

## Document Citation

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Author(s)	William K. Everson
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"STRAIGHT SHOOTING" (Universal, a "Butterfly" production, 1917)

Directed by John Ford; scenario: George Hively; 5 reels

With: Harry Carey (Cheyenne Harry); Ed Hoot Gibson (Sam Turner); John Douglas (Bob Smith, a farmer); Ruth Ford (Bessie, his daughter); Fred Steene (Jack, his son); Duke R. Lee (Big Bill); William Roberts (Greenoch); Tom Longfield (The Sheriff); John Berry (Black Jim).

For years it has been one of the disgraces of the American film preservation system - both archival and Hollywood-based - that only two silents by John Ford, one of our major directors, had apparently been preserved in this country. Those two were "The Iron Horse" and "Four Sons" -- almost tantamount to having Griffith's whole silent period represented only by "Way Down East" and "Orphans of the Storm". Now, happily, there has been something of a breakthrough. A number of the Ford films of the 20's, "Cameo Kirby" among them, have been unearthed over here, though far more exist in Europe - including "North of Hudson's Bay" (a Tom Mix vehicle) and the later and more elaborate "Three Badmen". The early formulative period is still lacking though, which is why "Straight Shooting" is so valuable to us. Ford's career began at Universal in 1917, with two-reel westerns. "Straight Shooting" is his first feature; but since it was made in mid-1917, it is still very close to the beginning of his career. And for a film made by a man with literally only about six-months' directorial experience behind him, it is in many ways a very remarkable film.

Curiously, it is not at all what one would expect of an early Ford. His later penchant for slam-bang roistering action and low comedy, plus the fact that he had been working in 2-reelers where the action was fast and the heroes rowdy (one of them even frequented a bordello for plot purposes!) would lead one to expect a rough and tumble actioner for his first feature. There is a certain amount of influence from the William S. Hart westerns, but this is inevitable since Hart's were the only major westerns being made then. Tom Mix's Selig westerns were generally unimportant, and he didn't join Fox himself until 1917. Indeed, his first Fox feature and Ford's first feature were made almost simultaneously, and copyrighted only a week apart, so obviously it was much too early for Ford (who would later work with Mix) to be influenced by him.



The Hart influence can be seen in the general austerity, and in the characters themselves -- good and bad intermingled among both the good guys and the bad guys. The sheriff (the only one too slick and Hollywoodian in his attire) is a nebulous and ineffectual character, and it is a gang of "good" outlaws who provide the posse for the traditional last-minute rescue. But if its "Shane"-like plot and striving for realism is an echo of Hart, then there's also a showmanship and a production polish far more typical of the later Ford. It really and deliberately builds its excitement in a manner that Hart usually avoided, and it is unusually smooth in terms of camera set-ups, locations and lighting. It looks far more like a production of, say, 1922, than one of 1917. Economies are quite skilfully carried off; for example, all of the cabin interiors are shot on an outdoor stage, with just a flat or two, but ingenious lighting, stressing the darkness "inside" and the sunlight through the framing of doors and windows, makes them work beautifully. The Devil's Canyon hideout of the outlaws is quite a familiar Ford location by now -- he used it for example, in "Stagecoach", at the beginning of the indian attack. The whole climax incidentally suggests that Ford had been more than a little impressed by the climax of "The Birth of a Nation" -- the rounding up of the posse, the ride to the rescue, individual shots inside the besieged cabin (a gun barrel being pushed through the weakening door), all inevitably remind one of Griffith's finale -- and this is heightened by the girl, Ruth Ford, making the most of a slight resemblance to Mae Marsh and imitating her as much as possible!

Harry Carey and Hoot Gibson make a good and off-beat team (they co-starred again in a brace of good RKO westerns in the 30's, best of which was "The Last Outlaw", based on a story by Ford). Gibson at one point takes an obviously unplanned horse-fall in the middle of a stream, gets up, remounts, and races past the camera with a broad grin!

"Straight Shooting" incidentally got attention right away, and the trade paper "Moving Picture World" commented: "... a cleanout, straightforward tale. Both the author and the director are to be congratulated upon having selected compelling scenes and situations for the production. The western panorama is set forth in clear, attractive photography and the riding and fighting episodes are enacted with dash and enthusiasm. So successful is the offering that it deserves to rank with "The Virginian" and "Whispering Smith".

#### Print condition:

On the whole it is a very good print -- certainly for such a rarity we could hardly be critical anyway -- but there is one short episode missing, about a third of the way through. This is a (presumably) semi-comic and short brawl sequence. A drunken Carey and a farmer advance on a group of ranchers in the saloon; then there is a cut, and Carey and pal are firing at them as they retreat. Why it's missing is anybody's guess; it could be due to deterioration, or anywhere along the line between now and 1922 (when it was first released in Czechoslovakia, whence comes the print) it could have been removed by a film-collector projectionist or to provide a representative excerpt in some kind of compilation. Its loss is irksome, not from a story point of view, but because it is the first moment of action in the film, and the action is carefully balanced until it explodes into the climax. Thus the removal of this scene, short though it must have been, does disturb the pacing a trifle -- though only momentarily.

The titles throughout are in Czech, but I will translate these as we go along -- or at least, those that are necessary to an understanding of the plot. Bear in mind that in translating from the original American titles, the Czechs reshaped them into that peculiarly simple form which the Europeans loved at that time to inflict on westerns, and a further translation back renders them even more simple. Nor can I guarantee that all of the character names listed in the cast above are necessarily those used in the original version; "Cheyenne" Harry for example was changed to The Prairie Kid! However, if you equate the film with "Shane", you'll have little trouble following it. The cattlemen are trying to run off the farmers, and among other methods deny them the use of water. Harry Carey is an outlaw brought in by the cattlemen to fight against the farmers; Hoot Gibson is a cattleman who is in love with a farmer's daughter, and in any case disapproves of the reign of terror. Both Gibson and Carey ultimately turn against the cattlemen, and unite to protect the farmers. This general synopsis, plus the translation of an occasional title, should see you through!

---- Wm. K. Everson ----