviews, the financial risk was too great, and Hart returned to steady, salaried work as a supporting actor.

He signed on with Julia Arthur, eventually creating the role of Messala in *Ben Hur*. Later that year, while he was touring with the company of *The Christian*, his youngest sister Lotta came down with typhoid fever. Hart returned home and remained with her until her death a few days later. He returned to the company and finished out the season. After

Filmography of William S. Hart

- 1914
 His Hour of Manhood
 Jim Cameron's Wife
 The Bargain
 The Passing of Two-Gun Hicks
 In the Sage Brush Country
- 1915
 On the Night Stage
 The Scourge of the Desert
 Mr "Silent" Haskins
 The Sheriff's Streak of Yellow
 The Grudge
 The Roughneck
 The Taking of Luke McVane
 The Man from Nowhere
 "Bad Buck" of Santa Ynez
 The Darkening Trail
 The Conversion of Frosty Blake
 Tools of Providence
 Cash Parrish's Pal
 The Ruse
 Pinto Ben
 Keno Bates, Liar
 A Knight of the Trails
 The Disciple
 Between Men
- 1916
 Hell's Hinges
 The Aryan
 The Primal Lure
 The Apostle of Vengeance
 The Captive God
 The Dawn Maker
 The Return of Draw Egan
 The Patriot
 The Devil's Double
- 1917
 Truthful Tulliver
 The Gun Fighter
 The Square Deal Man
 The Desert Man
- Wolf Lowry
 The Cold Deck
 All Star Production of Patriotic
 Episodes for the Second Liberty
 Loan
 The Narrow Trail
 The Silent Man
- 1918
 Wolves of the Rail
 Blue Blazes Rawden
 The Tiger Man
 Selfish Yates
 Shark Monroe
 Riddle Gawne
 A Bullet for Berlin
 The Border Wireless
 Branding Broadway
- 1919
 Breed of Men
 The Poppy Girl's Husband
 The Money Corral
 Square Deal Sanderson
 Wagon Tracks
 John Petticoats
 Sand
- 1920
 The Toll Gate
 The Cradle of Courage
 The Testing Block
 O'Malley of the Mounted
- 1921
 The Whistle
 White Oak
 Travelin' On
 Three Word Brand
- 1923
 Wild Bill Hickock
- 1924
 Singer Jim McKee
- 1925
 Tumbleweeds



Hart and his crew setting up for the land rush scene in *Tumbleweeds* (1925) his last and one of his best films. Setups like this enabled Hart to get some truly unique shots for a scene that was imitated in many later films.

VISITING THE HART RANCH

This year the Natural History Museum is proud to announce the joint operation of the William S. Hart Park Museum with the County Parks and Recreation Department. Free half-hour tours of Hart's home are offered Wednesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. from June 15 through October 1; from October 1 to June 15 tours are offered from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Wednesday through Friday, and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday. Many of Hart's Westerns were shot on and around the 265-acre ranch, which Hart named La Loma de los Vientos, the hill of the winds. The house itself contains Hart's collection of artworks by such Western artists as Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, his extensive collections of weapons and Native American textiles, and his personal memorabilia. The Hart Ranch is located in Newhall, at 24151 Newhall Avenue (805/259-0855) and can be reached from the Antelope Valley Freeway (Highway 14), take the San Fernando Road exit and follow the signs.

TUMBLEWEEDS

On Saturday and Sunday, January 9 and 10, 1988, the Natural History Museum will be showing *Tumbleweeds*, William S. Hart's finest and final film. Hart directed and starred in this silent opus, which tells the story of the Cherokee Strip landrush. This 1939 reissue of the 1925 film features a prologue by Hart and added music and sound effects. The film is free and will be shown in the museum's Jean Delacour Auditorium at 2 p.m.

his stint with Arthur, good parts became harder and harder to find, and he supplemented his income by working as a yard detective for the railroads.

Finally, in 1905, he was cast in the role that served to ignite his career: "Cash" Hawkins in *The Squaw Man*. He took advantage of the play's Western theme and his own knowledge of the West to make the character his own. The play was a big hit and ran until 1907. Hart was able to buy a house for his sister and mother in Westport, Connecticut. In 1907 he took over the title role in *The Virginian*, solidifying his image as a Western star. Rose died in 1909, but by this time Bill was too involved in his career to return home to be with her in her final days. He felt guilty about it for the rest of his life.

After his success in *The Squaw Man* and *The Virginian*, more Western roles followed. While touring with the company of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* in 1914, Hart decided to take a chance coming to California to make films. At that time motion pictures were still something of a novelty, and while the industry was still in its infancy, Western films were already flooding the market, and their popularity was dwindling.

Nevertheless, Hart called the New York Motion Picture Company and was put in touch with producer Thomas Ince, who was a friend of his and had once been his roommate. Ince tried to dissuade him

from his determination to make Westerns, but Hart was insistent, and Ince finally offered Hart a job as an actor so that he could become accustomed to working in front of a camera. Hart was not happy with the two movies completed under this agreement, and when Ince asked him to do a third feature, Hart protested. Ince was not keeping his promise; Hart insisted on making his own films.

