

Fornax Old Frontier Unnumbered Issue

Fornax is a fanzine devoted to history, science fiction & gaming as well as other areas where the editor's curiosity goes. It is edited/published by Charles Rector. In the grand tradition of fanzines, it is mostly written by the editor. This is a special Western issue published in May 2017

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Feature Article

Was Reno Drunk at Little Bighorn? by William G. Rector
Originally Published in the November 1967 issue of *The West*

In the Spring of 1967 the United States Army Board for Correction of Military Records altered the record of former Major of Cavalry Marcus A. Reno, to show that he had been honorably discharged rather than dishonorably discharged. As Major Reno had been dead for 78 years, the chief implications of this action was that his body could be removed from its unmarked grave and reburied in a military cemetery, presumably the national cemetery at the Custer Battlefield National Monument.

Although many people thought that this was an interesting story, and some thought that justice had finally triumphed, others think that the army board made a grievous error; that Major Marcus A. Reno was never a "gentleman" and was a disgrace to the United States Army whether alive or dead.

Whenever people discuss Lt. Col. George A. Custer and the defeat of the Seventh Regiment of the United States Cavalry on the Little Bighorn river on June 25th and 26th, 1876, the question of fault is almost certain to arise. Many people have maintained that Major Marcus A. Reno was primarily responsible for the defeat, that if he had done his job properly the battle would have turned out differently, and then George A. Custer, one of the most colorful cavalry commanders in our history, would have lived for greater achievements.

One of the reasons why many people have arrived at the conclusion that Major Reno was the mainspring of disaster, stems from the charge that on day of the bloody battle Major Reno was drunk.

The charge that Major Reno was intoxicated emanated from one source only, although it was repeated by a number of different people. Frederick F. Gererd, for instance, one of the Indian interpreters for the 1876 expedition, later repeated many times the accusation that Major Reno was drunk at the Little Big Horn. But even he had to admit that he had not seen Reno intoxicated and had obtained his information from citizen John Frett. Frett, who had been employed as a mule packer on the expedition, Claimed that he had seen Major Reno on the night of June 25, 1876, and at that time the Major was drunk.

According to Frett he had gone that evening to the horse picket line within the Reno-Benteen defense perimeter and had encountered Major Reno. Major Reno is supposed to have asked him, "Are the mules tight?" When Frett allegedly questioned, "Tight...what do you mean, tight?" the major was supposed to have replied "Tight, God damn you." Then he allegedly slapped Frett on the face, picked up the carbine and threatened to shoot him. Frett maintained that Reno was holding a "bottle of whisky in his hand, and as he slapped me the whisky flew over me and he staggered. If any other man was in the condition he was, I should call him drunk."

The story of John Frett was in some respects, verified by another citizen packer named B.F. Churchill, who maintained that as soon as Frett had been slapped by Major Reno he had grabbed Frett to prevent fisticuffs. He also maintained that when Reno had slapped Frett, whisky had splashed over himself and Frett, but Churchill maintained he had not seen where the whisky had come from.

Then Frett averred, he had seen Reno pick up a carbine, but he didn't know for what purpose; and that his impression at the time was that Major Reno "was a little under the influence of whisky or liquor." In addition, Churchill refused to state that Major Reno had been either staggering or stammering.

It is on this meager foundation that the story that Major Reno had been drunk during the battle of the Little Bighorn has rested all these years, in spite of the fact that numerous officers who were questioned in regard to this episode maintained that Reno had not been drunk, or staggering, or stammering during the battle. Even Frett's friend, Churchill, refused to state that the major had been drunk, "but only a little bit under the influence," which is a far cry from drunkenness.

Just who is this citizen John Frett who is solely responsible for the story that Major Reno had been intoxicated at the battle of Little Big Horn? It is interesting that while Frett's charges have been debated to the point of nausea, virtually nothing has been done to investigate the author of the charges. Although Frett had once been a policeman in St. Paul, Minnesota, he is not listed in the city directories of that city for 1874 or 1875, when he is supposed to have served in that capacity. On St. Patrick's Day, 1876, he was employed at Fort Lincoln to be an army mule packer at the wage of \$50 a month.

Almost immediately after the battle of the Little Big Horn he applied for his discharge, received it, and was in St. Paul within a month of the battle.

