



Figure 1. Hollywood did not invent extra-fancy gun gear. These items were used by Jack Sinclair as director of the Dodge City Cowboy Band. They were overlaid and jeweled by a jeweler in Pueblo, Colorado, in the 1890s. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.)

## Fanciful and Real: Hollywood Cowboy Guns

James H. Nottage

The cowboy has been a part of American life, culture and myth now for the better part of a century and a quarter. And the dress and equipment of the cowboy have been a part of the real and perceived Western landscape just as long. There has been something respectable and exciting about collecting the weapons of the *working* cowboy; fine old Winchester rifles, Colt revolvers, and other artifacts of the trail drive era have been avidly studied and gathered by both private collectors and museums. In fact, the romance of the herder and the frontier have drawn those who have dreamed of the West from the beginning.

The frontier of old has been romanticized since the 1860s. And with the worldwide success of William F. Cody's Wild West Show starting in 1883 and the performances of those who copied him, the cowboy has been made a national hero. When they could afford to, working cowboys and showmen enjoyed and used the finest weapons available to them. Factory-engraved Colt revolvers with ivory or pearl grips were not uncommon. They were a mark of status and good taste. Numerous examples could be cited in the writings of Charlie Russell, in the equipment used by Teddy Roosevelt, and in examples of weapons used by Buffalo Bill himself, his protégé Johnnie Baker, and others.

Of course, it was the movies that in sometimes the most fantastic expressions of make-believe brought cowboys to virtually every home in America and to audiences abroad. Readers of this journal, depending on their age, often grew up following the likes of Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Tim McCoy, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Matt Dillon, and many others. These fictional heroes provided hours of entertainment, and many of the fans followed in their footsteps, pursuing make-believe adventures armed with cap guns and dressed in appropriate cowboy outfits.

Fans who also happened to be interested in the history and function of real guns have long delighted to find fault with the historical inaccuracies in Western films and television programs, and many of them almost subconsciously have counted the number of rounds being fired from six-shooters—the sometimes unending volleys, the steady streams of lead which today would send supporters of Handgun Control, Inc., scrambling to Congress in the belief that the capacity of the cowboy's revolver was well beyond reason.

The truth is that the history of film itself is of great



interest, and the collecting of firearms related to film and television productions can be an exciting and rewarding endeavor. The subject itself is large. The present paper will focus on two examples of movie cowboy revolvers and address some factors in collecting such weapons.

Two exceptional movie six-guns are among the featured Hollywood weapons in the collection of the Autry Museum of Western Heritage. They were used by two of the great movie heroes of the silent and early sound eras. In discussing them, this paper is also meant to introduce the reader to a non-factory engraver of potential interest.

By 1915, a former soldier, law officer, and 101 Wild West performer had become one of the top leading men in Hollywood. Tom Mix was his name, and more than one generation of fans would avidly follow his exploits through movies and radio. For 5 months in 1915, Mix lived in Las Vegas, New Mexico. He had been invited to attend the 1st Cowboy Rodeo Celebration there. The rustic scenery attracted him, and he moved *into* the old Lubin Film Company facilities, which first opened in Las Vegas in 1912. With ties to the Selig film empire, Mix's company took over the town and produced 39,000 feet of film during the 1915 season. At one point, Mix visited Albuquerque, driving a favored but loud car and was arrested for "making as much noise as a machine gun platoon in action."

