

Pioneering the Old West in Periodical Literature

By Larry J. Walker

Reading western history offers the opportunity to participate vicariously in those colorful times. Our role as historians, researchers and authors is to preserve and perpetuate that unique heritage for future generations.

The excitement of pioneering is certainly one of the drawing cards of interest in the Old West. In a way we are also pioneers—seeking to expand the horizons of western history by filling in important details from the past. I am writing to relate my pioneering experience in the field of western periodical literature.

Over the past several years I have been engaged in an ongoing process of locating, cataloging and promoting western magazines--a valuable source of information about the Old West that has been largely unknown to many, even to many of you. In this article I will share some of my experiences and discoveries.

What is a “Western Magazine”?

My working definition of a “western magazine” refers to a post-World War II, general nonfiction western history publication in magazine format, written in popular style, targeted to general readership and published for national circulation via newsstand and by subscription. The genre includes thirty titles totaling more than 1,500 issues, beginning with *True West* in 1953.

Other titles are: *America’s Frontier West*, *Authentic West*, *Badman*, *Big West*, *Frontier Times*, *Frontier West*, *Golden West*, *Great West* (two series), *Gunslingers of the West*, *Man’s Western*, *Old Trails*, *Old West*, *Oldtimers Wild West*, *Pioneer West*, *Real Frontier*, *Real West*, *The West*, *True Frontier*, *True Western Adventures*, *Western Action*, *Western Digest*, *Western Frontier*, *Western Roundup*, *Western Tales*, *Western True Story*, *Westerner* and *Wild West* (two series).

Of this group, only *True West* and the new series of *Wild West* are still in print. But all of the titles are valuable sources of historical information. Authors and contributors include J. Frank Dobie, Walter Prescott Webb and many current members of Western Writers of America, National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History, Western Outlaw-Lawman History Association and other historical groups.

My Pioneering Journey

Thirty years ago I picked up a few issues of *True West* and *Old West* in a used book store. I thoroughly enjoyed reading them. Several years later while living in El Paso, I came across a small stack of western magazines. Recalling the joy of reading the others so long before, I snatched them up and eagerly devoured their contents. This began a quest to locate as many as I could find in order to build an ample supply for my reading entertainment.

My search soon led to other titles such as *Real West*, *The West* and *Golden West*. These discoveries aroused a new interest. Having collected everything from coins to match book covers, I pondered the possibility of collecting western magazines.

Not knowing what titles and issues were available, I wrote in to *True West* to seek more information. Chuck Parsons printed my letter in his Answer Man column in the July 1990 issue of *True West*. Two long time collectors sent me extensive lists of titles and issues. A subscriber from Phoenix invited me to look through his bound set of western magazines. With the two lists in hand, I drove to Phoenix and corroborated the written lists with this bound set. I compiled this information and self-published *Catalog of Western Magazines Based on Years Since 1950* (which I nicknamed with the acronym of “COWBOYS”).

I began a relentless search to locate magazines to build my collection. After acquiring numerous duplicates, I began advertising in *True West* to sell or trade issues. Within four years I was able to build a complete collection of every issue listed in “COWBOYS.” In the meantime my hobby gradually expanded to a part time mail order business (Magazine House)—buying, selling and trading western magazines. I have spoken several times to historical groups and written articles for numerous publications on the topic of western magazines.

In 1992 I updated, corrected and revised “COWBOYS” and expanded it to a price guide in 1995. *Western Magazine Price Guide and Collector’s Handbook* (Western Publications, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1995, paper \$8.95, now available exclusively from Magazine House for \$5.00) includes information on locating, storing, buying and selling western magazines, along with dollar values for each issue.

During this time western historian Jim Browning had also been putting together a set of western magazines to use in his research and study. Chuck Parsons referred him to me. I was able to help him assemble a nearly complete collection.

Over the years Jim had compiled a running file of notes on western magazine articles about western personalities. According to Jim, my book (“COWBOYS”) inspired him to expand his research file into a hardcover book entitled *The Western Reader’s Guide: a Selected Biography of Nonfiction Magazines, 1953-91* (Barbed Wire Press, Stillwater, OK, cloth, \$29.95, available from Magazine House for \$25.00).

The knowledge and experience I have gained by blazing this new trail into previously unexplored territory has enabled me to locate thousands of western magazines for collectors, authors, historians and other western history buffs. I have also helped libraries and research centers compile western magazine sets at reasonable cost.

I am pleased to offer my services to fellow western magazine collectors and anyone interested in the history of the Old West. Although I do not consider myself a western historian, I probably know more about western magazines than anyone because of the effort I have pioneered. You tell me what you need, and I will do my best to locate information for you from my large inventory of western magazines.