Shortly after his arrival in the capital city of Minnesota he gave an interview to the press which was published in the *St. Paul Dispatch* on July 27, 1876. In this interview Frett had a number of things to say and it is obvious that he bore no love for Major Reno.

According to Frett, Major Reno had charged the Indian camp and then retreated, but Custer had charged through the Indian village "for two miles" when Reno had left Custer "at the mercy of the Indians;" if it had not been for Captains Benteen and Weir the remainder of the regiment would have been annihilated; and if Frett ever went into Indian country again, "it must be under another commander than Reno."

In this interview Frett did not charge Reno with drunkenness, or at least the paper did not print that charge. The closest the *Dispatch* came to the subject of drunkenness was when it quoted Frett as saying that on the first day of the battle "he never saw Reno anymore until dusk when he was not fit for anything." Frett also maintained that Major Reno had done nothing on the second day of the battle except to lay in a hole.

John Frett had some other observations to make concerning the battle which cast doubt as to his credibility as a witness. He was convinced that Sitting Bull had been killed because a soldier had come into camp with personal ornaments supposed to be the property of the Sioux sachem. In fact, according to Mr. Frett, many Indians were killed during the battle.

On a portion of the battlefield where "Custer and his men laid" John Frett had seen after the battle in one ravine "sixteen dead Indians and a short distance on, in a teepee,

we found nine more, while a little further on lay eight or ten dead Indians who had evidently crawled there to die."

It is hard to visualize a teepee erected near a ravine on the site of Custer field, but John Frett said there was one in that area, and he, and he alone, saw thirty-three or thirty-five dead Indians near where "Custer and his men laid." John Frett saw more dead Indians after the battle than all of the rest of the command combined, but then he was the only one to see a drunken army major too.

The other Twin Cities newspapers ignored John Frett and his story. In fact the *St. Paul Dispatch* paid him little further attention, but an article did appear in the *Chicago Tribune*. This paper published an interview with John Frett on July 28, 1876, in which the drunkenness charge was aired. It is interesting that the St. Paul and Minneapolis papers did not play up a news story which had local interest, on one of the biggest news stories of the times, because when John Frett arrived in St. Paul the press of the nation was busily engaged in dissecting everything and anything concerning the battle of the Little Big Horn. Perhaps it was a case of the prophet not being honored in his own country.

Shortly after his arrival in St. Paul in June, 1876, John Frett purchased a saloon, or an interest in one, on Seventh Street "near Ross." The following year he operated saloon on Seventh and Earl and stayed at that location for almost two years. One can almost visualize him polishing the bar as he related his eyewitness account of the battle to his thirsty customers. Shortly before the Reno court of inquiry convened in early 1879, Frett left saloon-keeping and at the time of the inquiry he was operating the Commercial Hotel at 93 East Seventh Street in St. Paul. The hotel also contained a billiard parlor.

If one takes John Frett's story in its entirety, one can quickly see that it is full of errors. Sitting Bull was not killed; Custer did not charge through the Indian camp for two miles, in fact, he might not have even gotten close to the village. Nobody else saw that teepee on the battlefield near where Custer and his men lay; nobody else counted thirty-three dead Indians after the battle; and nobody else saw a drunken major, either.

John Frett should have been an expert on the subjects of whisky and intoxication. However, drunkenness is a state that has a beginning, an existence, and an end, and of about 400 people within the Reno-Bentzen defense perimeter only John Frett saw any of

these conditions in the conduct of Major Marcus A. Reno . In addition, Major Reno did not lay in his "hole" all of June 26, 1876, because other witnesses have placed him on various parts of the battle line from time to time.

There are some other interesting aspects concerning John Frett and his John Barleycorn charges. Although his story was published by the St. Paul Dispatch, it was completely ignored by the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press and Tribune, which was one paper in 1876, and far superior to the Dispatch in the extent of its news coverage. In addition, the story carried by the Dispatch did not accuse Major Reno of being intoxicated; this was done by a Chicago newspaper. As a matter of fact, when one considers the entire story of John Frett, and his charges, one wonders why a serious attempt was not made at the Reno court of inquiry to impeach Frett and completely discredit him as a witness.

The fact that only a minor effort was made in this direction strongly indicates that Frett by his own testimony had impeached himself on the witness stand and, of course, his collaborating witness, B.F. Churchill, had not supported Frett's testimony in two major particulars.