On November 24, 1915, a special Colt single-action army revolver, serial number 331793, caliber .32-20 with 7½-inch barrel, silver plated with carved ox-head motif on both panels of the pearl grips and with style 2 engraving was shipped by the manufacturer. The name Tom Mix was



Figure 2. Tom Mix Colt SAA. Non-factory engraving has been added to the last 2 inches of the barrel, the hammer, and elsewhere. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)



Figure 3. Colt SAA engraved by Cuno Helfricht as a gift for film star Tom Mix. The grips, made by Edward H. Bohlin, were added later with a gold Mix signature to match the one on his Bohlin saddle. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)



Figure 4. In 1924, Del Jones had this Colt SAA custom inlaid and engraved, fitted with enameled ivory and silver and gold-mounted grips, and equipped with a tooled leather case and a matching holster by Edward H. Bohlin. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)



Figure 5. Before 1927, Ed Bohlin marked his work with a small set of alphabetical stamps. This example is the Colt SAA embellished for film star Buck Jones. Between 1927 and 1980, Bohlin products were marked with a stamp reading "Bohlinmade, Hollywood, Calif." (Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.)



Figure 6. Buck Jones first starred in the Miller Brothers 101 Wild West show. By 1917 he was doing stunt work in Hollywood. He soon became a major star in his own right. An avid hunter, he collected guns and appreciated finely engraved Colt, Winchester, and Marlin firearms. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.)

engraved on the barrel, and it was sent from Hartford, Connecticut, to one Ludwig William Ilfeld, address unavailable. As it turns out, Ilfeld was the Las Vegas merchant who organized the local rodeo and profited directly as a participant in Mix's Las Vegas film venture.

Mix, as it turns out, was an avid collector, and his unheard-of salary of up to \$10,000 per week allowed him to indulge in his collections and other luxuries. His Hollywood home was filled with guns, art, horse gear, and mementoes of his career. The Ilfeld gift appears in one interior shot of the Mix home in the 1920s. It was among his prized possessions, and in time he modified the gift. An unknown engraver added compatible floral engraving to cover all remaining surfaces of the gun. The remainder of the barrel, the face of the cylinder, the head of the ejector rod, the hammer, and other components were engraved, but awkwardly so compared to the original work of Cuno Helfricht. In addition, "Tom Mix" was engraved on the back strap and "Texas Ranger" was engraved on the butt. Finally, in about 1930, engraved sterling silver grips with the Mix brand and signature in gold were added. After Mix's death in an automobile wreck in 1940, the gun was acquired by a friend. In 1993 it was donated to the Autry Museum by that friend's widow.

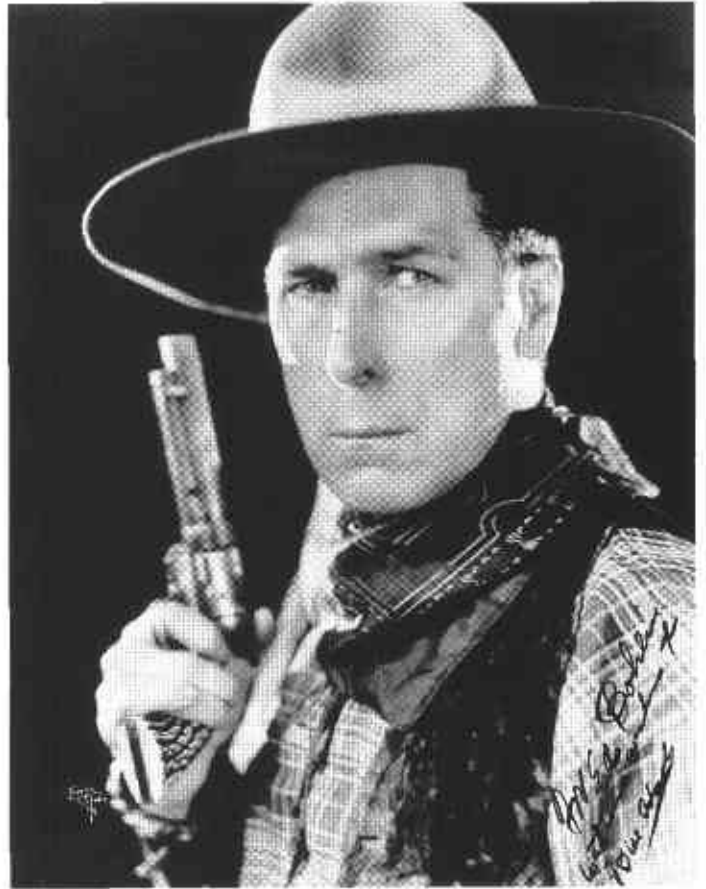


Figure 7. Shakespearian actor and later film star William S. Hart prided himself on dressing to reflect the kinds of Montana cowboys painted by Charlie Russell. Using the style of the working wrangler, much of Hart's film equipment had silver embellishments. His firearms were plain factory examples, usually the Colt SAA or large-frame Colt double-actions. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.)

