

Hanging Little Joe on the Suburban Ponderosa, or, What Has the Middle Ages to Do with the Old West?¹

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Historical imagination is necessary to our understanding of any historical period, but especially the Middle Ages. At the same time, that imagination must be tempered with dispassionate, unemotional examination of the evidence. We must not romanticize the period. It was neither an idealized era—all nobility and all chivalry all the time—nor was it an age that was entirely dark, plagued by ignorance and violence. No. The medieval period was much more complicated than that, and to understand it requires subtle, nuanced thinking. Above all, one must overcome the regular diet of stereotypes the movies have fed to us. As much fun as Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* or his crusader

epic *Kingdom of Heaven* may be, these are not the historical Middle Ages.

This is what I tell my students when I teach medieval history. But I am a fraud. For when it comes to the history of the Old West, no such subtle, nuanced thinking applies. I have access to historical evidence about the West, if I choose to look at it. I am trained in a range of historical methods—not only in textual analysis but in the interpretation of material culture—if I choose to practice these. But where the Old West is concerned, all of that goes out the window for me. I am happy to live entirely in the imagined Old West constructed in my youth from so many episodes of TV Westerns and cowboy movies, and so many hours—years really—of playing “Bonanza” on the edge of the civilized world, Virgil’s *Ultima Thule* transplanted to the Old West in a suburb where my grandparents had built a house on the outskirts of town.

Oak Hills Terrace was a 1960s era development on the northwest side of San Antonio, Texas. It was one suburb of many, part of the postwar prosperity and sprawl that would eventually turn San Antonio into one of the largest cities in the United States, a seemingly inevitable expansion, a continuation of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis, Manifest Destiny played out one-third of an acre at a time.

Oak Hills Terrace was built outside of Loop 410—that part of the interstate that ringed the city and gave easy access to its many military bases and shiny new shopping malls. Being outside the Loop was more than just a geographic position; it was a way of life, a state of mind. Roads and electricity and running water had only recently been brought to this southwest territory. Before Oak Hills, it had just been ranch land. Beyond Oak Hills, it still was ranch land. Now, people like my family were going to attempt to live there and not raise cattle. They must have felt like pioneers, but pioneers who could quickly hop on the Loop and drive to the mall.

We had moved in with my grandparents when I was three years old, shortly after my father disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Had he died in combat? Had he abandoned my mother and her three sons? Was he a spy for the Russians during the Cuban missile



“Historical Imagination: Old West/Medieval/Suburban Mash-up.” Collage by the author. Used with permission.

crisis? There were lots of stories in those early years, not many real answers. What vague answers there were came only later, but haltingly, and with a lot of yelling and weeping. The house my grandfather built was at 5822 Prentiss Drive. To look at it now—which is easy to do on Google maps—it seems a plain and modest one-story home like all the other houses in the neighborhood. But when I was a child, it seemed huge, even luxurious. Although the subdivision’s developer laid the foundation, my grandfather, probably to save money, did a lot of the construction himself: connecting the plumbing, running the electrical, even hanging the wood paneling that so clearly announced the house as a product of the 1960s. He installed a retaining wall on one side of the lot to keep the sloping land from eroding down the hill. Wasn’t this what pioneers did: contain the land? When the wall was first built, it was almost as tall as I was. Looking at it now, it seems ridiculously small. Watching my grandfather do this work, on what was then one of only three houses in the entire subdivision, must have added to my own pioneering sense of things. We were alone on the frontier.

The developer of Oak Hills Terrace seems to have had a passion for all eras and aspects of movies and television, and this passion can be read in the street names he chose for his subdivision. Some of them were named for real and famous actors: Cary Grant Drive, Lon Chaney Drive, [Humphrey] Bogart Drive. Some were named for comedians: Jackie Gleason and Danny Kaye drives, George Burns Street. There was Desilu Drive, named for the production company of Desi Arnez and Lucille Ball. Some of the streets were named for fictional characters: Ben Hur Drive, Ben Casey Drive. There was even a [Dobie] Gillis Drive! Would any child who lives there now be aware of these obscure movie and TV references? Some streets

were named for the sexy stars of the moment: [Mia] Farrow Place, Edie Adams Drive, and [Zsa Zsa—or was it Eva?] Gabor Drive. The cleverest, and most obscure of all of these street names was Brenda Lane, for not only was “Lane” a kind of street, it was also the real last name of silent screen actress Brenda Lane, who, according to the IMDB, performed in only four movies, the last of which was *The New Klondike*, a 1926 movie about baseball, with a screenplay by Ring Lardner. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason for choosing these names. They were just the movie stars and shows and characters the developer liked.