The mere calling of John Frett and B.F. Churchill to testify at the Reno court of inquiry in 1879 is interesting in itself. The recorder at the inquiry, whose duty it was to investigate all of the evidence so that the court could arrive at the truth, handled his duties so that his questioning and his summation sounded not like the seeker of truth, but like a conviction hungry prosecuting attorney trying to increase his local reputation with another victory.

The recorder, Lieutenant Jesse M. Lee, (the same Lieutenant Lee who was responsible in part for the murder of Crazy Horse), did not call the two former mule packers as rebuttal witnesses until the waning moments of the inquiry, a time when some newspapers were predicting that Reno would be exonerated. They were called to refute the stream of testimony which had, on the whole, been favorable to Major Reno and this type of testimony had dominated the last two weeks of the inquiry.

Yet, when recorder Lee made his summation to the court, a summation that reads like a prosecuting attorney trying to wring a guilty verdict from an unsophisticated jury, he did not once mention the charge of drunkenness. The fact that Lieutenant Lee did not mention drunkenness in his summation indicated that even he doubted his own witness.

There is another interesting speculation concerning John Frett. At one time, he had been a policeman in St. Paul. Later, he had been a mule packer for the army. Neither of these occupations were highly remunerative. Yet, almost immediately upon his return

from the battle of the Little Big Horn he had enough risk capital to purchase a saloon or at least a financial interest in a saloon. The location of the saloon indicated that it could not have been the cheapest type of saloon in St. Paul in 1876. Of course, he could have acquired the required amount of risk capital in a great variety of ways. He could have acquired it also at the battle of Little Big Horn.

The Seventh Regiment of the United States Cavalry had received two months pay after they had left Fort Lincoln and the men had no place to spend it during the expedition to Montana Territory except in a limited way on the river steamboat Far West. In addition, the men were restricted in how they could carry the fruits of two months garrison duty. The issue trousers of the day were meager in regards to pockets and, of course, hip pockets are useless in the saddle. The uniform blouse of the day had only one pocket -- inside of the left side of the blouse, and no more. The issue gray flannel pull over shirt sometimes had one pocket.

The question is, where did the soldiers carry their newly issued pay on a very hot day, and June 25, 1876, was a hot day.

It seems almost certain that some of the men must have carried their money in the single blouse pocket and when the day became hot the blouse was tied to the cantle of their McClellan saddles. Others may have kept some money in their saddlebags, a not unheard of thing in the horse country.

In either case, some of the money had to be on the picket line, not to mention the money belonging to the dead and wounded. It was in the vicinity of the picket line that Major Reno had accosted John Frett in the darkness. The record is not completely clear, but a number of officers and men had personal possessions stolen off their saddles and from their kits during the battle of the perimeter.

And what was John Frett doing in the darkness at the picket line when he was accosted by Major Reno? By his own admission, he was there to steal. He maintained that his horse had been shot and that his personal possessions had been stolen, so he came to the packs from the firing line to get a blanket. Any blanket. Anybody's blanket. Just so he got a blanket. Nobody at the court of inquiry mentioned the presence of the money that must have been at the picket line, but Frett was there. It was dark; and he was on a self-confessed mission to steal a blanket. It is sometimes better to plead guilty to a forgivable misdemeanor than to be guilty of a felony. It is even better to accuse the possible witness to the felony to the felony, of, say, drunkenness.

So, the only man who claimed to have seen Major Reno drunk at the battle of the Little Big Horn was a man of imaginative sight. John Frett, and John Frett alone, saw a teepee on Custer battlefield near where Custer and his men lay; John Frett, and Frett

alone, counted a minimum of thirty-three dead Indians on the battlefield when four hundred other men couldn't find them; John Frett, and Frett alone, had seen a drunken major of cavalry during the battle. It is amazing that some people have given credence to the charges of this self-confessed thief and never inquired into his credibility as a witness.

Fiction

Cascades Ivory

By Charles Rector

The setting: The Cascades Mountains in Oregon in October, 1912:

Thomas Lundeen and his mule Whiskey trudged up the hill. Suddenly, the grizzled old prospector turned to Whiskey and said, "I'm through with Mother Nature. That old lady has thrown too much stuff at me for so long, you know, blizzards and the like, that I've just had it. When you add all the bounty that I've gotten from prospecting and fur trapping, I don't need to live here another winter."