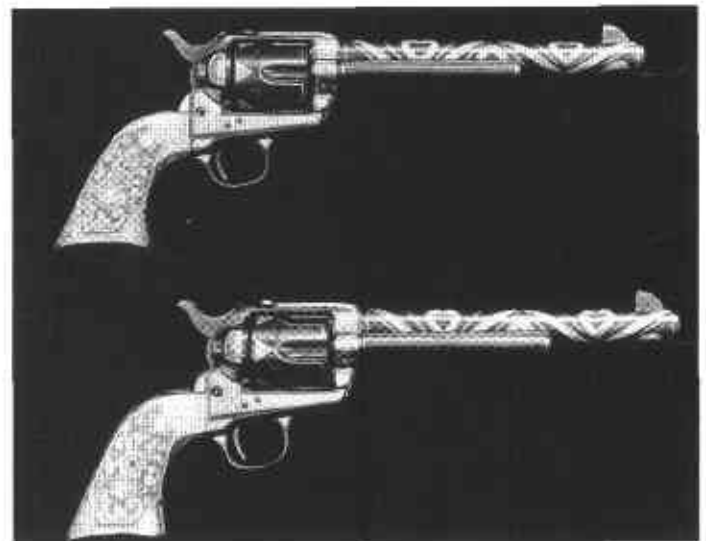


Figure 8. Edward Bohlin proudly presented William S. Hart with a matched pair of Colt SAA revolvers. Such strategic gifts helped to generate orders from those who admired his work in the hands of stars. The grips are similar to those on the Buck Jones gun—ivory-enameled with color background and set into engraved silver.



Figure 9. Hollywood did not invent the outlandishly large cowboy hats, decorated chaps, or other such equipment. Style has always attracted the cowboy. This individual is typical of Wyoming cowboys in about 1920. His name was Edward H. Bohlin, and he did design some of the most outlandish guns and gear of the movie cowboys. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.)

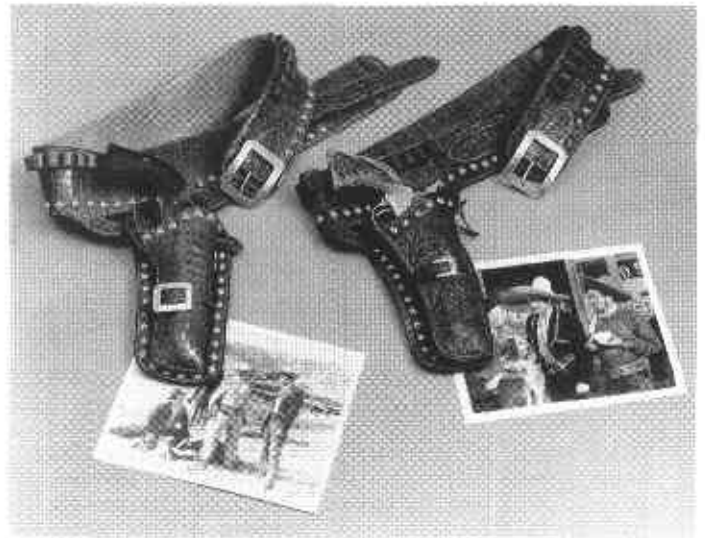


Figure 11. The Colt Bisley on the left with alligator skin Bohlin holster set was used by Jack Holt in low-budget Westerns during the 1930s. The Bohlin rig and Colt SAA on the right was carried by Leo Carillo in his role as Pancho in the Cisco Kid films and television series during the 1940s and 1950s. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)