There were several street names that evoked the Old West, named for actors who were famous for playing cowboys. There was McQueen Place, named for Steve, the most magnificent of *The Magnificent Seven*. There was Gary Cooper Drive, where I like to imagine the movie star reenacting the iconic gunfight in *High Noon*. Dan Duryea (located between Charlie Chan and Gomer Pyle drives) was named for an actor who often played cowboys, most notably the smarmy villain in 1950’s *Winchester ’73*. There was no street named for Jimmy Stewart, the hero of that same movie. An even greater irony was John Wayne, a nub of a street with only three houses on either side, connecting George Burns Street with Danny Kaye Drive. What were they thinking?! Even Angie Lane was bigger than John Wayne Street, named for Angie Dickinson, who before gaining fame in the 1970s as *Police Woman* had made her television debut in *Death Valley Days*.

Granger Avenue was named for the British actor Stewart Granger, who is best known to American TV audiences from *The Virginian*, replacing Lee J. Cobb as the new owner of the Shiloh ranch. Later in his career, Granger played Old Surehand in three Westerns adapted from romanticized novels of German author Karl May. The first of these was 1964’s *Unter*

Geiern, literally *Among the Vultures* but translated as *Frontier Hellcat*. In 1965, he starred in *Der Ölprinz*, literally *The Oil Prince* but translated as *Rampage at Apache Wells*. Also in 1965 came his most famous turn as the eponymous *Old Surehand*, which for some reason got translated into *Flaming Frontier*. Hmm. Karl May had never been to the West and had written these and other novels without maps or other reference aids during a nineteenth-century stint in prison. Hence in a Karl May Western one could travel west from Saint Louis and end up in New Orleans. This made no difference, though. To the hundreds of thousands of his loyal German readers, and to the imprisoned Karl May himself, the Old West was the ultimate escape. Mom went to high school in Germany in the late 1940s, while my grandfather was stationed at Ramstein Airforce Base, though I’m sure she never read Karl May. I discovered *Old Surehand* and *Winnetou*, his trusty Indian companion, in the late 1970s, during my own escape from the New West of



“Horizontal-axle windmills, then and then . . .” Collage by the author. Used with permission.

suburban Texas to West Berlin. At a time when I should have been in college, I was instead learning German via Karl May's goofy stories about the Old West.

Back in the Texas of the early 1960s, one block north of Brenda Lane, Prentiss Drive had the highest point in the subdivision. It was named for the actress Paula Prentiss, best remembered for her role in the original *Stepford Wives*, who was born in San Antonio in 1938. Finally, a connection! Two things were important about Prentiss Drive, at least when I lived there. First, it was just four blocks away from Ponderosa Drive, named for the spread on *Bonanza*. Second, it was at the edge of the subdivision. Across the street from my grandparents' house, about 20 feet back from the road, running in both directions for as far as I can remember, was a fence of rough wooden posts and barbed wire.

Although drawn-metal wire was a medieval invention, it was the cowboys who added the barbs. Wire had been around since the invention of metallurgy, but its production evolved over time. At first it was forged, but humans eventually figured out how to harness waterpower in machines that drew out great lengths of metal wire, even from iron. Around 1494, two years after Columbus discovered America, the German painter Albrecht Dürer finished a watercolor of a large wire mill and labeled it as such. I must have been in the second grade when I learned that it was still against the law in Texas for anyone to carry wire-cutters in their back pockets—a leftover from the days of the cattle rustlers. One day after school, I followed the janitor out to the parking lot because I was sure I'd spotted wire cutters protruding from the back pocket of his coveralls. They turned out to be vice grips, which the janitor showed me after spotting my poor attempt to tail him and telling me to mind my own damned business.

Just behind the barbed-wire fence, there was an old windmill that was used to pump water out of a well—the kind of rickety contraption one hears squeaking in the opening sequence of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

This kind of windmill—the horizontal-axle windmill—was invented in the Middle Ages, in 1185 to be precise, in the North Sea region of what would become Germany. Seven hundred years later, the descendants of medieval farmers would bring the horizontal-axle windmill to the American West and combine it with the suction pump, another medieval invention, to draw water from the depths of what otherwise would have been barren land.

This dry and dusty sprawl, across the street from my grandparents' house, on the other side of the barbed wire, under the windmill, at the edge of the subdivision filled with references to Hollywood's Old West, became the backdrop for my many cowboy fantasies from the ages of five to ten. We called this land, the land, as in, "We're goin' over 'n' play on the land for a while; be back for supper . . ." as the screen door slammed shut behind us with a squeal of its rusty spring and a smack at the end that always made us wince just a little. The land seems like a uniquely unimaginative name for a place that so fired our imaginations. I don't remember how we came to call it that.

