



You'd think I'd be happy watching Sam Elliott and Tom Selleck in *The Shadow Riders*, a 1982 western movie when both these handsome cowboys were in their prime. Still are for the most part. As a character in the current *Grace and Frankie* comedy series remarked when an aging Sam Elliott appeared: "There are only ten men in the world who can pull off that mustache and he's nine of them." You know who the tenth is. I usually enjoy B grade movies set in Texas with great scenery and superb horses, but I ended up more irritated than entertained.

What bothered me was the portrayal of Texas women in the Civil War era as mealy-mouthed and idiotic. I know this film is entertainment not a documentary, but why were the women characters so out of sync with the era and the plot?

Brothers Mac (Selleck) and Dal (Elliott), having fought for the Union and the Confederacy respectively, return home to find their parents docilely sitting on their porch.

Seems the renegade Confederate Major Ashbury plans to continue the war but needs weapons, so he rounded up all the area females who are tradeable. Among them are Mac and Dal's sisters and Dal's fiancé Kate. Ashbury is transporting the women to the Gulf Coast. There he'll be able to trade them for guns and ammunition to the evil Holiday Hammond. That this didn't upset Mac and Dal's parents the least little bit should have been a clue.

The scene changes to a small group of Confederate soldiers transporting their wagonload of females to the Gulf Coast where Hammond is due to sail in with crates of guns. Not only are the women untied but they all keep their eyes and heads down like sweet little hostages except for a bit of feminine umbrage displayed by heroine Kate.

Supposedly, none of these women ever had to kill a chicken, slaughter a hog, gut a fish, hunt, plant a field, harness a horse, kill a rattler, or wield a gun or knife during all the long years their menfolk were off fighting the Civil War. No tendency for self-preservation, no fight in them at all.

I kept waiting for one of the women to come up with a plan to distract the guards when they stopped. Then, others could sneak out of the wagon, creep up from behind, spook the horses, grab a leg or other body part, unseat them, and grab those rifles. Come on! Not that hard!

They could still end up prisoners, but it would have been a good scene and added some tension. Instead the women placidly walk into a makeshift cage without a word of protest. That really got to me because when in the world has anyone tried to corral a group of Texas women and not heard a word from them? That was the most unbelievable bit in the movie.

Would you believe that once in the makeshift cage, none of these Texas women try to dissemble it? Like they never nailed a board onto a roof after a wind storm or fixed a door blown off its hinges? Instead, they all stand around placidly until Kate (she did escape with the help of men of course) arrives disguised as a nun (it would take me too long to explain that one).

The women are so dimwitted that one of them happily yells out "It's Kate," apparently not understanding that this will alert their captors that their visitor isn't a nun but Kate. It does, and yet it gets worse.

Since Kate's attempt at rescue fails, Mac and Dal must save the women. The brothers arrive and the shooting starts. But all the women are still standing up, perhaps some of them wondering why the nice nun who tried to help them was carted off. One of the men has to yell "get down" because the women are all standing in the line of fire. Hear a gunshot? Hit the dirt! Not a hard concept. Honestly, I was ready to throw my popcorn at my DVD player, followed by my wine glass.

I know part of my irritation is the state of our society and the current upheavals concerning women's place within—but we won't go there. The other part was that this movie reminded me of how much I disliked the portrayal of women as just plain silly in western movies, which I adore as entertainment, even bad ones. It brought back the many times since the 1950's that I watched tv and movie heroes and villains fighting while the hero's sweetheart stands there with her hands over her face.

Even when I was a little girl, I'd think "pick up the frying pan and hit him over the head!" Although I have to admit the one time I remember Dale Evans swinging a chair at the villain punching out Roy Rogers, the villain ducked just in time and Dale knocked out Roy instead.

It's no surprise to most people that a lot of accepted western history is myth, more a product of western novels and Hollywood movies than original source material. Myth is often more fun than reality so for the most part, depiction of women in western novels and films has been only for entertainment.

This silly nonsense in *The Shadow Riders* was not out of the ordinary. It's just that it seems so much more important now that history not be perverted, and that entertainment be recognized as such, not as history. There's a lot of research to be done and new documentaries and films to create. We have a wealth of university collections, state and regional historical associations, and old

newspaper archives to dig through. Film makers and writers take note; there are a lot of true stories waiting to be told about Texas women.

Even when researching from the best possible sources, however, it's important to view the material in context and with a grain of salt. This concept was beautifully portrayed in a classic western, which I hope everyone will watch or watch again. I'm thinking about John Ford's 1962 movie,

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, starring Jimmy Stewart (Ransom Stoddard) and John Wayne (Tom Doniphon). For years, the public believed Ransom Stoddard shot the bully Liberty Valance, who terrorized the town of Shinbone. Stoddard was elected senator partially based on that belief. When Senator Stoddard returns to Shinbone years later to attend Doniphon's funeral, he tries to set the record straight while being interviewed. Senator Stoddard tells the newspaperman that Doniphon shot Liberty Valance and he asks him to print the truth. The newspaperman refuses to do so. He does not want to correct the story because the legend has become fact in the public's mind. He prints the legend.

I still recommend *The Shadow Riders* for fun, not the least of which is watching the great Ben Johnson deliver the corniest dialogue in the worst role of his superb career.

For laugh out loud reading that will engage your brain at the same time, however, I suggest the book *Texas My Texas*, a collection of works by the marvelous James Ward Lee. Start with his essay "The True History of Texas." Then, please be sure to note what he has to say about Texas women in "The Changing Myth of Texas." We are tough cookies.

Time to come up with another saying besides "Texas is Hell on women and horses." Our true history is that women and horses strengthened Texas. That's fact not legend.