It was not unusual for Hollywood cowboys to have fine factory-engraved guns and guns engraved by non-factory artists. Hopalong Cassidy, played by William Boyd, carried two ivory-gripped and Helfricht-engraved single-actions, currently preserved at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming. Tex Ritter had a Cole Agee-engraved single-action army (SAA), while Gene Autry had both a Helfricht-engraved SAA and one engraved, overlaid in gold and gold-plated by Kuhl of San Francisco. It was also not unusual for the Hollywood guns to be customized with new finishes, replacement grips, and other features. The fact is that they usually received heavy and abusive use and frequently show the signs of having been dropped.

When Tom Mix decided to replace the grips on his Colt, he naturally turned to an old friend. Edward H. Bohlin had immigrated from Sweden as a young teen and learned to cowboy in Montana. Studying leather and silver work, he opened his first saddle shop in Cody, Wyoming, in 1920. After a couple of seasons serving the needs of working cowboys, he joined a wild West show in Billings, Montana, eventually ending up in Los Angeles in 1922, performing with the troupe as a trick roper and rider. As the story goes, someone from the audience at the Pantages theater called out and asked him how much he wanted for his fine tooled boots and coat. The buyer paid what seemed to be a huge price, and shortly thereafter Bohlin opened his first shop in Hollywood. The man who bought his boots and coat was Tom Mix!

Ed Bohlin began by manufacturing silver-mounted spurs and bits and by adding silver mountings to saddles and other horse gear. He ultimately gained fame as the creator of the great silver parade saddles so familiar to viewers of the



Figure 10. This cased Colt Bisley with silver inlay and engraving and gold-overlaid silver grips is the one Ed Bohlin made for his personal use in the 1940s. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)

Figure 12. During the 1920s and 1940s, rodeo and 101 Wild West show star Ken Maynard carried a variety of Colt SAAs. This set with Bohlin gold and silver grips with matching double holster rig was used in his short-lived circus/wild West show in the 1930s. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)