And then Lundeen shouted with authority to nobody in particular, "I'm through with you, Mother Nature!"

Whiskey eyed the prospector curiously, as if he was wondering just how did mules like him ever become the servants of stupid humans like Lundeen. Finally, the old man and his mule reached the cabin. Lundeen went into the cabin to make sure that all was well.

Satisfied, Lundeen came back outside and once again started talking to Whiskey. "It wouldn't be so bad if I had a partner like old Blaine Forseth, but he's dead. Well, Whiskey, we're just about done with this place. We're going to leave these mountains forever," the prospector promised his mule.

While Lundeen addressed Whiskey, a swarthy, bearded man on horseback rode out of the forest and reached the cabin.

"Still talking to yourself, Lundeen?" he asked. "No wonder you're pulling out. Spend too many more winters up here by your lonesome and you'll wind up a lunatic!"

Thomas Lundeen's whiskers bristled in anger.

"Why are you being a smart aleck for, Mason?" he petulantly asked.

"Just making an observation," replied Dwayne Mason. "However, I'm grateful for this cabin. I can keep myself snug and secure while doing trapping in this country during the winter," Mason said. He continued, "Hopefully, this place is in nice condition, you old buzzard."

Lundeen had to restrain himself. He was aware that neatness both in terms of keeping the cabin up and in the quality of his mind were intertwined. He was proud of that neatness.

"You little punk," Lundeen roared, "I'd rather be dead than let you use the cabin as long if you're going to act like this!" "You won't dare to as long as Jeff Schaefer does his trapping on these here lands. You don't have the nerve to poach from his area," Lundeen taunted Mason.

Mason's face grew red.

"Oh yeah?" Mason asked. "Well, for your information, Jeff Schaefer won't be around here for some time. The government got him for poaching. By the time he works off his five hundred dollar fine, its going be too late in the season for trapping!"

"Jeff Schaefer a poacher?" asked Lundeen. "I don't believe you. Jeff's always been a law abiding man. Why would he break the law all of a sudden?"

Mason leaned forward with an angry look on his face, growling, "Shut the Hell up!" For a bit he glared at Lundeen and then he turned his horse around and rode off.

Lundeen stared at Mason as he rode away. Lundeen was fearful since Jeff Schaefer was the son of his late, longtime partner Tom Schaefer. He felt that he had to see if the young man was really in trouble and what he should do about it.

If Jeff Schaefer really was in trouble, then his whole family was in a mess as well. There was Catherine and the baby. The Schaefer's were trying to make it as homesteaders while Jeff was doing some hunting and trapping on the side. It was a tough existence, but Jeff was getting better at it and bringing more money into the family every year. If Jeff really was guilty, then all that hard work would go down the drain and the family would become destitute.

Lundeen thought about it and then said to Whiskey, "Can't leave the mountains when young Jeff is in trouble. Don't want to spend another winter up here, but a man's got to do what a man's got to do."

Lundeen quickly went to work. He got his gear and stuff back in the cabin. Whiskey was returned to his stall on the side of the cabin where there was a great deal of hay to feed on. Thomas Lundeen then walked down the trail to the settlement.

There, Lundeen reached the local jail where young Jeff Schaefer was with Deputy Sheriff James Cropp. Lundeen looked at Schaefer, "Did you really break the law with so much at stake?" Schaefer shook his head in the negative.

"Tom, you know me better than that," he said. "I'd never kill elk since its illegal and I was raised to be a law abiding man," the young Schaefer said.

"Jeff, I know you too well to think that you'd do such a stupid thing as break the law when there is so much at stake. Tell me how it happened that you got arrested."

Jeff Schaefer looked straight into Tom Lundeen's eyes and said, "I was railroaded. I was going around the scene minding my own business when I came across some elk that had been shot dead and their teeth had been removed. While I was looking them over, wondering who could have done it and why, the park ranger Mark Whittaker came out of the brush and accused me of having done it and then arrested me."

"He did, did he?" Lundeen asked.

"Yes, he did. What's even worse, is that he wouldn't even listen to me. It's just like he already made up his mind the moment he saw me looking over those dead elk. I tried to point out to him that my gun had not been fired all day, and he searched me and could not find any of the missing teeth on me. Didn't matter, he arrested me anyways," Schaefer said.