Mom: "I don't want you boys playing on that land."

Us: "But we like the land. It's fun."

Mom: "That land is dangerous and I don't want you going there again."

Us: "Awww, mawwwm!"

Mom: "No. That's it for the land."

Luckily, it was our grandmother who watched over us most of the time. She may have been more tuned in to boys being boys, but it's more likely her lenience with us was part of some parenting struggle with our mother. Either way, when Mom was gone and Grandma was in charge, we went to

the land as often as we wanted. Like the magical wardrobe that transports C. S. Lewis's young characters into Narnia, stepping through the barbed-wire fence, for us, had the power to take us to another time and place: the Old West—as seen on television. Although the *Lone Ranger* and *Hop-Along Cassidy* and *Gunsmoke* all had their turns, the show we reenacted the most was *Bonanza*.

We were only three brothers in those days (two more would come much later with a new stepfather). *Bonanza*, a show about three brothers, was perfect for us, and the Cartwright brothers in particular seemed to reflect our own personalities. I played Adam, the oldest and also the smartest. Mike, the middle brother, two years younger, played the middle Cartwright brother, Hoss, who, like Mike, was big and hulking and known for using muscle to solve problems. Joe, three years younger, played Little Joe (who else?), the fastest left-handed gun around, and quite the ladies' man. What did we know about that last part in those days? My brother Joe would have to wait, but he would grow into it. Like the Adamo boys, the Cartwright boys had a complicated family backstory. Instead of Phil, Mike, and Joe's mysteriously missing father, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe each came from different mothers, none of whom were around. Since our own mother was busy working and also wasn't around—at least not in the way that 1960s sitcom mothers were depicted as being around—this also felt right to us. The other thing about the Cartwright boys was that they fought with each other; they had conflicts they had to resolve using their various attributes: reason, muscle, charm. Like the brothers on the TV show, we acted out our conflicts on the land, against the backdrop of our imagined Old West.

With so few houses in the early days of Oak Hills Terrace, my brothers and I had to depend on each

other as playmates. Since love and attention felt like a zero-sum game in our house, we were more often rivals than allies. There was a girl who lived down the street, Valerie, who sometimes played with us. We had already taken the roles of the Cartwright brothers, so Valerie was forced to play Ben Cartwright, the father on the show. We called her Pa, which she tolerated just to be able to play. Valerie was always too reasonable in her attempts at resolving our conflicts—or was it Ben Cartwright’s character she was channeling? Just when a good fight was about to break out, Valerie/Pa would step in and break it up. She didn’t have a clue about how boys resolved their differences. The last time she played with us was when we decided to hang Little Joe.

One of the problems on *Bonanza*, which was our problem as well, was that it basically had four stars of the show. The producers of the show made such a big deal about the equal stardom of the actors that each week the actors would appear in the credits in a different order. Some weeks Lorne Greene (Ben Cartwright) would be shown first. The next week it was Michael Landon (Little Joe), then a week later it was Pernell Roberts (Adam), then Dan Blocker (Hoss). They were always mixing it up so no cast member became more important than the others. After a couple of seasons of *Bonanza* they began to focus each episode on one or two characters. This no doubt made the writing easier—how could you have four equally strong characters in every story line?—and it no doubt gave the actors more time to show their stuff.

In our own version of *Bonanza*, we had the same problem. We could only spin out so many story lines with three brothers and sometimes Valerie. Every once in a while, one of us had to play a stagecoach robber or a cattle rustler or some other desperado. The best of these stories was when one of

our Cartwright brothers went over to join the desperados. This never happened on the TV show, and we liked taking that creative license with the characters. It allowed basically good boys to move beyond the simplistic sibling rivalry of the show and explore their dark sides, though we probably didn’t put it in those terms.

One day, through the barbed wire, past the windmill and into the land, we decided to hang Little Joe. It was his turn to be the cattle rustler and when we caught him with the livestock (our bikes), and a pair of wire-cutters (two sticks) in his back pocket, he had to hang. It was the law of the West.

Hoss/Mike: “Hangin’s too good for him.”

Adam/Me: “Yep. Hangin’s too good for him.”

Pa/Valerie: “Couldn’t you show him mercy?”

Hoss/Mike: “Hang him!”

Adam/Me: “Hang him!”

