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Who Was That Masked Man?

by Bill O'Neal

This question was asked hundreds of times on radio, television, and film. That masked man, of course, was played most memorably on the radio by Brace Beemer and on TV and movie screens by Clayton Moore. There were 6 motion pictures and 169 television episodes featuring the Lone Ranger, but the character first achieved popularity on network radio.

The Lone Ranger was the creation of George W.

Trendle. The initial broadcast of *The Lone Ranger* emanated from Detroit's WXYZ on January 31, 1933. The juvenile western show won immediate popularity, and within a year it was the cornerstone of a new radio network—the Mutual Broadcasting System. The thirty-minute program aired at 7:30, three nights a week. On each of these three evenings, there were three live performances to accommodate the three time zones.

The initial episode, which was repeated on a regular basis through the years, centered around the ambush of a band of Texas Rangers by the Butch Cavendish Gang. The six Rangers were led by Captain Dan Reid whose small command included his younger brother John. The Reid brothers were partners in a rich silver mine, but they intended to stay with the Rangers until the notorious Cavendish Gang was apprehended. However, they were guided into a deadly ambush in Bryant's Gap by their treacherous scout. Although the Rangers fought bravely, they were gunned down one by one. Captain Reid asked John to provide his wife and son Danny with income from the silver mine. (George Trendle soon created another popular program, *The Green Hornet*. A modern crime fighter, the Green Hornet was a secret identity of crusading newspaperman Britt Reid, son of Danny Reid—and great nephew of Lone Ranger!)



When John Reid fell wounded beside his dead brother, all six Rangers lay still on the canyon floor and the outlaws rode away. That night under a bright moon, the fallen Rangers were discovered by an Indian. Finding that John Reid was still alive, the Indian carried him to a cave and tended his wounds. Then the Indian buried the five dead Rangers, creating a sixth grave so that outlaws would not suspect there was a survivor.

When John Reid recovered consciousness four days later, he recognized his caretaker as Tonto, a boyhood friend whose life he once saved. Reid would call Tonto "kemo sabe" (faithful friend). "You only Ranger left," Tonto informed Reid. "You Lone Ranger." Reid announced his intention to devote his life to the battle for justice, and Tonto vowed to stay by his side. Reid devised a mask to conceal his identity. He employed a retired Texas Ranger, Jim Blaine, to work the silver mine, providing the Lone Ranger with income and silver bullets. When he acquired a magnificent white stallion, Tonto remarked, "Him shine like silver." "Silver!" exclaimed the Lone Ranger. "That would be a great name for him." Silver would save the life of the Lone Ranger on many future occasions.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto soon captured the Cavendish Gang. When a later episode saw Butch escape from prison, the Lone Ranger tracked him to Bryant's Gap and killed him. But Butch Cavendish was the only man the Lone Ranger would ever kill. He apprehended countless villains but whenever shooting was necessary, the Lone Ranger always wounded his opponent. In addition to being an expert marksman and a superb fist fighter, he was a master of disguise. He never drank or smoked, and he spoke flawless grammar. Parents were delighted with such an exemplary role model.



"A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and hearty 'Hi-Yo Silver!' The Lone Ranger rides again!" Excited audiences listened expectantly for this introductory announcement, accompanied by the swelling orchestral strains of *The William Tell Overture*. The best-remembered announcer was Fred Foy, who joined the show in 1948 and continued until the final episode aired in May 1956. The Lone Ranger was first played by George Steinus, who was soon replaced by Earl Graser. In 1941 Brace Beemer assumed the role, lending his rich bass voice to the Lone Ranger for a decade and a half. Tonto was played by John Todd.

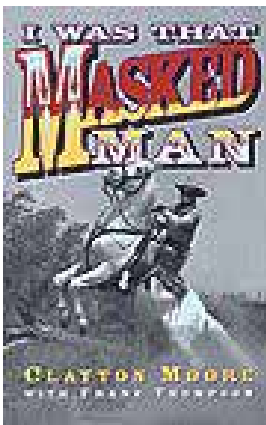
The show was written by the prolific Fran Striker, who had to churn out 156 Lone Ranger radio scripts a year in addition to his work on *The Green Hornet* and other shows! Soon Striker, who sometimes was aided by other writers, also was creating Lone Ranger comic books and comic strips, along with a dozen Lone Ranger novels. Then he was called on to write two 15-chapter Lone Ranger movie serials.

The Lone Ranger was filmed by Republic Studios, which excelled at producing Westerns for juvenile audiences. Lee Powell starred in the title role, while Chief Thundercloud played Tonto. Bruce Bennett and George Montgomery had featured roles. While comic books and comic strips had pictured the Lone Ranger clad in a raccoon mask, Lee Powell and his stunt

double wore a long black mask with eyeholes. The mask dropped well below the chin and since the stuntmen chewed tobacco, several masks were used. Released in 1938, the fast-paced serial found large Saturday afternoon audiences who were thrilled at last to actually see their radio hero in action. In 1939 Republic filmed a serial sequel, *The Lone Ranger Rides Again*. Lee Powell was replaced by handsome Robert Livingston, who had just played another masked hero of the frontier, Zorro. Chief Thundercloud returned as Tonto, while the supporting cast included Duncan Renaldo (Renaldo later gained fame on TV in his own right as *The Cisco Kid*) and Glenn Strange (who later would become famous on television as Sam the bartender on *Gunsmoke*).

