

MAKING MOVIES IN MOAB

How life changed when Hollywood came to town

story by RICHARD STARKS

THE BLOCKBUSTER SUCCESS of the 1939 Western movie *Stagecoach*, filmed in Monument Valley, helped put Utah on the map as a premier shooting location. A decade later, movie studios discovered the fiery red rock canyon country of Moab. The John Wayne film *Rio Grande* was shot near Moab in 1949, followed by many more movies throughout the 1950s. People in a town where life had revolved around ranching

and uranium mining were suddenly in show business. This dramatic meeting of worlds inspired Colorado-based authors Miriam Murcutt and Richard Starks to set their latest novel in Moab during those days of movie magic. To research this book, *In A Town Called Paradox*, the authors met with people who lived there at the time to hear firsthand what it was like when Hollywood arrived in Moab. Starks reveals to us what they discovered.



Joshua Hardin

WE FIRST CAME to Utah more than 20 years ago. Heading west on I-70, we had not yet learned how far apart gas stations in Utah can be. With a dashboard low-fuel light flashing a warning, we left the highway to refuel in a place called Cisco, only to find it a ghost town – just a scattering of barnboard buildings with collapsed roofs and doors that flapped in the wind.

Coasting on fumes, we headed for Moab, following the course of the Colorado River, and the scenery there – the mesas, buttes and six-shooter spires aimed at the sky – just blew us away, as we used to say back then.

We knew we'd return; and we knew, too, that we wanted to set one of our books in Utah. We just weren't sure how, until a chance visit to the Moab Museum of Film and Western Heritage set us off in the right direction.

The museum – located within the Red Cliffs Lodge, a river-front ranch-resort on a wide sweep of the Colorado River along Highway 128 – is a treasure trove of mov-

ie memorabilia, with colorful displays of photographs, posters, scripts and props from the many Westerns that have been filmed in the area.

Its walls are hung with portraits of stars intermingled with those of local people who worked for the studios when Hollywood arrived back in the 1940s and 1950s. And that made us wonder: How had the locals coped? There must have been conflict, not least between the glamorous stars with their liberal values and the small-town inhabitants with their more conservative views.

To find out, we tracked down Karl Tangren in his usual haunt: Susie's Branding Iron Restaurant, set behind a split-rail fence just south of Moab on Highway 191. Tangren, whose burly figure can be seen in one of the many photos that grace the walls of the film museum, has been a rancher all his life. His ties to the movies go back to 1949, when he was hired by the studios as a wrangler and location scout.



Republic Pictures

A still of *Rio Grande* stars John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara points to the Moab Museum of Film and Western Heritage in Red Cliffs Lodge. Director John Ford filmed scenes on the property and at the nearby landmark Fisher Towers.

“Conflict? Of course there was some,” Tangren told us. “But people liked the movies coming to town. Times could be hard; people would run up debts; but the movie work would tide us over, so all of a sudden, our bills could be met. You got paid for everything, every time you turned around. I never saw so much money in my life.”

The studios would arrive and take the place over for eight weeks at a time, he said. “But when they were paying, we all thought the same: Ranching could wait.” It was Tangren who gave us the slogan we later assigned to the mayor of our fictional town of Paradox: “The studios didn’t take anything but pictures, and didn’t leave nothing but money.”

Tangren sometimes worked as an extra – a face in the crowd or a pioneer on a wagon train – but he mainly supplied horses, which were always in demand. Film studios would bring in a few “cast horses” for their stars – horses they knew were docile and wouldn’t suddenly bolt – but for the rest, they hired local.

Directors liked to film scenes at dawn, when canyon country looks its most photogenic. It wasn’t uncommon for Tangren to get a call at 2 a.m. asking him to have horses ready for a sunrise shoot. Directors would then change filming locations as many as four or five times a day.

IN MOAB, THERE were no “high-class joints where the Hollywood set could go,” Tangren said. Nor was there anywhere for the stars to stay. The cast would lodge with anyone who could offer up an extra bed.

That chance remark led us to Colleen Taylor, whose photo also hangs on the wall of the film museum, and the modest house she lives in on Apache Circle in Moab. Now 85 years old, but still slim and bubbling with life, Taylor describes herself as “Mormon to the roots,” with a grandfather, John Henry Holyoak, who came to Utah with Brigham Young.

For more than 50 years, she and her husband, David, ran the Fisher Valley Ranch at the north end of the La Sal Mountains. They’d spend their summers there, leaving empty the house on Apache Circle. In 1949, when John Wayne came to town to film *Rio Grande*, they rented the place to



Tom Till

A rainbow appears in Professor Valley, a location appearing in films like *Wagon Master*. Visitors marvel at a video showing a stunt dummy resembling Geena Davis that was used in *Thelma & Louise*.



Joshua Hardin

him so he could bring his wife along.

John Wayne’s co-star was Maureen O’Hara, an Irish redhead then at the height of her fame. In one scene, O’Hara had to wave goodbye to departing soldiers, Taylor told us. But the actress didn’t like to stand there getting covered in dust as they rode by, so the studio hired Taylor to be her stand-in.