You can tell a lot about a society by the way it executes its criminals. The ancient Greeks and Romans reserved hanging for suicides. Think of Jocasta or Judas. For execution, they preferred impalement or crucifixion, leaving the exposed body to rot in the sun for days, vultures pecking at its flesh, a warning to others who might be tempted to transgress.



“Cartwright Boys vs. Adamo Boys.” Collage by the author. Used with permission.

After the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, it must have seemed untoward to keep crucifixion around. This didn't keep the fourth-century Romans (now Christian) from still needing some means of execution. The Emperor Justinian, in his *Digest* of laws, circa 533, found a substitute for crucifixion. For every place that *crux* (cross) appeared in the earlier law codes, he substituted *furca* (fork). The *furca* was a long, sturdy post with forked branches at the top. The convicted felon was hoisted up, his neck placed in the *furca*, while a board was nailed behind the neck to hold his head in place. There he was left to dangle . . . and strangle. This method of execution probably came from the "barbarians" who lived to the north of the Roman Empire. The historian Tacitus recounts how the Germanic warriors hung their convicts from trees, which probably had naturally occurring *furca*. By the early twelfth century, hanging by *furca* was on the way out. An Italian manuscript illumination from that period shows men hoisting a convict by a noose around his neck. The rope in the illustration has not been tossed over the cross beam of a gallows, but the horizontal beam of the *furca*, already nailed in place. The illustrator clearly knew what the *furca* was, but by the time he did the drawing, it had fallen out of use and he'd forgotten how it worked. Luckily, my brothers and I were also ignorant of the *furca*'s use, or things would have turned out a lot worse.

Much of our story development for the hanging of Little Joe had been influenced by a show we had seen on TV, *Secrets of the Stuntmen*, or something like that. The show revealed all the tricks of real cowboy stuntmen. There were all kinds of cool stunts: guys falling backwards after being shot from their horses, guys getting shot off of roofs and falling off-camera into big piles of mattresses, guys fake hitting each other with fists and breakaway chairs and whiskey bottles that were made out of something



"You can tell a lot about a society by the way it executes its criminals." Collage by the author. Used with permission.

much softer than glass. Oh, this was heaven. The realism we could bring to our own episodes of *Bonanza*: fantastic! One of the stunts they revealed was how to hang an outlaw. An extra safety rope was tied to a harness the stuntman wore under his costume. The rope ran from the harness, hidden behind the stuntman's head, and attached to a beam above, bearing all the weight as the stuntman dropped through the gallows. The hangman's noose, visible on the front of the stuntman, wasn't really tightening at all, because the other rope kept it from doing so. As I try to describe this stunt now, it feels as if I must have missed some of its more technical aspects, though I would never have admitted that at the time.

This must have been in the days before those warnings that tell the viewer "Do not attempt this at home." If they did have such a warning, we didn't see it, or more likely didn't care to heed it. We had to try all the stunts we had seen on the show, and hanging the cattle rustler was to be the finale.

"Couldn't you show him mercy?"

"Hang him!"

"Hang him!"

At this point in our story we had to stop to set up the rigging for our stuntman's hanging. We found an old

oak tree that hadn't born leaves in years, the kind where you'd expect to see a scraggly turkey buzzard flap its wings and take off just as you were riding up on your Schwinn palomino. There was hardly any bark on the tree, and a big chunk of it had been eaten out or rotted out at the base. This was our hanging tree. We had pilfered a good length of rope from Grandpa's workshop, maybe 50 feet. Plenty enough for a hangin'. The three of us were about ten, eight, and seven years old at the time, so Joe probably weighed all of 50 pounds. We "knew" the rope would be strong enough. We didn't have a stuntman's safety harness so we had to improvise and tied the safety line to Joe's belt. We threw this line over the longest dead branch of the old oak and had plenty left over for when it came time to tie one end to the trunk. I cut off a section of rope to make the hangman's noose, which we put around Joe's neck, and also threw that over the dead branch. Meanwhile, Mike and Valerie found a sawn off log that would stand up on one end. Once the rigging was done, we'd stand Little Joe the desperado up on this log then kick it out from under him. The law of the West.

"Couldn't you show him mercy?"

"Hang him!"

on the bottom strand of barbed wire. Grabbing the middle strand with both hands, I made a motion to open up the fence but stopped short. “Nobody tells,” I said. “Nobody tells,” they repeated.

And that’s how I became a medievalist—

What has the Middle Ages to do with the Old West? Echoes of Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” While the phrase “Middle Ages” denotes a time, “Old West” is at once a time and place. Both have to do with history—not just the events of the past but how we construct those events into narratives. Both evoke escapism, yet both are inescapable in their influence on the American identity. The Old West, like the Middle Ages, lives in the imagination.