Jeff Schaefer shook his head in worry.

"I'm being held under a thousand dollars bail. If I'm convicted, that would mean a prison sentence and the loss of my livelihood," he said.

And then Schaefer's voice took on a hard edge, "If I ever get out of this mess, I'm going to get even with Dwayne Mason. I just know that he's behind this! I'm going to kill him!."

Upon hearing this, Lundeen grew angry. "If you do that, then you are no better than him. If we ever find proof against Mason, then we'll turn it over to the law. In the meantime, you're going to stay here and cool your heels," Lundeen said firmly.

Upon finishing up with Schaefer, Lundeen talked to the deputy. Jim Cropp assured the old man that the case against Jeff seemed weak and he figured that Jeff would beat the rap. Upon hearing that bright assessment, Tom Lundeen left the jail in higher spirits than he had been entertaining when he had arrived to see Jeff.

As Lundeen and Whiskey both trudged through the hills, the old trapper pondered the situation. Even though Dave believed that Dwayne Mason was behind his being framed, there seemed no evidence or even reason to back his suspicions up. What was even worse, was that for all success as both a trapper and sometimes prospector, Lundeen did not have enough money in the bank to let Jeff get out of jail.

Lundeen and Whiskey headed for the place where Schaefer said that he had found the dead elk. The trip took over a day and Lundeen had to make a camp in the cold weather. Despite the fact that Schaefer had been arrested several days earlier, there were still remains of the elk around.

After finding the remains of the dead elk, Lundeen checked the scene out. The trail signs told the long time veteran of the wilderness a great deal. He became convinced the killing of the elk was done by one man. Only problem was that there was no evidence pointing to any one specific man whether it be Dwayne Mason or anybody else.

Lundeen checked out the surrounding landscape. Since he was a prospector, he also gave the nearby creek a looking over as well. He decided that the creek looked like it might be a good place to pan for gold and he wondered why he had never tried panning for gold there before.

While looking things over, Lundeen saw some tracks on the sand by the creek. It was the distinct imprint of a man's heavy boots. There was something odd about the tracks that made it appear that the boots had been damaged and then poorly repaired. Lundeen reflected that Mason's boots looked like they were in pretty poor condition. Although the tracks were interesting, Lundeen realized that they did not provide the hard evidence needed to get Jeff out of jail since the tracks did not lead to a trail.

As the mantle of night descended, Tom Lundeen made camp. He heard the beautiful songs of the birds. On the other hand, he heard the distinctly unmusical bellowing of a male elk.

Lundeen realized that from the sound, the noise must be made by an unusually big elk. The male elk might be calling for the three deceased elk. The old wanderer of the wilderness suddenly realized something that had been left unsaid all this time. The three dead elk were all females. The big male elk that was doing all that bellowing might have claimed those females for himself. If that male elk were to realize that his three lovelies were dead, then that might make him mad and go on a rampage.

However, Lundeen was dead tired and so he soon fell sound asleep. He slept well and did not let the big elk interrupt his time in slumber. Daylight saw Lundeen waken, have some breakfast and then resume his detective trek across the wilderness.

Lundeen headed downstream since he also aimed to do some panning for gold in addition to searching for evidence to free Dave. Exactly what he was looking for, he did not know, but he reckoned that he would recognize it once he saw it.

However, the grizzled old pioneer refused to let any nagging doubts get him down. If anything, it made him all the more determined to trudge forward to try to free his friend. He refused to let any natural obstacles do anything but slow him down. Not under any circumstances was he ever going to turn back.

Eventually, Lundeen came to a spot in the creek where there was a log jam. This was surprising, for while logs would periodically show up in natural waterways, it was pretty unusual for there to be an actual log jam. To a veteran of the wilderness like Lundeen, this could only mean one thing. Someone or somebody was engaged in illegal logging.

Looking over things, Lundeen realized that the illicit logs were all spruce. This sealed the case in his mind that this was deliberate logging instead of the acts of Mother Nature. Moreover, this looked like a great spot for hiding the illegally harvested timber.

In the sand, by the creek, Lundeen saw tracks. They were identical to the tracks that he saw earlier. Lundeen grimaced. Somebody was going to pay dearly for breaking the law and Thomas Lundeen was just the man to see to it that justice was done. And if by capturing the guilty would help him gain leverage to get Jeff released from jail and all charges dropped, then so much the better.

