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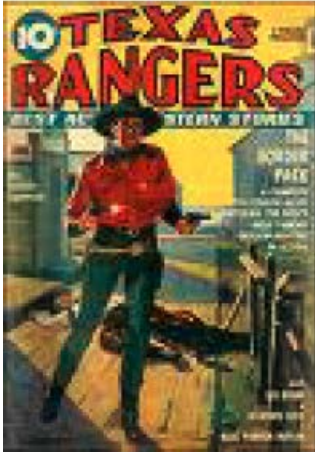
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The Pulp Cowboy

John Dinan



To the explosion, the Kid uttered a scream, whirled around, and the gun was jerked from his hand and flung across the room of the shack. He fell sideways, and lay there groaning and cursing.

If you saw the film, *The Third Man*, you remember it features Orson Welles as the bad guy and Joseph Cotton as his old pal. The friend turns out to be the author of a zillion pulp cowboy stories featuring the Arizona Kid, one of hundreds of cowboys who populated the pages of pulp magazines.



In the period of 1933-1946, over 2,000 western films were produced. More than one was created to satisfy a seemingly bottomless public appetite for tales of the mythic West, a place fashioned from the imagination of a legion of writers.

The neighborhood variety store was my home of the pulp cowboy. It was there that I first saw him glaring menacingly at me from the covers of *Dime Western*, *Western Story Magazine*, and *Star Western*. He rode fearlessly into a showdown to save the ranch, or he shot it out with one of the many evil characters who menaced an innocent settler. More often than not, he was aiming a brace of Colts in the reader's direction.

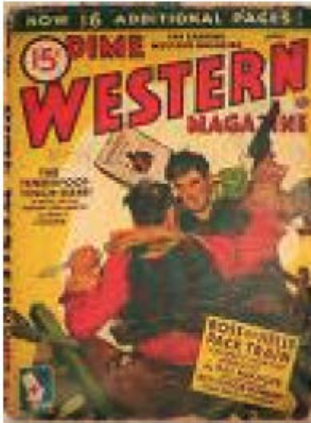
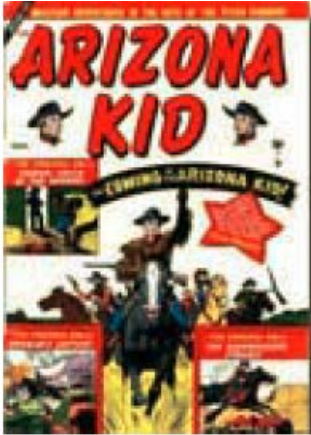
Stacked in metal racks that were ten rows high, the western pulps created a phantasmagoric apparition that rendered me helpless. As quickly as possible, I would plunk down my dime to get to the action that the cover artist promised:

To the explosion, the Kid uttered a scream, whirled around, and the gun was jerked from his hand and flung across the room of the shack. He fell sideways, and lay there groaning and cursing.

Since I was partial to Kid stories as well as superheroes like the Lone Ranger, I might have picked out a copy of *Pete Rice Western* or the *Rio Kid Western*.

Sometimes I chose Star West-ern, which featured the adventures of Don Muerte (“Gentleman of Death”), who was master of the knife, pistol, and saddle carbine. Settling into solitary retreat, I would dive into the world of the pulp cowboy:

Jim was hit, but his tumble was voluntary and foredesigned, although almost ruined by the sickening punch of the Cheyenne bullet that smashed through his ribs.



When I was a young boy in the pre-war 1940s, I remember my dad taking me to a Gene Autry rodeo at Boston Garden. At the time, the western was American's principal popular entertainment in all genres, whether film, radio, or the printed word. I lived in Lynn, Massachusetts, which is about as far east as one can get. Regardless, games of cowboys and Indians dominated our play—before the Power Rangers, there were Texans Rangers. I remember the Big Little Books of Buck Jones and the radio dramas of Tom Mix keeping me company as I ate my Ralston and prepared to mail my thin dimes to Checkerboard Square for those gorgeous premiums.

The early years of the western pulp magazine were those of the Depression, with a capital "D." Most folks struggled for the essentials, and the popularity of the genre and its principle character, the pulp cowboy, is best understood in the context of these hard times.

The pulp cowboy was not a working ranch hand or range cowboy but a legendary character who shaped his own fate and the fate of our nation. An example is Steve Reese of the Range Riders. Reese was a mythical frontier character who feared no man in his quest for justice even though his life was at risk wherever he ventured:

The solitaire player had forgotten his cards and was watching Reese narrowly. The man on the opposite side of the room was stirring out of his feigned sleep; a gun, drawn and ready was resting in his lap, faintly outlined by the spill of gray light through the dusty window.