I doubt that children today play any version of cowboy games. The mythos that TV and movie Westerns served has shifted. It is more likely today’s children play games with medieval characters. They imagine themselves as Tolkien’s Aragorn or Gandalf or Bilbo Baggins. Or George Lucas’ characters from *Star Wars*, which is nothing if not an Arthurian drama retrofitted to outer space, with its (Jedi) knights and warring empires, and the all-powerful Lord Vader. The imagined past and the imagined future both take their cues from the Middle Ages. And while, in a child’s mind, the safest, fenced-in suburban yard can be transformed into Camelot or Mordor or Luke Skywalker’s home planet of Tatooine, I cannot imagine that these have the same immediacy as the land did for us. I don’t think this is nostalgia speaking. Places like the land, replicated all across the New West of the mid-twentieth century, were as close as any American kid could get to having real connection to the past, imagined or otherwise. Medieval children playing at knightly games in the corners of walled towns, in the shadow of castles high on hills, may have come closer to this feeling,

but the potential for such frontier experiences has diminished. The imagined frontier of our land was one traversed by cowboys because cowboys really had traversed it! Real cowboys had lain that barbed-wire fence and real cowboys had built that horizontal-axle windmill. Real cows still sometimes ventured over to the edge of the burbs, as evidenced by the real cow-pies they left behind. The land was also full of dangers, not just the dangers we invented—like almost hanging each other—but tarantulas that could bite you, wasps that could sting you, and rattle snakes that could poison you. There were even coyotes that could eat you if you stayed out after dark. The other side of the barbed wire was so vast that it was also easy to get lost, though we never did, far as we might roam. This was our playground? Few parents today would allow their kids to play in such a setting, not if they wanted to avoid a visit from Social Services.

This kind of play gave me boundless, perhaps foolhardy self-confidence. I left home at seventeen and by nineteen was living in Europe, not on a semester abroad—I wasn’t even in college—but on an adventure abroad! I lived there until I was twenty-five. Oddly enough, the whole time I was there, I never once set foot in a castle or cathedral. I convinced myself that those sites were too touristy. I wanted to be with the people, whatever that meant, not realizing that the people also visited castles and cathedrals. I wanted no part in it. I worked, and hung out in cafes, and walked along the riverbanks in Florence and Cologne and Paris and dozens of other cities and towns. I watched un-dubbed spaghetti Westerns to learn Italian, and read Karl May novels to learn German, and *Lucky Luke*, a Belgian comic series about a cowboy, to learn French. My favorite was *Lucky Luke contre Phil de Fer*, not just because the villain shared my first name, but because it was the first time I understood a

pun in a foreign language: Phil de Fer was a play on the French *fil de fer barbelé*, barbed wire. Across the street from my grandparents’ house, about 20 feet back from the road, running in both directions for as far as I can remember, was a fence of rough wooden posts and *fil de fer barbelé*. . . .

Cowboy stories in foreign languages in foreign countries? Never visiting a castle or cathedral? What the hell was I thinking? In spite of my resistance to touristy stuff, the great medieval monuments of Europe were being pressed into my memory. When I finally did go to college, Notre Dame de Paris and the Kölner Dom and the Duomo di Firenze were all right there, easier to recall because I had walked past them hundreds of times. “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian’s question is ultimately one of identity. Are you a pagan philosopher or a Christian? For Tertullian the two could not be reconciled. The question of identity is central in innumerable Westerns, but most vividly in the *uomo senza nome*, the man with no name, made famous by Clint Eastwood in *A Fist Full of Dollars*. What has the Middle Ages to do with the Old West? Are you a cowboy or a medievalist?

Both. The answer is undeniably both. The Cartwright boys with their missing mothers, acting out their adventures on the Ponderosa. The Adamo boys with their missing father, emulating the Cartwrights on ‘the land.’ We are where we come from. The man with no name had no past, no history, at least not one revealed to the viewer. Yet if history defines us, gives us our identity—which, as a historian, I must believe without a whiff of doubt or hint of cynicism—then my life as an imagined cowboy in my childhood has defined me, and informs my life as a medievalist. I cannot think of one without remembering the other.

What has the Middle Ages to do with the Old West?

Everything.

Note

1. For my knowledge of medieval culture's influence on the Old West, I am indebted to the classic article by Lynn White, Jr., "The Legacy of the Middle Ages in the American Wild West," *Speculum*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Apr., 1965), 191–202, which I have freely pillaged for information throughout this essay.



Stephen Gelfire, Augsburg College. Used with permission.

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