

SLINGSHOT COWBOY

by Tony Beckwith © 2000

Cowboys played an important role in my childhood. They were my heroes. I wanted so much to be like Tom Mix, Lash LaRue, Hopalong Cassidy, and all the other good guys. I used to think I learned more from their movies than I ever did at school.

The most exciting moment of any little boy's birthday party in our community at that time was when the lights were switched off, the rather rickety rented projector whirred, and we watched a black-and-white cowboy movie, perched on sofas and chairs and sprawled on the floor in the birthday boy's darkened living room. There was, of course, considerable interaction between the screen and the audience. During the inevitable saloon brawls we staged our own mock fights, throwing ourselves into the fake punches and dramatic falls with all the enthusiasm of extras on the set. Our manly dialogue came straight from the soundtrack: "Why, you...!" and "Take that, you...!" and "Oooooofff!" and so on. The parts I loved best were the wild horseback rides as the cowboys fought running battles with the Indians, the thunder of galloping hooves and the shrieks and whoops of the warriors filling my head with romantic wonder.

When I was just a little older I spent one of those endless summers being a bicycle bum. I rode with a small gang of like-minded boys, all similarly blessed with dubious social value at that stage. Our bikes were central to everything we did, and we

were on and off them all day long. Mine was a tall, gangly Triumph, midnight black with chromed handlebars. It may have looked like a bicycle to anyone else, but it was really my horse, my gallant stallion, my noble steed. In my mind we had a sort of Roy-Trigger thing going. Being ten years old really wasn't that bad, for me.

Our home turf was a lonely, abandoned road on the coast, with empty fields on one side and the open sea on the other. A low wall ran alongside the field, pockmarked and crumbling, in about the same condition as the road. The ground was littered with rubble and stones, some of which were very beautiful, professionally speaking.

I should explain that our other passion that summer was the slingshot, and we always carried one strung around the neck. To serious slingshot aficionados like us, the pebbles on that road were an irresistible temptation.

We learned to gather our ammunition without getting off the bike, leaning way over and scooping up stones as we coasted down the road. From that angle we spotted the potential of the low wall, and it wasn't

long before we had tin cans and empty bottles lined up and were shooting at them from under the crossbar. Did I say crossbar? I meant the belly of our horses. And the slingshots were really our Winchesters.

With practice, of course, we became good marksmen, and contributed generously to the environmental pollution of our town. Some of us went on to use our talents in ways I'm sure we'd rather forget. (I'll name no names for the children's sake.) In my case, I have a gnawing sense of karmic debt concerning the city's street lighting. Those large, elegant globes looked like huge harvest moons, gorgeous golden orbs serenely suspended in the night sky, and then....

I like to think it was just youthful exuberance and an overdeveloped taste for drama that prevented me from absorbing the real lessons taught by those straight shooters on the screen. Surely I'll be one of the guys in the white hats when I grow up? Hi Ho, Silver, away! ★