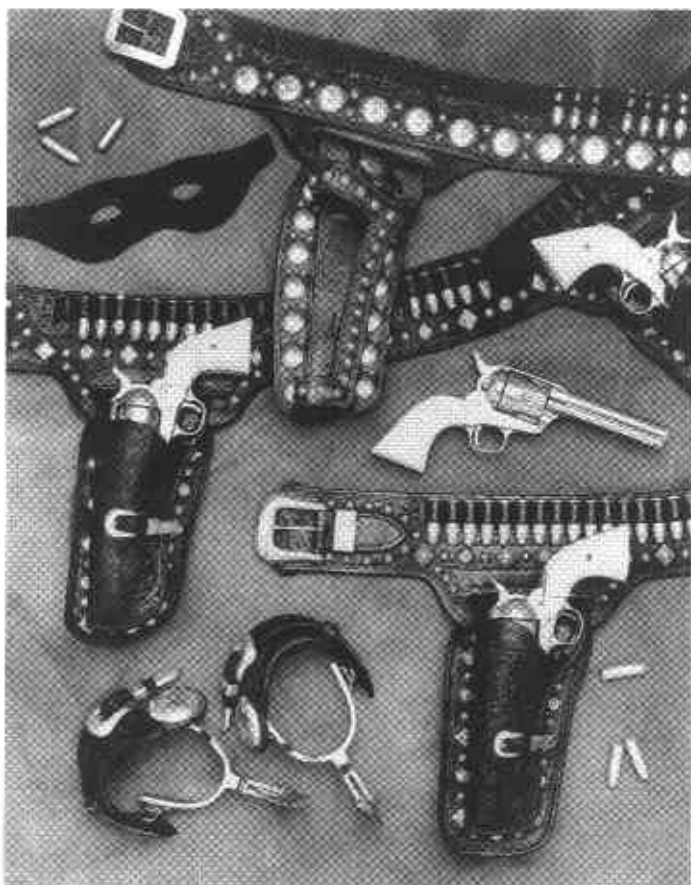
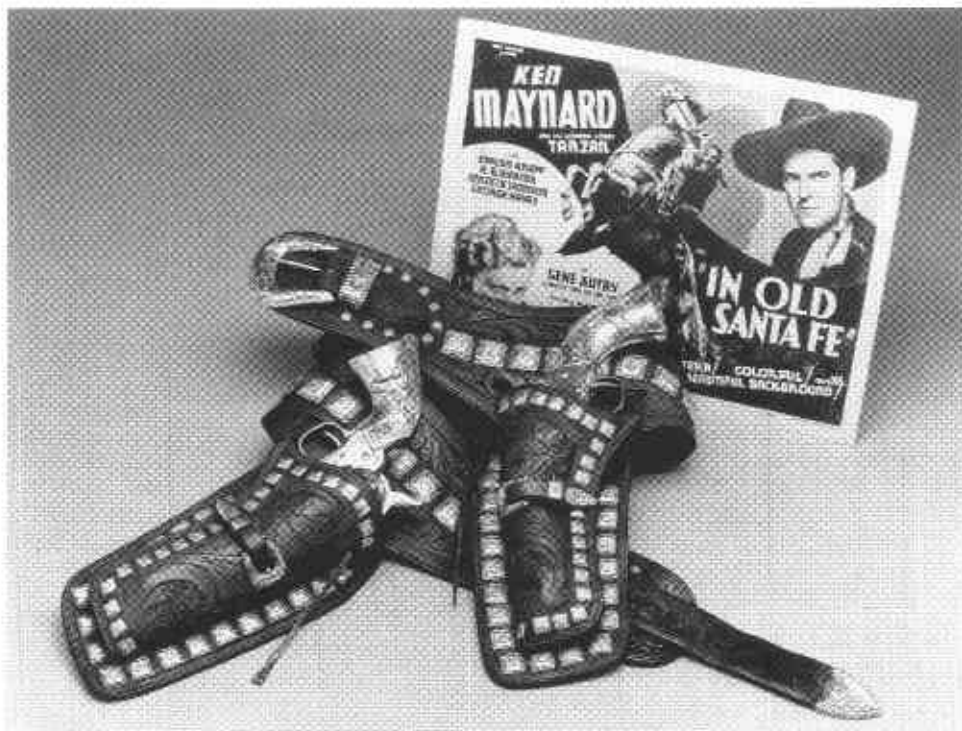


Figure 13. The term "Hi-Yo Silver!" gained extra meaning when proclaimed by Clayton Moore as the Lone Ranger. His horse gear, spurs, and holsters were silver-mounted by Edward H. Bohlin. The top rig dates to the 1930s and was used in public appearances by the radio version of the Ranger. The two other rigs were used by Clayton Moore and date from 1949 through the early 1960s. (Autry Museum of Western Heritage Collection, Los Angeles.)



Figure 14. William Boyd, as Hopalong Cassidy, thrilled audiences from the 1930s into the 1950s. His gear was purely Hollywood. The silver-plated, factory-engraved Colt single-actions were factory-engraved by Cuno Helfrich—fancy, yes, but typical of the best traditions of Colt engraving, not the products of Hollywood.

Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena. His early years in Hollywood, however, were lean, and he often moved toward bankruptcy. One Hollywood figure went so far as to lend money to Bohlin and frequently purchased saddles, spurs, and other gear for his own outfit. That man was Buck Jones, who starred in the 101 Wild West Show and moved to Hollywood in about 1917 to do stunt work for Mix and others. By the early 1920s, Jones was major star. With new-found wealth, he cut quite a figure.