Ince finally allowed Hart to collaborate with C. Gardner Sullivan on the screenplay for *The Bargain*, which was directed by Reginald Barker. As soon as *The Bargain* (1914) was completed Hart, Sullivan, and Barker began work on a second film, *On the Night Stage* (1915). Hart was pleased with his first two Westerns, but a contract as an actor was not forthcoming from Ince. He did offer Hart a contract as a director, but Hart declined and returned to New York to look for work on the stage.

Hart was at one of the low points in his career. Not only did he feel that his trip West had been a failure, he was unable to find stage work upon his return to the East. He had nearly given up when his luck changed. Ince telegraphed him an offer of \$125 per week as a star, directing his own pictures. Hart, his sister Mary Ellen, and their beloved dog Mack packed up and were off to California, tourist class. William S. Hart was finally on his way.

The Bargain had turned out to be a tremendous success. Ince sensed that Hart was destined for stardom and held up the release of *On the Night Stage* in order to capitalize on that stardom. Hart was not aware of this, nor was he aware of his possible earning power; he was just happy to be making real Western films. Although he did not begin to realize that he was being exploited until later, it is clear that Ince took advantage of their friendship from the very beginning.

In many ways, however, Hart was fortunate to work with Ince. His studio "Inceville" had wonderful facilities for making Westerns, and Ince did allow Hart to make Western pictures in his own way. Hart followed his first two films with one success after another, becoming one of the top actors of his time as well as one of Hollywood's most successful directors.

In 1915 Ince joined with Mack Sennett, Harry Aitken, and D. W. Griffith to form Triangle Film Corporation and Hart

Settlers nervously await the signal to begin the rush for land on Oklahoma's Cherokee Strip. The land rush sequence in *Tumbleweeds* is considered to be one of the best of its kind.



went with him. Triangle imported new stars at bigger salaries; for example, Douglas Fairbanks received \$2,000 per week. Negotiations with the company only doubled Hart's salary and added a \$50 bonus; one year later Hart's salary was raised to \$1,000 per week. It began to be obvious even to Hart that Ince was taking advantage of their friendship.

In 1917 Ince, Sennett, Griffith, Fairbanks, Hart, and others left Triangle to join Adolph Zukor at Famous Players-Lasky (later Paramount). Zukor offered Hart \$150,000 per picture, guaranteed, plus a fifty-fifty split of 35 percent of the profits with Ince. Hart was finally receiving what he deserved for his films, even though he was forced to share the profits with Ince, who was involved in the films in name only. Hart and Ince argued constantly once shooting on the first picture began. The resentment that had been building for years finally broke the friendship, culminating in Hart's successful lawsuit against Ince in 1920.

In 1919 Hart was approached by Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith to join them in forming United Artists. Hart, now feeling a loyalty to Zukor, choose to accept a second contract with Paramount for nine pictures at \$200,000 each guaranteed. He was also looking for financial security, and he did not wish to take on the burden of running a new company. He was also beginning to think

about settling down and raising a family.

Hart is rumored to have fallen in love with most of his leading ladies; it is known that he proposed to many of them. Winifred Westover, his co-star in *John Petticoats*, accepted him, and they were married on December 7, 1921. Unfortunately, after a short and unhappy interlude they separated in May 1922. Their son, William, Jr., was born September 6, 1922, but public hopes that the child would bring the couple back together were in vain. Hart provided a generous financial settlement for Winifred and his son soon after the couple separated. They were divorced in 1927.

At the same time, Hart's films were beginning to show some signs of decline: they were becoming increasingly predictable, repetitive, and overly sentimental. Hart refused to speed up his films by adding action sequences as other stars such as Tom Mix were doing. Paramount was concerned that exhibitors were losing interest in Hart's films and requested that Hart give them control over the production of his films. He refused, and rather than submit to the direction of others, Hart left Paramount, intending to make his own films.

But his departure from Paramount effectively ended his film career. In 1925 his final film *Tumbleweeds* was released through United Artists. Although it is now considered to be one of his best films, United Artists thought at the time

that it was too long and sought to cut the film. Hart blocked this action, and United Artists countered by deliberately mishandling the distribution of the film, ruining any chance for a successful run. Hart filed a lawsuit against United Artists and won, but the damage had already been done. Hart never made another film, although he did participate in a few small film-making ventures.

In 1926 he commissioned Los Angeles architect Arthur Kelly to design and build a Spanish colonial-style home on a working ranch in Newhall, California, that he had leased since 1918. His sister Mary Ellen lived there with him until her death in 1944. Hart himself died in 1946. He left the bulk of his estate to the County of Los Angeles with the stipulation that his home and the grounds of the ranch were to be used as a public park and museum. The home stands today not only as a tribute to William S. Hart, but also as a true museum. Hart's personal effects and movie paraphernalia are shown along with his marvelous collection of Western art and artifacts. An educational and thoroughly entertaining visit to the William S. Hart Ranch is what Hart had in mind when he gave the property to the County in order to give back to the people some of what they had given to him.

Katherine Child is Collections Manager of the William S. Hart Park Museum.