

## Tulsa went West, supplying scenery for several movies

By MICHAEL SMITH  
World Scene Writer

Imagine a traditional Western town of storefronts, saloons and hitching posts, built purely as a place where stagecoaches are robbed, thieves jump off horses and cowboys climb cliffs.

A Hollywood back lot? No, the William M. Smith Amusement Co.

Built west of Tulsa near the future Newblock Park, it produced Western films shown around the country beginning in 1920.

Lights, cameras and action abounded in the Tulsa area 90 years ago, as several silent film companies set up shop, looking for authentic Western and particularly oilfield settings.

Most ventures didn't last very long; some failed before completing a film. Tulsa never became a going concern as a center of motion picture production, but a couple of cinematic wildcatters who followed the new oil money made their mark.

Smith Amusement built its back lot after World War I and soon was populated with actors working to provide audiences with an untamed Old West where dashing heroes wrangled horse bandits, foiled villains and rescued damsels in distress.

One of the shoot-em-ups, "So This Is Arizona," was of such a caliber that it led to 15 more films being produced and sold to California distributors, according to a 1930 Tulsa World story.

The studio set burned down in 1922 — the newspaper reported that small boys broke in and were playing with flares used in lighting sets — and future filming went up in smoke.

The studio was outside the fire protection area and was not insured.

### Outlaws' tale filmed

A relative of one of the most notorious crime families in American history played a starring role in one of Tulsa's most unusual film projects.

Scout Younger, a cousin of

Cole Younger — whose band of outlaws ran with Jesse James' gang — did extensive photography in Tulsa intended to be street scenes of Western life in 1912.

Tulsa newspapers reported the filming of a "true life of the Younger brothers" motion picture, which apparently came out in 1916, as advertised in the Tulsa Democrat.

"Five and ten cents," the ad said. "Younger Brothers today and tomorrow at the Lyric Theater in their latest Western production, 'They never forgot Mother and Home.'"

### In OKC, newsreels

The motion picture business was active in Oklahoma City as well during this early period, thanks to Arthur Ramsey and his newsreels.

Ramsey filmed Oklahoma events for famed companies including Pathe, Paramount and Fox Movietone.

During the 1930s, newsreels were as much a part of the film-going experience as the comedies and Westerns they preceded.

The son of an oil millionaire, Ramsey could afford state-of-the-art equipment at the start of the sound era, and he captured moments that otherwise would have been lost to oral history.

Images of Gov. "Alfalfa" Bill Murray, the 101 Ranch, the baseball star Pepper Martin and Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show were not only preserved, they were able to be seen in movie houses around the country.

Ramsey got the call in 1933 to cover the trial of George "Machine Gun" Kelly at the Oklahoma City federal courthouse in the kidnapping of an oil baron. Only two other trials — the Lindbergh kidnapping and the so-called Scopes "monkey trial" — had previously been filmed by newsreel cameras.

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Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Arthur B. Ramsey, founder of Ramsey Pictures Corp., is shown in the mid-1930s with his 35mm Mitchell camera.

## RADIO DAYS | OKLAHOMA'S FIRST STATION



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

In 1922, the U.S. Department of Commerce issued a license and call letters to WKY in Oklahoma City. It was the first radio station west of the Mississippi River.

## Broadcast pioneer WKY began in garage, living room

By MATT GLEASON  
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Not far from the Oklahoma City stockyards, Earl C. Hull and H.S. Richards created WKY, the first radio station west of the Mississippi River and the third broadcasting station in the country.

And they did it all from a garage and converted living room.

Initially, the co-owners of the Oklahoma Radio Shop hoped to cash in on the radio craze by manufacturing radio receivers. But when Hull and Richards couldn't keep pace with huge factories, the duo focused their attention on their amateur low-watt station then known as 5XT, according to Gene Allen's book "Voices on the Wind: Early Radio in Oklahoma."

"I don't think they were really good businessmen," Allen said in a telephone interview from his home in Oklahoma City, "but they liked having their voice thrown out into the ether, as the expression went."

In the beginning, the living room/studio featured a homemade control panel, microphones, an upright piano and a wind-up Victrola.

Amazingly, the St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral choir once gave an Easter program within the living room's small confines, Allen said.



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

A WKY radio mobile unit in the early 1930s has antennas on its front and rear bumpers. The transmitter inside the Studebaker had a range of a few miles. Broadcasts were picked up and relayed back to the studio by telephone lines.