On top of that, Lundeen thought of something else. Whoever had cut down the timber had also been the one who shot the elk and harvested their teeth. In other words, by capturing the criminal lumberjack, he would be able to get Jeff out of trouble for sure.

Lundeen decided that it would be best to make camp right then and there.

As he cooked himself a meal, he heard the distant bellow of a male elk. Right after that, he heard the faint though unmistakable sound of shots being fired.

Lundeen was hungry, but not so famished that he was going to wait before exploiting this chance to capture the culprit and being able to free Jeff. He checked his rifle to make sure that he had it loaded. He also made sure that he had extra ammunition handy. His determination to see to it that justice was done sufficed to drown out his feelings of hunger.

Lundeen set out in the general direction of the shots. Out of excitement, he walked faster than normal. Just a few minutes after starting his trek, Lundeen heard another shot, this time closer than the earlier shots. And then all of a sudden, there was the sound of a man screaming. Almost immediately after that, there was the unmistakable bellow of a male elk, also closer than the previous bellows.

Lundeen immediately realized what that meant. He had a golden opportunity to capture the criminal in the act! The old man walked even faster and he wanted to catch the crook so bad, he could almost taste it. Even with his haste, it took Lundeen nearly half an hour to reach the spot where the noise had come from.

The scene that awaited Lundeen was one of horror. On the ground was a dead female elk. Not too far from the deceased creature lay a dead man. It was none other than Jeff Schaefer's suspect Dwayne Mason. Upon further inspection, it was clear that Mason had been gored by a male elk's horns.

Studying the scene, Lundeen could figure out what had happened. Mason had killed the female elk not realizing that the male was nearby. The male elk went crazy and gored Mason after Mason had put away his gun in preparation to removing the dead elk's teeth for their ivory content.

While Lundeen was surveying the scene, forest ranger Mark Whitaker came on the scene. "I heard all that shooting and came here as fast as I could," Whitaker said.

"Mister ranger, if you were to take Mason's shoes, you should be able to match them with the tracks made by the illegal lumberjack and by the poacher," Lundeen said.

Whitaker nodded saying, "I don't doubt now that Mason is the one. It doesn't matter now anyways. After Deputy Sheriff Jim Cropp gave me a tongue lashing about my putting Jeff Schaefer in jail on no real evidence, I let Jeff go and dropped all charges against him."

The old man squinted his eyes at the ranger and said, "You mean that all of the time

and effort I spent on Jeff's behalf was wasted?"

"If you want to look it that way, you could. However, if we can definitively show that Mason was the one who was responsible for all this wilderness lawlessness, then we put all this behind us," Whitaker said.

It took about a week for Lundeen and Whitaker to show to the ranger's superiors that Mason was indeed the guilty party. Thankfully, there was enough time between the time that the matter was settled and Jeff Schaefer and his family were able to move into the cabin for the winter that Lundeen and Whiskey were able to finally at long last head off on foot for civilization and retirement just in the nick of time to avoid being stuck in the mountains for another winter.

Movie Reviews

The Claim (2000)

Every year, there are certain movies that reap tremendous acclaim from the critics. Some of these movies deserve the critical plaudits while others do not. And there are more than just a few movies each year that when you go see them, you wonder just what the critics were thinking when they praised this movie. One such movie is the 2000 flick **The Claim**.

"Cranky Critic" Chuck Schwartz praised **The Claim** as being "a great drama and it's stacked with great, subtle performances." Roger Ebert & Richard Roeper gave **The Claim** their coveted Two Thumbs Up rating. Ebert & Roeper's newspaper, the Chicago Sun-Times, later ranked **The Claim** as being in its Top Ten Movies of the Year. In his published movie review, Ebert gave **The Claim** a rating of 3 1/2 stars out of 4. Movie critic Jeffrey Lyons called **The Claim** "One of the year's best films, while Premiere Magazine praised the movie as being "beautifully acted."

The Claim purports to be an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's classic novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* transplanted to the Old West. The producers clearly wanted **The Claim** to be accepted as a literate Western and it is clear that the critics fell for it. However, as anyone who has read the original Hardy novel can tell you, the movie fails as a Hardy adaptation. Meanwhile, any fan of movie westerns can tell you that **The Claim** is a failure in that department as well.

