

Western Magazines--an Overlooked Source of Western History

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A long overlooked, and largely unknown source of western history has now come to the forefront with the publication of *The Western Reader's Guide* (see book review in this issue). This article is about western magazines and their value for western research. "Western magazine," by definition refers to post-World War II, general non-fiction, magazine format publications written in "popular style". These magazines are targeted to the general public and were printed for national circulation via newsstand sales and by subscription. A total of 30 magazines that fit this description were published, beginning with TRUE WEST in 1953. *Catalog of Western Magazines Based on Years Since 1950 ("COWBOYS")* contains a complete listing and description of all of these, including dates of publication and subtitles of special issues. The following is a list of western magazines as defined in "COWBOYS:"

AMERICA'S FRONTIER WEST
AUTHENTIC WEST
BADMAN
BIG WEST
FRONTIER TIMES
FRONTIER WEST
GOLDEN WEST
GREAT WEST (original series)
GREAT WEST (later 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 WEST
TRUE WESTERN ADVENTURES
WESTERN ACTION
WESTERN DIGEST
WESTERN FRONTIER
WESTERN ROUNDUP
WESTERN TALES
WESTERN TRUE STORY
WESTERNER
WILD WEST

WILD WEST (a later and totally different magazine than previous entry)

Of these thirty, only three (TRUE WEST, OLD WEST and WILD WEST) are still in publication. However, since history is never out of date, back issues remain as valuable and timely as the day they were published.

Western magazines have not been widely recognized and used for western research. In fact their very existence was unknown to most. "COWBOYS" and The Western Reader's Guide are valuable reference works for listing these magazines and cataloging and indexing the information contained in them.

A number of misunderstandings have limited the use of western magazines as a source of western history.

"Popular style" magazines are distinct from scholarly style magazines and historical journals. Journals are published by historical organizations for the purpose of conveying historical information to their members. "Popular style" magazines are published primarily for entertainment and are targeted to the general public. The typical format of these mass market magazines includes covers featuring full color western art or photography and profusely illustrated articles written in narrative style.

Undoubtedly, many have assumed that the content of popular style magazines is of little value to serious western historians, since they are written for general readership. However, style refers not to WHAT is written but HOW it is written. In other words, don't confuse style with content.

Also, it is not fair to lump all western magazines together. Each must be judged on its own merit. Some utilized historical consultants to assure accuracy. Furthermore, even though western magazines may differ in overall quality of content due to their editorial policy and personnel, the magazine is only a vehicle. The key to the content is the author of each article. No reliable western history author would compromise accuracy simply for the sake of entertainment.

One look within the pages of The Western Reader's Guide reveals a wealth of information by many of the same authors that are so well known for their western books. In fact many NOLA members have written for these magazines. Some issues even reprinted the entire text of rare, out-of-print books which might not otherwise be available, at least to the average western history buff.

This leads to another misconception. Many assume that anything that has been written in magazine articles can be found in books written by the same author. Western authors will tell you that this is simply not so. Information can be found in magazine articles that does not occur elsewhere, even by the same author. Of course many articles are written by individuals who never wrote any books.

Of course magazine articles are not comparable to books in regard to quantity of information. But length is not the only determining factor. Here we are dealing with quantity

versus quality. The longer the manuscript, the more information one would hope to find. But information can be very brief yet very valuable. For example some issues contain letters from readers which often contain vital details of firsthand information on people, places and events of western history. No research is complete without searching out all available information on the subject. That would include even poorly written material, inaccurate information and wrong conclusions. This for the purpose of dispelling any false information that has been conveyed to the general public. Since the readership audience of western magazines is largely the same market as for western books, it is important to know what has been written in that sector of western periodical literature--for better and for worse.

Western magazine articles can complement what is available in books for reading, researching, and writing about, western history. In the words of Walter Prescott Webb, "The files of TRUE WEST and FRONTIER TIMES are going to be of great historical value and should be preserved in all the libraries of the country." With that, I rest my case.

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.