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American Idol

By James M. Decker

It's high noon in the frontier town. A tall, handsome hero strides into the dusty street where his outlaw nemesis awaits. The two men draw. The outlaw is fast but the hero is faster. His aim is straight and true. The outlaws falls to the ground. The townspeople celebrate, but the humble hero needs no acclaim. He rides into the sunset accompanied by a beautiful woman that he loves.

It is a familiar scene with countless variations on screen and in the printed word. They call it the "Western." Over the decades, it has brought fortune and fame to many: Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, Tom Mix, Randolph Scott, John Ford, John Wayne, Howard Hawks, Sergio Leone, Clint Eastwood, and many others owe much of their fame to the Western. Ostensibly, the Western tells the tale of the American West: the hardships of the frontier, settlement of new towns, and "good" triumphing over both wilderness and evil.

But was it real?

Several essays back, I wrote of Teddy Blue Abbott's famous cowboy memoir "We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher." Abbott wrote a rare first-person account of the cattle drive era and the fun, hardships, hard work, and general mundanity that he and other cowboys experienced. It was a striking contrast to much Western literature that predated Abbott's memoir that was published in 1939. Prior to that date, the Western canon had some shreds of reality but a whole lot of pulp fiction that bordered on outright fantasy.

The golden era of the cattle drive lasted only a few years, but it has spawned over 150 years of stories that continue even today. It is a fascinating phenomenon that began with aspiring writers and looking-for-a-quick-buck types who filled

Eastern magazines and dime store novels with wild frontier tales. These stories entertained post-Civil War audiences in grimy, booming cities who were fascinated by the land of opportunity and adventure that seemed to abound "out West."

Then along came Owen Wister.

Wister was a well-heeled Philadelphia gentleman who became lifelong friends at Harvard with another Easterner from a wealthy family, a New Yorker named Theodore Roosevelt. Wister, like many others, had been captivated by Roosevelt's brief-but-legendary time as a rancher in the Dakota Territory, and the stories that Roosevelt published in dozens of magazine articles and several books. Roosevelt suggested that Wister start writing tales of western cowboy life and they were picked up by the popular Harper's Weekly magazine. A few stories were even illustrated by Roosevelt's friend Frederic Remington (yes, that Frederic Remington).

In 1902, Wister published a full-length novel called "The Virginian" and its dedication page gave effusive praise to

Theodore Roosevelt himself. Set in Wyoming in the 1880s, it tells the tale of a cowboy hero whose name is never mentioned. The hero is tall, dark, and handsome. He faces down outlaws and he gets the girl. It is an enjoyable read, but if you have read many Westerns, it is nothing you have not read before.

And yet, those other Westerns exist BECAUSE of Wister's novel. It became a best-selling sensation and is considered the first modern Western novel. It was adapted to film five different times and loosely adapted into a popular television series. Grey, L'Amour, and all the others picked up their story formula from Wister's novel. The hero's gunfight with outlaw Trampas was the first known "showdown" in cowboy fiction.

I love Westerns. Just ask my teachers who objected to me reading Louis L'Amour novels in class. But I have a lot on my mind about the Western, the cowboy ideal, and the Western's influence, good and bad, on the concept of community. Is the cowboy hero a goal to which we should aspire? Or is he an idol that we worship to the detriment of our people, our community, and our own mental health? And is that partially Theodore Roosevelt's fault?

Stay tuned in the weeks to come. Because I find this topic to be critically important to my own understanding of rural America and to its past, present, and future.

James Decker is the Mayor of Stamford, Texas and the creator of the West of 98 website and podcast. Contact James and subscribe to these essays at westof98.substack.com and subscribe to West of 98 wherever podcasts are found.

USDA proposes new 'Product of USA' label changes

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a proposed rule with new regulatory requirements to better align the voluntary "Product of USA" label claim with consumer understanding of what the claim means.

The proposed rule allows the voluntary "Product of USA" or "Made in the USA" label claim to be used on meat, poultry and egg products only when they are derived from animals born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States.

"American consumers expect that when they buy a meat product at the grocery store, the claims they see on the label mean what they say," U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said. "These proposed changes are intended to provide consumers with accurate information to make informed purchasing decisions. Our action today affirms USDA's commitment to ensuring accurate and truthful product labeling."

USDA's proposed rulemaking is supported by petitions, thousands of comments from stakeholders and data.