The Claim begins in 1869 where Daniel Dillon (Peter Mullan) lords supreme over his company town. His gold mining company is a topflight operation. Dillon is easily one of the most admired men in California, if not in the nation. However, Dillon is not a terribly happy man. Deep down, he broods over a dark secret that, if exposed, could lead to the destruction of his reputation.

You see, the gold claim was originally made by another man, but Dillon sold his wife and daughter to the original claimant in exchange for the claim. The prospector thereupon took both wife and child to Boston and raised the family there. Meanwhile, Dillon ruthlessly exploited the gold claim to become one of the richest men in all of California. Needless to say, if it became public knowledge that Dillon's success was based on the sale of human beings, that would be nothing short of disastrous.

Matters are brought to a head when his wife (Nastassja Kinski), daughter (Milla Jovovich) and his wife's subsequent daughter with the other man (Sarah Polley) show up in town and request that he take them in as his family. Just when you think that things are going to get interesting, the rug is pulled out from the audience's feet when it is revealed that Dillon conveniently never married after making his dirty deal. This enabled him to marry his ex-wife without ever having to publically admit that they were previously married or what happened to that union. This effectively removed all dramatic tension and helped make **The Claim** a colossal bore.

One wonders just what the critics were thinking when they praised **The Claim** to the hilt. **The Claim** is a waste of your time and money.

Frank and Jesse (1994)

Ever since the early days, the American motion picture industry has shown a great willingness to invent fictionalized history in the name of telling a good story. Only problem is that quite often, the revisionist history created in Hollywood is less interesting and not as good a story as what really happened. One such movie is 1994's **Frank and Jesse** starring Bill Paxton & Rob Lowe as the infamous outlaws Frank & Jesse James.

Frank and Jesse is a particularly egregious example of anti-historical Hollywood movie making. Outside of getting most of the people's names right, the movie basically ignores what really happened.

In the movie, Charlie Ford kills Jesse James, while in real life it was his brother Bob who did the deed. Changing the name of the killer makes no sense and adds nothing to the movie. There is a character named Arch Clements who has a speaking problem which is correct except that the real Clements died in the Civil War before the events depicted in the movie ever took place. In this movie, Bob Younger is deaf while in real life, he had pretty good hearing. Falsifying Younger's hearing condition added nothing to the movie. Also, in the movie, Younger was killed in the abortive Northfield, Minnesota raid when he was actually captured.

The movie starts in Missouri at the end of the Civil War. The James brothers, like all ex-Confederates, were required to take an oath of loyalty to the Union. The movie tries to make out that the brothers were being forced to take the oath despite never having served the Confederate cause. In real life, they were actively involved in the Confederate Army and units that they belonged to were linked to heinous atrocities against innocent civilians. After the oath, the movie delves into further twisting of history by having the evil railroad company murder some of the brothers' relatives and seizing their farms. No such thing ever happened.

The movie further departs from reality and never does return to the real story of the James Gang. It does use a few real incidents but even those they twist around and change. The outlaws are presented as popular figures when they robbed banks. In reality, the common folk hated the outlaws and with good reason: the money in the banks that were being robbed belonged to the common folk themselves. The Northfield, Minnesota, raid where the James Gang was pretty much shot up is presented as an ambush by the Pinkerton detectives whereas it was the townsfolk who repulsed the outlaw attack.

There are omissions, distortions, and flights of pure fantasy throughout this movie. Movies that are about real life people ought to get their facts straight. The 1980 movie *The Long Riders*, also about the James Gang, shows that it can be done.

There are other problems with the movie. The acting is generally poor. The cinematography is average. The production values are like those of a made for TV movie.

Frank and Jesse is a weak western that is a waste of your time and money.

Only the Valiant (1951)

Only the Valiant is an early example of what might be called the "impossible mission" movie subgenre. Flicks of this type have plots in which a certain number of men, usually hard cases, are picked for a do or die mission in which there is a high degree of failure. Other notable films of this sort are *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Dirty Dozen* and *Where Eagles Dare*.

Gregory Peck stars as Captain Richard Lance who is a commander of United States Cavalry stationed in the Wild West. Captain Lance needs to send an Apache Chief Tuscos (Michael Ansara), who harbors violent hatred of Americans, to a prison at another fort. Captain Lance sends Lieutenant William Holloway (Gig Young) to escort the chief.

