

No Fight on the Edge of a Cliff

The Plainsman, epic of the early West, does not follow the old rules

By CECIL B. DE MILLE
Director of *The Plainsman*



Sketches by
GARY COOPER

It is the unrecorded episodes between the big events of history—the story between the lines—which have always fascinated me.

When Jeanie MacPherson, who has the nose and wit for such things, unearthed the astonishing fact in the Congressional Record of impeachment of a Secretary of the United States because of his irregularity in selling rifles to the Indians in the great Northwest, I recognized a startling revelation not recorded in the little red school book.

Armed with the memoirs of General Sherman, Sheridan, and Custer, we prepared to bring to the screen the great story of Buffalo Bill and his gallant band of plainsmen, who struggled after the Civil War to rid the frontier of the Indians—Indians, mind you,



who had been supplied with rifles by white men. It was along the current of this stream of rifles that *The Plainsman* was written. But, to my surprise, though the story was to be about Buffalo Bill, that long, lean, long-stepping friend of his, Wild Bill Hickok, and the gal, Calamity Jane, who loved Hickok though he brushed her kisses from his lips, took absolute possession of the scenario willy-nilly and the story is theirs.

The love story of Hickok, a laconic, hard-fighting, ornery fellow, who boasted that he would never fight unless put upon (but was a bad 'un to the core when put upon, I can tell you), and Calamity Jane, frontierswoman, stage-coach driver, pony-express rider, and bullwhacker, is enough to capture the imagination of any author and we had four; Harold Lamb, Waldemar Young, Lynn Riggs, and myself, working from story data supplied by Courtney Ryley Cooper and Frank J. Wilstach.

It was the first time Gary Cooper and I had ever worked together. We had met occasionally at dinner parties, but beyond that had little more than a speaking acquaintance. We watched one another like hawks the first day of shooting. Cooper had heard that I was a scorpion and a viper and a python rolled into one. I had heard that he wasn't anything of an actor, merely a charming and likeable personality who eased his way through pictures. At the end of the first day of shooting *The Plainsman* we were both so relieved that we almost fell into one another's arms for sheer joy. Contrary to general opinion I believe in letting actors develop their own roles without suggestion from me. I seldom interfere with a performance. Gary Cooper I soon discovered to be one of the finest actors I have ever known.

"The Plainsman"

To be sure, Cooper's personality is Wild Bill Hickok to the life, with his flicker of humor, the iron quality of his reserve, his astonishing dexterity with guns, his reticence and natural shyness, but it takes a really fine actor, an actor with great technique, not to destroy his own personality when he faces a camera. Without the equipment of a fine actor behind it, a personality shrinks or goes blah when called upon to express itself before an audience.

One unearths interesting facts in preparing to bring the true spirit of romance and drama to the screen. I found it was not Horace Greeley who first said, "Go west, young man." It was an editor named James B. Soule, and he first used the phrase in an editorial in his paper, the *Terre Haute Express*.

Of course many of the exploits that have been attributed to Hickok are purely legendary. Fifty Siegfrieds could not have performed half of the feats laid at his door, but the real Hickok was an exciting, courageous fellow, quick with his gun and quick to kill. On the other hand Calamity Jane, who avenged his death, wasn't by any means the brazen-faced, bedizened female of her latter-day portraits after she became famous and was exploited into self-consciousness. She was a frontierswoman who knew not fear. To be sure she was tough, wayward, and strongheaded. She quarreled and fought her way through a man's world, but she had the courage of the truly brave woman and when smallpox threatened to wipe out a community, she turned up her sleeves and with no thought of personal danger nursed the sick and the dying.

Just as Claudette Colbert created a new type of camp-follower girl in her portrayal of Cigarette, Jean Arthur's Calamity Jane reveals a new kind of Western bad girl. Hers is not the bespangled creature we know in the honky-tonks, but a free-tongued, free-spirited gal who flouts the established rules of decorum, not with any consciousness of wrong doing, but because, being the embodiment of the untrammelled West, she knows only the convention of necessity.

All these things one discovers by delving into the records of the time. Legend rides high with history, but truth follows a lonely trail. I have pursued verity from the museum at Cairo to the smoking tepees of the Cheyennes at Lame Deer, Montana, and a costly pursuit it has been. The charges of research alone on a major historical film are sixty thousand dollars.

In *The Plainsman* I am compressing facts in American history not found in the average library. It is not my idea to expose a purple chapter of the nation's past, but to show the drama behind the Custer Massacre, and give an accurate picture of what motivated men like Abraham Lincoln, General Custer, and Buffalo Bill, who opened with their blood the American frontier to the white man.

We gathered more than six hundred books from libraries and collections everywhere. We bought files of topical periodicals published between 1865 and 1876, brochures and pamphlets by the score, and replicas of the Congressional Record. We collected prints of paintings by Remington and Charles Russell, and furthermore engaged the services of Joe de Yong, associate of Russell for ten years.

Three acres of permanent sets at Paramount

“The Plainsman”

were demolished to make room for the villages of Deadwood, St. Louis, Hays City, and Leavenworth, Kansas, as they were in 1865.

I always find the current and contemporaneous periodicals of an era invaluable sources in getting at the truth. Legend glorifies and enhances, but one's contemporaries see with a clear and merciless eye.

I think *The Plainsman* differs from any Western we have ever seen for many reasons:

In it no Indian attempts his laconic English.

Every Indian speaks real, honest Cheyenne.

There isn't a single cattle rustler.

There is no chase or sheriff's posse.

There is no argument over water rights.

There is no half-breed.

The heroine is not the daughter of a wealthy, but persecuted, ranch owner nor an Eastern girl visiting the West.

There is no villain who discovers oil or gold on the ranch and tries to buy the property from the unsuspecting owners.

There is no snatching of the heroine off a runaway horse.

There is no shooting out of the lights in the saloon.

There is no speech in which the hero says, "I'll take the short cut and head 'em off."

And there is no fight on the edge of a cliff.

There isn't a single sheriff with a star badge. I caught one walking through the set of our Deadwood, South Dakota, street and had the star taken away from him.

And, moreover, the United States Cavalry fails to arrive in the nick of time.



1870—Coast to Coast—20 Days.

J. G.