

Using Western Magazines for Research

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In the April-June, 1993, *Quarterly*, I discussed the value of western magazines as a source of western history. In this second and final installment, we will take a more detailed look at the 30 western magazines in terms of their value for research. Since most of you are probably not familiar with western magazines, it would be to your advantage to be aware of what is available in this hitherto largely untapped resource. We will also consider how to access the information and where to locate the issues you need.

Of course, historical accuracy is a matter of prime importance to researchers. But we all know that history is perceived, and therefore preserved, with varying degrees of personal bias. Such is the human condition! Widely varying accounts of eyewitnesses are a problem in any event, from a minor auto accident to the gunfight at the OK Corral. Since there is no such thing as a pure source of totally accurate historical information, proper intent and editorial policy of a given publication, and competence of the editorial staff and contributors would seem to be an appropriate starting point in evaluating western magazines.

Most western history enthusiasts consider the best of all-around western magazines for historical research are Western Publications' *True West*, *Old West*, *Frontier Times*, and *Badman* (which contain stories contained in the other three publications). *True West* could be said to be "winner and still champion" in that it was the very first western magazine of its kind, conceived in 1953—the brainchild of the entrepreneurial mind of Joe Small. After forty years, it is still the flagship western magazine, and one of only three still in print. Quarterly sister publication *Old West* is another of the survivors. *Frontier Times*, though discontinued as a title has been incorporated into *True West*, which is now published monthly. *Frontier Times* began in 1957, when Joe Small took over a small, plain-looking, monthly non-fiction magazine by the same title, published in Bandera, Texas, by J. Marvin Hunter, beginning in 1923. Small converted it to the unique format he pioneered with the advent of *True West*. Western Publications has since begun to offer reprints of the old Hunter's *Frontier Times*. Despite the brevity of the articles, they are worth consulting because many of the stories are first-hand accounts.

Spurred on by the conviction that truth is more entertaining than fiction, "Hosstail" (as he later nicknamed himself) outlines, in the pilot issue of *True West*, his editorial policy as a pledge to his readership, "To the best of our ability, we were going to publish an *honest* magazine on the West as it really was and is. It will be for people who want the facts along with their entertainment. We'll do the best we can to publish a true, original, interesting magazine...." I believe he succeeded what he set out to accomplish.

To help assure the historical accuracy of the magazine, Small was able to engage the services of personal friend Dr. Walter Prescott Webb to serve as historical consultant until his untimely death in 1963. Western Publications has also benefitted from a working arrangement with Glenn Shirley from the time that his "Outlaw Queen" article on Belle Starr appeared in the second issue of *True West*. The letters to the editor often contain valuable tidbits of pertinent

historical information, sometimes from original or second-hand sources. Rare, out-of-print books were reprinted in many early issues. In fact, that was a regular feature of every issue of *Old West* from the first issue through 1982. Unfortunately, Western Publications does not have a list of these books and the issues which carried them. Perhaps they could be persuaded to compile such a list. They are also considering resuming the practice of reprinting western books in their publications. Perhaps a little input on that would be helpful as well.

Next in line for historical value would have to be *Real West*, which was also second only to *True West* in number of issues published. It began in 1957 and was discontinued in 1988 after a run of 221 regular monthly issues and 45 special issues. *Real West* featured stories by many well-known western authors as well as regular columns and other short features, including a column on the American Indian by Nono Minor and letters from readers. Several issues featured serial topics such as guns, western movie stars, treasures and gunfighters—the latter written by Jack DeMattos. DeMattos was listed as an historical consultant during the time he wrote for the magazine (from 1979 through the final issue). Edward LeBlanc was listed as “research director” from 1963 through December, 1985. Reference sources were listed at the end of many of the articles, especially in the earlier issues. *Real West* even featured a “gun editor”—Major Ackerman, who also wrote most of their articles on the subject. A few of the special issues of *Real West* features Indians, outlaws, and lawmen. Most were annuals, yearbooks, and specials, from which the late seventies contained only reprinted articles from the regular series. A short series of digest-sized *Western Digest* issues were an experiment that failed because of their odd size. They are like midget versions of *Real West*. Unfortunately, they are extremely scarce.

Westerner (not to be confused with *The Westerner*, a western movie magazine of more recent vintage) would be my choice for the next best because of the subject material of the articles and the authors. About half of the issues were special issues with several articles devoted to a designated subject such as lawmen, outlaws, and gunfights. The name of the magazine was changed to *Old Trails* for three quarterly issues in 1977 and 1978, after which it ceased publication.

True Western Adventures is my favorite for entertaining reading. It consisted of colorfully-written articles on the Old West reprinted from *True* magazine in the 1950s and 1960s. Fawcett Publishers put out a fine quality publication, complete with cover art by Frank McCarthy. Each issue contained a “true western book-lengther,” several of which were written by Homer Croy. Several short features and other articles rounded out the tableau. The entire run was only 21 issues; and, although hard to find, make a very nice addition to anyone’s western library.

Frontier West was tastefully done with striking western art covers, which, unlike most, was published like clockwork for its lifespan of 28 issues. Harold Preece, Dean W. Ballenger, Xanthum Carson, Fred Huston, W. S. Catlin, Wayne T. Walker, and Leo Rosenhouse all were regular contributors.