However, Indians attack the escort freeing the chief and killing Lieutenant Holloway. The chief then goes on to lead an Indian uprising against the Americans. Captain Lance is held responsible for the debacle by both his men and his girlfriend, Cathy Eversham (Barbara Payton). This is especially serious since Holloway was widely beloved.

With the uprising, the fort that Captain Lance's troops are stationed at is vulnerable to attack. If the fort falls before reinforcements can arrive, then the territory and its settlers will be wide open to Indian attack. Captain Lance decides that the best course of action is to take a personally selected task force to a nearby fort that occupies a mountain pass that is a superior strategic position that was abandoned some time earlier. If that fort can hold out long enough for reinforcements to arrive, then the territory will be spared from Indian incursions.

For this mission, Captain Lance decides that the only soldiers whose lives should be risked are the hard cases. These are the dregs of the army whose devotion to the cause is rather suspect. They include cowards, criminals, deserters and just plain malcontents. Among others, they are Corporal Timothy Gilchrist (Ward Bond), Trooper Kebussyan (Lon Chaney, Jr.) and Sergeant Ben Murdock (Neville Brand). The selected troopers, in turn, suspect that this is precisely why they have been chosen and they resent Captain Lance all the more for it.

Needless to say, Captain Lance's work is cut out for him. He must meld men who have severe character flaws together into a cohesive unit. He must work in a confine of responsibility and honor that is every bit as narrow and have the potential for being dangerously conflicting as the pass that the bloodthirsty Apaches have to move through to attack the fort.

Only the Valiant is a flick that could easily have been just another Western but in the hands of veteran director Gordon Douglas, it is a masterpiece of suspense. Douglas was one director who really understood just how to build suspense. This movie is atmospheric and intense and tells a story worth telling. It is filmed in stark black and white that only adds to the suspense. Douglas aimed to make a character driven Western and in that he succeeded admirably.

Young Guns (1988)

Young Guns was one of those movies that has a cast that is literally loaded with handsome young actors that the studio figures will appeal to young female moviegoers. The studio also throws in a chock full of violence to appeal to the guys. Add in "electric" 1980's TV show type theme music and you have a purely formula driven movie.

This is an utterly unhistorical movie. The real Billy the Kid was basically a loner who shunned gangs such as the "Regulators" bunch in this movie. One of the characters is a deputy marshal who throws away his badge and utters the usual lines about how the law is really on the side of evil. In this case, the ex-deputy joins the rest in a revelry of mindless violence all of which is committed in the name of a good cause, although it is hard to see how the violence did anything constructive.

The problems with **Young Guns** begin with the fact that it is a Billy the Kid movie. There has never been a really good Billy movie, even though there have been quite a few attempts at doing so.

You would think that this fact would have caused the makers of **Young Guns** to be extra careful with the material. If anything, **Young Guns** is just another stupid Billy movie, chock full of senseless, historically inaccurate violence.

Young Guns suffers from other deficiencies than the idiotic plot, the historical inaccuracies or the poor excuse for music. The worst aspect of this movie is the poor acting amongst the young stars of the flick. Emilio Estevez in the role of Billy the Kid is a disaster. Estevez looks ridiculous in the outfits that he is wearing. Every time he speaks is cringe worthy since Estevez uses a weird faux Southern-sounding accent. Lou Diamond Phillips is clearly a case of someone being cast for his good looks with complete disregard for his lack of acting ability. No wonder neither Estevez or Phillips ever had much in the line of starring roles.

However, not all of the acting in **Young Guns** is cringe worthy. Both Brian Keith & Jack Palance provided quality cameo appearances to the movie. Both Charlie Sheen & Terence Stamp did well, but their characters were both killed off way too early for their performances to leave a lasting stamp on the movie. The only actors with meaty roles in this movie who did well were Dermot Mulroney & Casey Siemaszko. It is passing strange that the 2 best actors in a big box office hit such as **Young Guns** were unable to go on to bigger and better roles and movies.

Basically, this is just another empty action flick of mindless violence and mayhem with characters who have deluded themselves into thinking that they are the good guys. Worst of all, the movie basically portrays these juvenile delinquents as being on the right side. The idea that violence is an acceptable thing to engage in if you believe that you are in the right is just simply not the kind of message that Hollywood should be conveying to young people.

In summation, this is an awful movie.