In July 2021, USDA initiated a comprehensive review to understand what the "Product of USA" claim means to consumers and inform planned rulemaking to define the

requirements for making such a claim.

As part of its review, USDA commissioned a nationwide consumer survey. The survey revealed that the current "Product of USA" labeling claim is misleading to a majority of consumers surveyed, with a significant portion believing the claim means that the product was made from animals born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States.

USDA's comprehensive review shows there is a clear need to revise the current "Product of USA" label claim so that it more accurately conveys U.S. origin information.

Under the proposed rule, the "Product of USA" label claim would continue to be voluntary. It would also remain eligible for generic label approval, meaning it would not need to be pre-approved by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) before it could be used on regulated product, but it would require supporting documentation to be on file for agency inspection personnel to verify.

The rulemaking also proposes to allow other voluntary U.S. origin claims we see on meat, poultry and egg products sold in the marketplace. These claims would need to include a description on the package of all

Area Churches

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Bronte Church of Christ

PO Box 346
 118 S. Jefferson • Bronte
 Sun. 10 am & 6 pm, Wed. 7 pm

Central Baptist Church

324 S. Franklin • Bronte
 (325) 473-4811
 Dale Patterson, Pastor
 Sun. 10 am Sunday School
 11 am & 5 pm Worship

First Baptist Church

424 S. Washington • Bronte
 (325) 473-2331
 firstbronte@gmail.com
 Pastor George Cooper
 Sunday 9:45 am Sunday School,
 10:30 am Worship
 Wednesday 6 pm - 8 pm
 Children and Youth

First United Methodist Church

Corner of Washington & Holmes
 Bronte • (325) 650-4836
 Sun. 11:00 am Worship

St. James Catholic Church

215 N. Washington, Bronte
 (325) 365-2687
 Rev. Timothy Hayter, Pastor
 Sunday Bilingual Mass 8 am

4C Cowboy Church

Drawer R • Bronte • (325) 895-4080
 Robert Lemmond, Pastor
 Sunday, 10:30 am - Texas Theater
 Wednesday Bible Study 6 pm -
 4C Feedlot Youth Building

Coke County

Pecan Baptist

PO Box 542 • 12 miles West of
 Robert Lee on Sterling City Hwy
 (325) 453-2065, Bill Hood, Pastor
 www.pecanbaptistchurchrl.com
 Sun. 10 am, Sunday School
 11 am & 7 pm, Worship

Robert Lee

Bible Baptist Church
 PO Box 938 • 9th & Austin
 Sunday 10 am Sunday School,
 11 am and 5 pm Worship,
 Wed 5 pm Bible Study

Emmanuel Pentecostal
 PO Box 794 • 1004 Hillcrest
 Pastor Brantly Robertson
 (972) 841-2009

Sundays 10 am, Wednesdays 7 pm

First United Methodist Church
 PO Box 144 • 9th & Chadbourne
 Robert Lee • (325) 453-2417

Cyndi Weidner, Pastor
 Sun. 10 am Sunday School
 11 am Worship,
 5 pm Choir Practice

Iglesia Bautista Betel

101 Houston • Robert Lee
 Sun. 9:45 am • Sunday School
 11 am Service • Bible Study Wed. 6 pm

Southside Church of Christ
 PO Box 698 • 8th & Houston
 Robert Lee (325) 453-2176

Recardo Reyes, Preacher
 Sun. 10 am, Sunday School
 11 am & 6 pm, Worship
 Wed. 6 pm, Worship

Northside Church of Christ
 PO Box 508
 9th & Chadbourne • Robert Lee

(325) 453-2685, (325) 763-2118
 or (325) 473-1053
 Services: Sun. 10 am

Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church

601 W. 10th, Robert Lee

(325) 365-2687
 Rev. Timothy Hayter, Pastor
 Saturday Vigil Mass 6 pm

Robert Lee Baptist Church
 PO Box 493 • 22 W. 11th
 (325) 453-2724

Chris Walls, Pastor

Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School
 11 am & 7 pm, Worship

Wed. 7 pm, Prayer Meeting
Victory Assembly of God

(325) 453-2208, PO Box 638
 202 E. 6th Street, Robert Lee
 Rev. Rocky Youngblood, Pastor

Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School
 10:45 am & 6 pm, Worship

Wed. 6 pm, Bible Study

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