Reese's background was uncomfortably similar to that of real-life bad man, Tom Horn. While Horn was an ex-Pinkerton hired by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the fictional Reese was an ex-police lieutenant hired as a field agent by the Cattlemen's Protective Association.

The most prolific of all western “fictioneers” was Frederick Faust. He wrote under more than seventeen pen names, the most popular being Max Brand. More than seventy films and numerous radio, stage, and television dramas were based on the products of his prolific pen. To best understand the characters created by Faust, one has only to look at the actors cast in the movie *Destry Rides Again*: Tom Mix in 1932, Jimmy Stewart in 1939, and Audie Murphy in 1954. These men certainly defined the character of the pulp cowboy—on film and off! Fifty years after his death, Faust’s work still attracts readers.

I loved these pulp cowboys and the adventures they shared with me. I thought they would be around forever, but like all things, they eventually came to the trail's end:

Manley shot again, falling into the dust, moving a leg to support himself. Then the gun fell. He tried to say something and could not. He raised a hand to his chest and his left knee buckled. He fell, kneeling, and then pitched gently into the dust.

The pulp cowboy caught one between the eyes in the 1950s. Like real-life gun-fighter Luke Short’s classic description of the demise of a gunman, the pulp heroes managed to stagger about into the mid-1950s before finally dropping into the dust forever.

The pulp cowboy was not a figure of the of the American West but of his day. He was a creation of some resourceful writers who knew what their readers wanted: a strong-willed, iron-fisted symbol of what it would take to get America out of its economic depression and spiritual malaise. I thought he was gone forever, but I find this is not the case. In a letter I recently received from County Antrim, Ireland, William Milliken de-scribes his joy at reading the old western pulp:

There are so many people that have no interests in life; I don't know how they survive. When I get a western pulp in my hands, I can float out the window and be in the Texas panhandle with Walt Slade or Jim Hatfield.

The Texas Rangers was just one of the dozens of western pulps. It is one that seems to have a particular attraction because the exploits of the real Rangers are familiar to many.

The creator of the Texas Rangers magazine was Tom Curry. Until his death on October 7, 1976, at his home in Norwalk, Connecticut, he spent his time between Connecticut and Florida, thus avoiding the New England winter. Although trained as a chemical engineer, he started writing in college because "it looked like an easy life." With enough success early in his writing career, Tom was able to work fulltime in his newly chosen profession.

Over the life of his pulp career, Tom Curry produced hundreds of western novels, innumerable novelettes and short stories, and eighty Texas Rangers novels. His first westerns were numerous short stories. In 1936 (the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Texas Rangers), he started the Texas Rangers magazine. He continued to produce the stories, alternating with other authors, including Leslie Scott (pennname A. Leslie) and Walker A. Tompkins. All three wrote under the Jackson Cole house name at one time or another.

In a December 11, 1965, Saturday Review article, Curry describes the apocryphal Texas Ranger:

A frontier sheriff in a panic over a brewing range war in his county wires the Texas Rangers for assistance. When he expresses surprise at the single Ranger stepping off the train in answer to his call for help, the Ranger replies: "There's only one war, ain't there?"

This remark has been attributed to real-life Texas Ranger Lone Wolf Gonzauillas, whose thirty-one year career with the Rangers was highlighted by run-ins with gangsters, bootleggers, bandits, and murderers. The hero figure of the Texas Rangers pulp was Jim Hatfield, whose description often resembled that of Gonzauillas:

Rampaging, raiding outlaws and land-grabbers, whose greed for empire knows no bounds, rode roughshod over the range until the Lone Wolf Lawman takes a hand in their game" from Law.

The Texas Ranger stories were marked with plenty of action, gunplay, and, yes, the ultimate triumph of good over evil:

A flaming pistol lit the room for a moment. The Ranger could see burly figures and the slant-eye slits of the hoods. Two more had come inside and another stood in the open doorway. A shotgun roared in the Ranger's direction. Hatfield sent a quick shot at the door and heard a yelp of pain. ("Law on the Winter Range," Texas Rangers, September 1947.)

During the Great Depression-World War II era, these stories were popular with young and old alike. They were read by farm boys as well as presidents of the United States (Roosevelt was particularly fond of westerns). I have received correspondence from a friend in Ireland, and I understand the Ranger stories have had long-term popularity in many European states. My friend likes nothing better than to spend an after-noon riding out with those pulp Rangers in the Texas Panhandle.

There were over 200 issues of Texas Rangers published between 1936 and 1958. Copies can still be had today at mostly reasonable prices (\$5-\$10) if your used-bookstore skills are up to the search challenge.

The covers and interior art of these westerns are particularly good. They typically show Jim Hatfield, blazing gun in hand, doing his law-and-order job out on the Texas Panhandle. As a lad, I walked into the corner variety store and saw a magnificent, multi-colored array of gorgeous pulp magazines. These were the covers that spoke to me in my youth.