As for the garage/transmitter room, Allen said, "It was just a mess. These guys weren't exactly real well-organized."

It was archaic, yes, but its mix of news reports with popular and classical music could be heard as far as Kansas and Mississippi,

according to Donald K. Tolman's "Through the Ether: The Birth of Radio in Central Oklahoma," published in the summer 1983 issue of the Chronicles of Oklahoma.

In 1922, about a year after 5XT hit the virginal Oklahoma

airwaves, the Department of Commerce issued its license and its new call letters, WKY.

In 1923, the station moved to a room atop the Shrine Temple for a year before it settled in the basement of the Huckins Hotel.

In 1928, The Daily Oklahoman purchased the station, thus beginning a new era of WKY.

Soon, the station boasted a 1,000-watt transmitter and a modern studio in the Plaza Court Building.

"That's really when it really began to grow," Allen said, "because the influx of capital is what it needed. These two guys didn't have any money. They were on and off the air on a fairly regular basis and always trying to get enough money to operate."

For decades, the station was a full-service NBC affiliate until it switched to Top-40 music beginning in the late 1950s continuing through the early '80s. Since then, the station's format has included country, secular and Christian adult contemporary and talk radio.

It now is a Spanish-language station and very much removed from the garage and converted living room where two radio lovers cast their voices out into the ether.

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## DEWEY: ACTOR'S OKLAHOMA CONNECTION

# Tom Mix was a Hollywood horseman with a tale

By MATT ELLIOTT  
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Tom Mix's story manufactured by Hollywood during his silent film days in the 1920s merged myth and man into a kind of gun-slinging Horatio Alger who rose from a rural Pennsylvania life to stardom.

Born in 1880 in Mix Run, Pa., Mix never was a soldier in the Spanish-American War although he was in the Army. He wasn't in the Boer War, or the Boxer Rebellion, nor was he a Texas Ranger. His family knew differently, said his cousin, Texan Paul Mix.

A Chronicles of Oklahoma article in 1980 states that Mix, a crack shot, starred in 142 silent films from 1910 to 1928, after working in Will Dickey's Circle D Wild West Show.

His films showed him rocketing across the plains on his trusted horse, Tony, vaulting across ravines, lunging from his steed onto moving stagecoaches and lassoing the bad guys four at a time. He was one of the most popular actors of his time.

Paul Mix said his ancestor's success brought him riches but he never forgot his friends, whether they were back in Pennsylvania or in Dewey, where the

Oklahoma Historical Society reports he served as a town marshal in 1911.

"He had the same friends like Sid Jordon (a Washington County deputy) up there in Oklahoma who followed him through the silent films," Paul Mix said of Jordon, who worked with Mix when the two were lawmen in Washington County.

Mix married Olive Stokes in Dewey in 1909, states an article in a 1968 edition of the Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise. He was married at least five times.

The people who really knew the stuntman liked him despite his faults, said Paul Mix, a retired DuPont engineer who has written at least two books on the actor.

Allegations against Mix and his near-mythological background surfaced in a libel trial in Natchez, Miss., after Zack Miller, the owner of the struggling 101 Ranch Wild West Show, accused Mix of libeling him in a 1929 Kansas newspaper article, the Chronicles of Oklahoma reported. Miller claimed Mix reneged on an agreement to join his show.

In the Arkansas City, Kan., newspaper article, Mix was quoted as saying rejoining Miller's circus was "a nightmare of Zack's."



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Cowboy movie star Tom Mix and his horse Tony.

The libel case and a breach of contract suit were part of a string of legal spats between Mix and Miller that stretched into 1934. Mix won the libel suit, but lost a breach of contract suit in Erie, Pa., when he was ordered to pay Miller \$66,000.

In that trial, testimony by Mix's equestrian trainer was used to undermine Mix's credibility by alleging the actor used a double for many of his film stunts.

Mix had stuntmen, but Paul Mix said Mix's youngest daughter said that "90 percent of the time he did it on the first try, so there were very few stuntmen actually used in Tom's movies."

The attempts to discredit Mix in the trial failed. His legend lives on at the Tom Mix Museum in downtown Dewey, which features artifacts from Mix's California mansion, including ornate saddles and his elaborate wardrobe. Door knockers from the mansion were added recently, said the museum's manager, Peggy Berryhill.

Tom Mix died in 1940 in an Arizona car wreck, about two years after an economic recession forced him out of the circus life, the Chronicles state.

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