It was dull and dirty work, she said, but it paid \$16 an hour – “a small fortune in those days.” But best of all, “with our house rented, I got to say that John Wayne slept in my bed.”

Around the corner from Apache Circle, we spoke to John Hagner in his townhome on Kane Creek Boulevard. Hagner, whose sharp features would sometimes adopt the squinting look of Clint East-

wood, was a talented author, musician and artist whose portraits of Ben Johnson, Jack Palance and Ronald Reagan, among many others, are prominently featured in the Moab Film Museum. He was also a stuntman, an ambition he’d harbored since he was a child.

By the time he was 14, Hagner had amassed a collection of photos and artifacts from professional stuntmen. “I don’t know why, but stunt work was something I always wanted to do,” he said. “I worked out with weights, developed tumbling and acrobatic skills, and when my chance came, I took it.”

He specialized in falls, for which he was paid by the foot – the further he fell, the more he earned – but he drew the line at 40 feet.

“That was my limit, because in those days, we didn’t have airbags, so I’d land on a stack of cardboard boxes piled on top of a mattress,” he said. “We’d lay it all out, paint a big ‘X’ on the top box, and I’d aim for that, making sure I didn’t land on my front, as I didn’t want to snap my back.”

Hagner fell off cliffs and rooftops and out of high-story windows, often after he’d been “shot” in the chest and a bag of fake blood made to explode inside his shirt. He never sprained an ankle or broke a bone, but he did get “banged up” working his other specialty: fights.

Stuntmen wore pads on their elbows, knees, forearms and hips when filming fight scenes. They choreographed each fight for a day or two to get everything right, he said. When the cameras rolled,



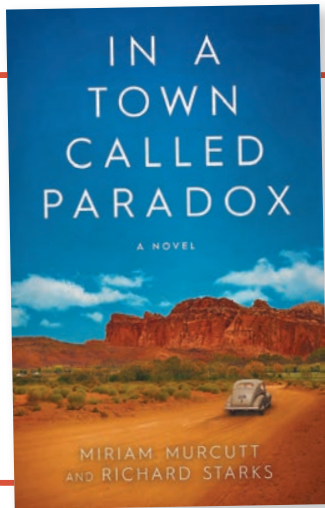
Tom Till



Joshua Hardin (both)



The Colorado River curves below the La Sal Mountains and Fisher Towers, frequent backdrops of movies filmed near Moab. The Moab Museum of Film and Western Heritage displays memorabilia and documentation of movies filmed in the region.



In A Town Called Paradox by Miriam Murcutt and Richard Starks. In 1950s Utah, three lives unexpectedly collide when Hollywood turns a rural backwater into a glamorous playground for its stars. Available in paperback from bookstores or Amazon.

they needed to move at full speed. “We always threw a face punch to the outside of the shoulder,” Hagner said, “but we didn’t always miss.”

ON NORTH MAIN Street, we next talked to Lin Ottinger, the gap-toothed and grizzled founder of the Moab Rock Shop. He, too, found work as a location scout and driver. When we spoke to him – squeezed in by trays of sodalite, agate, selenite and fragments of dinosaur bone that he’s collected over the years – he told us how, when driving, he’d pick up an actor at dawn, take them to makeup, then out to the set.

Ottinger vividly recalls hauling around

Richard Boone, the tough-guy star of *Have Gun – Will Travel*.

“I was hanging out with him one day in a bar when a guy sat down beside us, looked at Boone and said, ‘You’re not tough as you look. That’s just for the movies. Boone reached out, yanked the guy towards him until they were nose-to-nose, and said, ‘That’s how I make my money, by being tough for real,’ then threw the guy halfway across the room. The guy left town the next day – and he was a local kid, too.”

So, conflict – just what you need for the setting of a novel. But you must also have characters and plot, and a motivation that drives your story forward. And

that’s where our status as Colorado-based outsiders came in.

I’m not sure Utahns realize just how much their state is revered by those who don’t live here, not just for its scenery – the sun-baked cliffs and boundless panoramas – but also for what it represents: space, opportunity and, most of all, freedom. That’s why we keep coming back. Because Utah’s more than a state; it’s also a state of mind. We decided to shape our Utah novel around people united by a search for freedom.

When we left Ottinger’s rock shop, we drove 30 miles to Dead Horse Point, past the neck to the overlook, where we stared down at the Colorado River, 2,000 feet below us.

It snaked its way towards an unreachable horizon through stepped canyons it had taken 15 million years to carve out. But we didn’t just see what was there. With the wind whipping in our faces, we also saw the timeless myth of the American West.

It was here at Dead Horse Point, standing-in for the Grand Canyon, that Thelma and Louise in their eponymous movie drove their 1966 Thunderbird off the cliff. They chose the freedom of the outlaw, the freedom of death, over a return to their former lives. We didn’t follow them off the cliff. We had not, like them, been cornered by the law. Instead, we’d found a story of freedom. Which meant we now had a book to write. 🐾