



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

William Witney

Born: May 5, 1915 – Died: March 17, 2002



Drawing by Dave Holland

An interviewer once asked director William Nuelsen Witney the secret to making good Westerns. "It's really very simple," he said. "Make sure you have good headlights on your car." At the look of puzzlement on the interviewer's face, Witney explained (with that ever-present twinkle in his eye), "because you go to work in the dark and you come home in the dark." He knew what he was talking about. This man, who would become known for his fast-paced and action-packed serials and features, started making movies in the '30s. "Back then," Witney once said, "we'd start in the morning before the sun came up, shooting with flares."

Over the years, Witney built a legacy that continues to this day. Although his hey-day in motion pictures was in the '30s, '40s and '50s, in television from the mid-'50s through the '60s and his last film was in 1982, film-makers are still being influenced by him, more than a quarter of a century later. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas have admitted that Saturday afternoon serials inspired the *Indiana Jones* movies. Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Jackie Brown*) calls William Witney a "forgotten master." Born in Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1915, Witney began in the picture business as a messenger boy for Mascot Pictures, which shot its interiors on the Mack Sennett lot, later home to Republic Pictures. He mimeo'd scripts, helped gather props, did script continuity on the set and even learned editing. The first serial he helped cut was *The Miracle Rider* with Tom Mix.

He was holding script on location in Utah in 1937 when the director was fired and Witney was told to take over for one day. "I was the only one who knew the script," he later explained. He was 21. A replacement never showed up so that "one day" turned into a nearly 40-year career during which he directed or co-directed 24 serials, 64 features and hundreds of episodes for such diverse television series as *Lassie*, *Sky King*, *Zorro*, *Mike Hammer*, *M Squad*, *Wagon Train*, *Bonanza*, *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *Laramie*, *The Virginian*, *Alfred Hitchcock*, *Daniel Boone*, *The Wild Wild West* and *High Chaparral*. The serial titles included such now classics as *The Lone Ranger*, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, *The Perils of Nyoka*, three *Dick Tracys* and *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, (a Steven Spielberg favorite). Cowboy star Rex Allen, a 1983 Golden Boot honoree, called Witney "my favorite director. He got more on the screen for a dollar than any director I've ever known." Stunt man Loren Janes, a 2001 Golden Boot recipient, has said that "the reason he could shoot so fast and get a 100 set-ups a day (on the serials), the man was prepared and he knew what he was doing. And he wouldn't pick a spot that would be horrible for a crew to get to. And he had a sensitivity that could get a quietness and special something out of the actors."



On the set, Witney always did it his way. He would shout "Come on!" instead of "Action!" to bring a group of horsemen galloping toward camera. And he never liked the way movie fights were shot. In the early days, the stuntmen staged the fights. Three or four "would get into it," Witney once said, "and by the time three or four minutes had passed, they were out of breath and scattered all over the set, just staggering around, waiting for someone to hit them." Then one day, he visited a friend on the Warner's lot and watched Busby Berkeley doing one of his kaleidoscopic dance numbers. "He lined up the girls for one leg kick," he said.

"One kick and he got it perfect. Then he rehearsed another little movement and shot that one and then some close-ups to go between those shots." That's when Witney began shooting his fights in pieces, moving in for close-ups of the leads, then back to the stuntmen for the next piece. "The stunt people loved it," he said. "A fall over a table could be done with precision, without the chance of being off balance when they hit the table. It made their work easier."

Witney once recalled that they averaged three to five weeks to shoot the 12 to 15 episodes of a serial (more screen time than ***Gone With The Wind***). To do that, most serials had two directors so "you could shoot on a Monday, let's say, then the other guy shot Tuesday and you'd spend that day preparing for your turn as director on Wednesday."

What was the appeal of Westerns for Witney? "I love horses for one thing," he said. "And I love the outdoors. I always felt like John Ford did. If it rained, I was ready to shoot in the rain. If it was windy, that made a Western picture for me. I was happy to work in the wind and the rain." Quentin Tarantino told the New York Times in 2000 that he discovered Witney during a year-and-a-half period of gorging himself on film history. He came across 1958's ***Bonnie Parker Story*** and "It was like, whoa, who made this?" Tarantino said. "I have to see everything he ever did!" In so doing, the young film-maker realized that the Serial King was a true journeyman director. "When they stopped making serials," Tarantino said, "he moved over to Saturday morning cowboy pictures and did pretty much everything Roy Rogers shot between the late '40s and early '50s." When Republic Pictures closed, he went over to American International to direct, "all the while churning out TV shows," Tarantino said. "He ended with ***Darktown Strutters*** in 1975."

"I've found directors I like," Tarantino said, "but William Witney is ahead of them all. I think it's so cool that he began as the king of the cowboy serials and ended with a black exploitation film. That's a career, man." He showed Witney's ***Stranger At My Door*** to a "group of friends, all film people," Tarantino said, "and it just blew them away. I showed his ***Paratroop Command*** to Peter Bogdanovich and at one point, he goes, like, hey, wait a minute, what's happening? It was so realistic. You knew it was made by a guy who had been there. William Witney was in the Marines in World War II for something like five years. One of the things I got from his films is that the camera movements are so elegant. You have to have made movies for 30 years to be able to move the camera so unpretentiously. I've turned quite a few friends on to William Witney," Tarantino said, "so he lives through us, at least."

See also: <http://www.williamwitney.com/>

Museum of Western Film History
PO Box 111 Lone Pine, California 93545
760-876-9909

Website: www.museumofwesternfilmhistory.org