I will group the remaining western magazines together by publisher, since “sister publications” are virtual “identical twins” in terms of content. The different titles were basically only marketing ploys to extend shelf life.

The West and *Golden West* were later phased out by a new publisher and converted to *Western Frontier*. The early issues (through 1971) are the best issues. The new publisher reprinted many articles from earlier issues due to budgetary restraints resulting from the waning newsstand market. Of course, since the same article can be found in several different issues, this increases your chances of finding it. *Western Frontier* also featured several special issues on the usual topics—Indians, outlaws, lawmen, gunfights, railroads, and ghost towns.

True Frontier and *Real Frontier* were published in alternate months, though sometimes sporadically. Professor Foster Harris of the University of Oklahoma and author of “The Look of the Old West” was the “consulting editor.” In addition to the 56 regular issues, *True Frontier* had 20 special issues on themes similar to those listed under *Western Frontier*.

The largest group of sister *Publications*—*Pioneer West*, *Big West*, *Western Roundup*, *Western True Story* (only 1 issue printed), and *Oldtimers Wild West*—followed a publication trail like an outlaw trying to cover his tracks—spanning a period of 24 years (1967-1980) and five different publishers. *Pioneer West* and *Wild West* (later renamed *Oldtimers Wild West*) were the mainstays, also published in alternate months. Here again, some articles were reprinted from one magazine to another within the set. Many familiar names appear on the bylines and title pages.

Several would-be western magazines popped up in the late 1950s to mid-1960s, only to fade almost immediately into oblivion. This batch consists of *America's Frontier West*, *Gunslingers of The West*, *Man's Western*, *Western Action*, and *Western Tales*. *America's Frontier West* is probably the best one historically. It has twelve good articles and a “big book bonus” entitled, “Last of the Great Outlaws...the Story of Cole Younger” written by Croy. Only “Issue #1” was printed. No publication date was listed, but it was apparently done in 1967. *Gunslingers of the West* has articles on Wild Bill Hickok, Joe [sic] Ringo, Ben Thompson, Cherokee Bill, Doc Holliday, Sam Bass, John Murrell, and Pearl Hart—all apparently written by editor E. Leigh Clynne and referred to as “chapters.” The autobiography of Calamity Jane is also reprinted in this, another “single shot” western, printed in 1966. The others (*Man's Western*, *Western Action*, and *Western Tales*) are very similar in style and content to the pre-World War II “pulp” —sensationalized narratives with the stereotypical macho western image. I consider them as intermediate links in the changeover from fiction to non-fiction. Moreover, they are very rare and, therefore, expensive to buy. So my recommendation would be to leave these to western magazine collectors.

Great West and *Authentic West* are the final two to consider. They could perhaps be best described as “soap opera westerns” (a pejorative term I learned and borrowed from a fellow western magazine reader). Many of the covers were liberally splashed with blood, a “dead (pardon the pun) giveaway.” There is probably one of the magazines Joe Small disdainfully referred to as “an eastern western.” There is probably good information in them, but the overall quality of content would undoubtedly rank lower than its peers.

A new *Wild West* came on the scene in 1988, one of many historical magazines published by Empire Press. The physical quality is very high—glossy paper and many full-color illustrations. Judging from the amount of advertising in each issue, they must be doing well

financially. Many western historians have given it less than rave reviews, however, in terms of content. It, along with *True West* and *Old West* are the only three survivors of what I define as “western magazines” in my book, *Catalog of Western Magazines Based On Years Since 1950* (acronym “Cowboys”), which gives more information on all the titles described above.

The next question is where do you find these magazines? Western Publications sells uncirculated back issues of most of their publications. Used copies may be obtained by consulting the classified ad section of *True West* and *Old West*. Some (very few!) used bookstores occasionally have a small supply. If you are really lucky, you might find a large collection in an estate sale or a stack of them at a flea market or garage sale. There is no telling how many are stashed away in attics, basements, and garages. Of course, many have been discarded. Fortunately, *True West*, *Old West*, and *Frontier Times* are the most readily available and, therefore, the least expensive.

I recommend that every serious western historian and researcher consider adding western magazines to your library. A complete set is a virtual western encyclopedia chock full of valuable information, written in a highly entertaining, easy reading style. Jim Browning’s recent work, *The Western Reader’s Guide*, serves as an index to help you locate articles on personalities of the Old West from the pages of western magazines. It is the first and only one of its kind and is of obvious value to anyone interested in western history. It is available from Western Publications, who also have their own index of articles from *True West*, *Old West*, and *Frontier Times*. A newly-revised version will be available soon.

I hope the above information will be of help to you and will stimulate you to tap into this valuable source of western history. I will welcome your questions, comments, and further information.

Update: Since this article was published, *COWBOYS* has been revised and expanded, published in 1995 as *Western Magazine Price Guide and Collector’s Handbook*. True West Publishing, Inc. (www.TrueWestMagazine.com) has replaced Western Publications as the publisher of *True West* magazine. *Old West* magazine is no longer published.