



JOHN WAYNE IN CHISUM (1970)

WESTERN ICONS

Lest we forget

Why celebrate John Wayne's legacy? Because we can't afford not to. *By William Reynolds*

In director John Ford's seminal Western *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, the soon-to-be-retired Captain Nathan Brittles (John Wayne) sits horseback for one last review of his troops. It's a sentimental and inspiring moment—for the actor and his audience.

Young Lieutenant Pennell (Harry Carey Jr.) rides up to Brittles and presents him with a gift of appreciation from his troops—a silver watch. On the back of the watch, Capt. Brittles is urged by Pennell to read the engraved "sentiment." As a sign of the emotion of the moment, Wayne's Brittles, fights back tears, fumbles with his spectacles and finally reads aloud, "Lest we forget."

It would seem with cinematic moments like this burned into

our collective Western-obsessed psyches, we would not forget, and that the last thing we would need was another article about John Wayne and his contribution to our culture. (According to Carey, Jr., by the way, Nathan Brittles was "Wayne's favorite role.") More than 32 years after his death, Wayne ranked third in a 2009 poll listing America's favorite movie stars; he was also 1) the only deceased star on the list and 2) the only star to have appeared in the poll every year since it first began in 1994. But time has a way of wearing away at most everything—even the fame and relevance of our most beloved heroes.

Case in point: At a recent high-profile, Western collectable auction held in Denver, the personal items of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were put on the block. Iconic items such as the "preserved" (read: stuffed) horse Trigger and Pat Brady's beloved jeep, Nellybelle. Yet many young people who attended the event asked the same question, "Who's Roy Rogers?"

For Western-genre junkie like me, I never saw that one coming. So I feel compelled to tell succeeding generations of the importance of Western figures. They helped shape and create our view of the West—with their larger-than-life characters—during the halcyon days of last century's Western cinema.

For "civilian-types," who may never have sat horseback, John Wayne is the classic cowboy. In 1955, Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb wrote in the journal *Harpers* that: "Western history is brief and it is bizarre. It is brief because the time is so short and its material deficient. It is bizarre because of the nature for what it has ... Westerners who have developed a talent for taking something small and blowing it up giant size." This is certainly true of Wayne. He was by no means small to start with and has since been super-sized into a Western icon.

Since the early days of advertising, manufacturers have used the image of the cowboy to sell everything from vodka to

cars to aftershave lotions. In the early 1930s, during the "Golden Age of The Western," movie cowboys started selling clocks—wrist-watches, alarm clocks, and pocket watches—and they sold them by the millions. Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and the likes of Bill Boyd's Hopalong Cassidy told us all that these products were "swell." And we believed them—because they were cowboys. Cowboys had honor. They kept their word.

Roy Rogers sold Quaker Oats, Sky King sold Peter Pan peanut butter, and Red Ryder sold Langerdorf Bread. And of course there was the most successful cowboy pitchman of all time—the Marlboro Man.

And these strategies worked all over the world yet simultaneously distorted what it was to be a "real" cowboy—a person of competency and principles. But this sort of cowboy marketing made us receptive to a single individual, who did, in fact, have something to pitch. John Wayne reminded us about love of country, about America. He reminded us of what we had and were in danger of losing.

In some of his most memorable roles—as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach*; Tom Donniphon in the *Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*; Ethan Edwards in the *Searchers*; Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit*; J.B. Books in the *Shootist*; and, of course, as Nathan Brittles in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Wayne was able to connect with his audience like no other in cinema. He was

what he himself called, "a normal kind of fella." He was someone we all wanted to be or have as a friend. He was the epitome of cowboy.

In Russell Martin's 1983 classic, Sears-catalog-sized tome, *Cowboy: The Enduring Myth of the Wild West*, the late film critic Gene Siskel is quoted saying that Wayne was capable of inspiring "grown men to curl up in his arms

most cowboy, Wayne had also just starred in and directed the *Green Berets*, a contemporary war film.

In the *Cowboys*, Wayne's character, Wil Andersen, must hire a bunch of kids to deliver a herd of cattle. Wayne's character is eventually gunned down by Bruce Dern, but the kids pull through and deliver the cattle. "For Mr. Andersen," they pledge.

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and ask about the Old West, as if they were reliving the cowboy dreams of their youth." Wayne himself said of his roles, "I don't play heroes—just good guys. I'm not what you'd call a villain, either. But one thing I make sure of—the guys I play are believable human beings...Following my dad's advise, if a guy hits me with a vase, I'd hit him with a chair. That's the way we played it."

Wayne's Western portrayals provided an almost paternal backstop for the rest of us. If Duke was on the scene, everything would turn out all right. Good would out-survive evil, even if Wayne was killed in the process, like he was in the *Cowboys* (1972).

It's important to remember that just four years before the *Cowboys*, Wayne spoke out in favor of the Vietnam War. The world's fore-

The late film critic Pauline Kael dismissed the film for its "simplistic, sentimental, right-wing ideology." She couldn't see it as just a film about a cattle drive and an old man inspiring young people to dig a little deeper into themselves.

After the *Cowboys*, Wayne's visage as a patriotic, conservative Westerner had become inseparable from both his on- and off-screen persona. In 1972, conservative politics ("being a John Wayne") had become equated with cowboy ideals and values. It was an ongoing legacy that John Wayne quietly upheld for the rest of his life. His fans loved him for it—and continue to.

At the end of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, we witness Nathan Brittles literally ride into the sunset. Not to retire to his mid-western roots but rather to head further West—deeper into American mythology.

The West was, and is, a place of freedom and possibilities. It represents classic John Wayne values and helps to define and reassure America. Lest we forget.



Tall But True

During the 1969 filming of *True Grit*, John Wayne became so enraged at co-star Dennis Hopper that he chased "Dennis the Menace" around the Paramount film studio while brandishing a firearm. According to Hopper, he had to hide in the dressing room of cast mate Glen Campbell until Wayne calmed down. Hopper biographer Robert Sellers explains that Wayne felt the *Easy Rider* director's rampant drug use and outspoken stance against the war in Vietnam represented everything bad about America.

Quotes by the Duke

"I don't give jobs. I hire men." —George Washington McLintock in *McLintock* (1963)

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