

## Document Citation

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# THE RED PONY

(U.S./1949) 91 minutes color \$40.00

Directed by Lewis B. Milestone - Screenplay by John Steinbeck from his book, *The Long Valley, The Red Pony and Other Stories* - Cinematography by Tony Gaudio - Edited by Harry Keller - Designed by Nicolai Remisoff - Special Effects by Howard and Theodore Lydecker - Special Animated Effects by United Productions of America (UPA) - Music Composed and Conducted by Aaron Copland - Produced by Milestone for Charles K. Feldman Group Productions - Released by Republic Pictures. Players: Robert Mitchum, Myrna Loy, Louis Calhern, Shepperd Strudwick (John Shepperd), Peter Miles, Margaret Hamilton, Patty King, Beau Bridges, Jackie Jackson, Little Brown Jug, Nino Tempo, Tommy Sheridan.

"In Central California, many small ranches sit in the hollows of The Coast Range Mountains—some, the remnants of old and gradually disintegrating homesteads, some, the remains of Spanish grants. To one of them, to the west of the foothills of the Salinas Valley, the dawn comes, as it comes to a thousand others..."

To Steinbeck's poetic opening prologue, Director Milestone adds his own visual poetry: in the cold light of early dawn, a dog watches an owl watching a rabbit; sensing danger, the rabbit retreats in confusion to a clump of grass, but not quickly enough! The owl swoops, the camera cuts to the dog who reacts in terror. We see nothing unpleasant, but on the sound track we hear a terrified creature-shriek. As in *Of Mice and Men* which like *The Red Pony*, was filmed on the Steinbeck and Hearst ranches, the creatures set the mood for the picture. This is something that Milestone has a genuine feeling for and, with the exception of Charles Laughton in the creature/children scenes of *Night of the Hunter*, no director has brought this sort of thing off so well.

The story, on the face of it, is simplicity itself. A boy and his first pony! But onto this surface tale, Steinbeck has embroidered the perimeters with sub-stories, episodic and more complex. The boy (Peter Miles) respects his father (Shepperd Strudwick), but dotes on the ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who, because he knows about animals and farming and hunting and fishing, becomes the father figure to the boy. His father, an ex-teacher, is a symbol of knowledge—and little more. As the understanding mother, Myrna Loy tries to bring the boy closer to his father, yet she finds herself drawing

further away from her husband because her love of the ranch and the rustic are at odds with the father's love of the city he has left. A crusty grandfather (Louis Calhern) is added as a point of tension between the father and mother, and is used by the boy to strike back at his father when angry with him.

The *Red Pony's* production values, particularly the subdued color photography of Tony Gaudio that favors earth colors—brown, dark greens, oranges, and dappled golds—combine with some unexpected animation by UPA (the chickens turning into horses in the circus dream scene, the vultures swooping over the pony) to make this film excellent both for study and for warm, down-to-earth entertainment. Aaron Copland, who also did the score for Milestone's *Of Mice and Men*, as well as *The North Star*, creates possibly his best film score.

Beau Bridges, Lloyd's oldest son, appears here for the first time (watching Peter Miles curry his horse, he warns, "You're gonna brush the hide right offen him.") and Margaret Hamilton (the wicked witch in *Wizard of Oz*, who now plumps for Maxwell House coffee on the tube) has a brief but memorable part as the no-nonsense school teacher, who apparently does not know that *The Pledge of Allegiance* was written twenty years after the period setting of this film. Patty King is the little girl we would most like to see kicked by a horse ("You're getting to be an awful liar, Tom. In fact, you're getting to be a terrible liar!"), but Milestone doesn't permit it. Mitchum as Billy Buck has one of his better, warmer roles. He is sufficiently inspiring that Copland composed 32 bars of music just to match his hip movements as he walks to the bunkhouse. Very few people can claim that sort of honor.

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