Buck Jones, like the other Hollywood stars, did not invent the outlandish hats, chaps, vests, gunbelts, and other accessories that cowboy purists occasionally snicker at. Such gear was ordered directly out of mail-order catalogs. In Jones' case, his first saddle came from the Visalia catalog, his chaps from the Hamley catalog, and his boots and hats from makers in Missouri and Kansas. He was using and wearing the most stylish gear also being used by rodeo performers and working cowboys throughout the country.

For Christmas 1924, Del Jones ordered a special gift for her husband Buck. It was a Colt SAA with inlaid and engraved silver by Ed Bohlin. The grips were silver-mounted inlaid with enameled ivory with gold name plates for "Del" on one side and "Buck" on the other. A tooled leather case held the gift, and for two decades the outfit was featured in Bohlin's catalogs. Jones used the gun in numerous films, and damage to the butt suggests rough usage at that. Jones' widow made the gun and case available to the Autry Museum in the early 1990s.

Early in his career, Bohlin realized that strategic gifts could do much to earn business for his shop. Revolvers fitted out in the manner of the Buck Jones SAA were made for film veteran William S. Hart and many others. In total, Bohlin probably did not create more than 30 or 40 examples of his silver-inlaid single-actions. Similar treatments were given to double-action revolvers by both Colt and Smith and Wesson. All examples of such work should be considered quite rare. Unfortunately, all of Bohlin's earliest records have been destroyed. Unless a gun of this type has impeccable provenance tying it to a Hollywood personality, care should be exercised. Many of the guns were sold to wealthy equestrians, especially in California, in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the odds are good that when found, such firearms may indeed have Hollywood ties. Research and provenance are the key!

Bohlin did outfit many hundreds of firearms, especially single-action Colts, with sterling silver grips such as the examples on the Tom Mix revolver. Frequently, these grips are embellished with gold steer heads, ranch brands, names,

and initials. At the same time, such firearms are also frequently found resting in the fine silver-mounted gun rigs that Bohlin also made famous.

For collectors, it is still possible to collect firearms used in movies and on television by important stars. Many actors were collectors, including Gary Cooper, Allan Ladd, and others. Care should be exercised, however. Just because a gun was in a star's collection does not mean that it was used on film. There must be additional corroborating evidence, including stills and posters that show the gun in use. Documents from the descendants and widows of stars, from film property masters, producers, directors, and others can be quite important as well. Over the years many stars have given guns to celebrity fund-raising auctions. Sometimes these guns become available. However, the truth is that most of the stars did not own or possess the guns they used on film. The bulk of firearms were rented from specialty companies.

Most of the significant movie guns of such stars as John Wayne, Gene Autry, Tom Mix, Buck Jones, and others are preserved in the collections of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles, and in other smaller collections.

#### SELECTED REFERENCES

Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles, Collection Accession Records, Edward H. Bohlin Company Records, Lillian Bohlin Pinkerton Collection.

Birchard, Robert S., *King Cowboy: Tom Mix and the Movies*. Burbank, CA: Riverwood Press, 1993.

Cochran, Keith, *Colt Peacemaker Encyclopedia, volumes I and II*. Rapid City, SD: Cochran Publishing Company, 1989, 1991. (Provides useful information on movie Colts, especially sections on rental companies.)

Nicholas, John H., *Tom Mix: Riding Up to Glory*. Oklahoma City: Persimmon Hill, 1980.

Nottage, James H., *Saddlemaker to the Stars: The Leather and Silver Art of Edward H. Bohlin*. Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Association with the University of Washington Press, 1996.

Rainey, Buck, *The Life and Films of Buck Jones: The Sound Era*. Waynesville, NC, 1991.

Wilson, R. L., *The Book of Colt Engraving*. North Hollywood, CA: Beinfeld Publications, 1982.

Wilson, R. L., *The Peacemakers: Arms and Adventure in the American West, Chapter XI*. New York: Random House, 1992.