Strangely, the Lone Ranger's mount was called "Silver Chief." Livingston soon returned to his most familiar role as Stony Brooke in Republic's Three Mesquiteers series. The next Three Mesquiteers film was *Kansas Terrors*, released in 1939, and Livingston briefly donned the black mask to make a cameo appearance as the *Lone Ranger*.

In 1940 Republic re-edited *The Lone Ranger* into a feature film titled *Hi-Yo Silver*. Although *The Lone Ranger* remained immensely popular on radio, sixteen years would pass before the masked man would reappear on movie screens. Indeed, long before there was another Lone Ranger motion picture, the masked man had become a hit on the nation's television screens. Television sets began to appear in American living rooms during the late 1940s and many popular radio programs were tried on TV. *The Lone Ranger* began its first television season on September 15, 1949. Telecast on Thursday nights from 7:30 until 8:00, *The Lone Ranger* became the biggest hit in the early years of ABC-TV.



A veteran actor, Jay Silverheels, was cast as Tonto. A Mohawk born in 1918 on the Six Nations Indian Reservation in Ontario, Canada, he moved with his family to the United States where he became noted for athletic prowess in boxing and lacrosse. In 1939 he began working as a movie stuntman and extra, and he was well known in Hollywood when he won the role of Tonto. Silverheels' real name was the very un-Indian sounding, Harold J. Smith! In 1971 he had his name legally changed to Jay Silverheels.

Another Hollywood veteran, Clayton Moore, claimed the title role. Moore had starred in several Republic serials, including *The Adventures of Frank and Jesse James*, *Jesse James Rides Again*, and *G-Men Never Forget*. He also

was featured in numerous Republic Westerns opposite such stars as Rocky Lane. After three seasons on TV, Moore was replaced for the next two years by a minor actor named John Hart. Moore returned as the Lone Ranger in 1954 and went on to achieve permanent identity as the masked man. When *The Lone Ranger* debuted on television in 1949, there were far more radios than TV sets, and it had been nearly a decade since young fans had seen a new Lone Ranger film at the movies. Therefore, radio listeners were excited to view a small screen version of the masked man and Tonto on the growing number of TV sets in neighborhoods across America. In 1956 the masked man reappeared on large screens. *The Lone Ranger*, produced by Warner Brothers, brought Clayton Moore, Jay Silverheels, and Silver to movie theaters. Although following the juvenile formula of the radio and television shows, *The Lone Ranger* was filmed in color and boasted a strong support cast including burly Robert J. Wilke and sly Lyle Bettger, two familiar Western villains.

Moore and Silverheels returned to the movies two years later with *The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold*. Filmed in color at Old Tucson, a classic Western set, the movie in one scene featured Clayton Moore unmasked in one of the bearded disguises patented by the Lone Ranger. (Moore and Silverheels actually worked together before *The Lone Ranger*. In Gene Autry's 1949 *The Cowboy and the Indians*, Moore and Silverheels appeared briefly in the same scene— but never met!)

The Lone Ranger aired on ABC-TV from 1949 through 1957, after which there was a steady supply of reruns. From 1966 through 1969 an animated version of *The Lone Ranger* ran on Saturday mornings on CBS, and the cartoon series was revived in 1980 as part of *The Tarzan/Lone Ranger Hour*. In 1981 the aging Moore was not included in the cast of *The Legend of the Lone Ranger*. Young, muscular Clint Eastwood played the Lone Ranger while Michael Horse was Tonto. The Lone Ranger and Tonto rode to the rescue of a kidnapped President Grant, played by the distinguished actor Jason Robards. Although filmed in color in Monument Valley—John Ford's favorite Western location—*The Legend of the Lone Ranger* was a box-office flop. There was far more violence than customary in Lone Ranger films, and Eastwood was utterly without talent.

But two decades later, *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* is still occasionally scheduled on cable TV, while the 1956 and 1958 Moore-Silverheels movies appear with greater regularity. Indeed, to the general public the Lone Ranger has become the most familiar and recognizable character—real or fictional—of the Old West.



Note: About two years before his death, Clayton Moore was made an honorary board member of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum.

Bill O'Neal first researched Jack Hays for his 1991 book, *Fighting Men of the Indian Wars*. Bill is the author of more than twenty books and three hundred articles and book reviews. He has appeared in televised documentaries about the West on The Learning Channel, TNN, and TBS. Bill teaches history at Panola College in Carthage, Texas, and recently he was awarded a Piper Professorship.