

**RESHAPING THE DESTINATION TO FIT THE FILM IMAGE:
WESTERN FILMS AND TOURISM AT LONE PINE, CALIFORNIA**

Warwick Frost

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Abstract

Lone Pine is a small town in the eastern Sierra Nevada of California. It has been the location for over 300 films. In this paper I use Lone Pine as a case study to examine three aspects of the relationship between film and destination image which have previously been scarcely considered in the literature. The first aspect is the role of Western films in shaping tourists' images and expectations of the western USA. Second, in multiple-film locations, such as Lone Pine, the development of an image is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Third, reacting to what has been projected in films, Lone Pine has reshaped itself as a Western-style town with a Western heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

The Alabama Hills. They remind you of the Khyber Pass in India. And Texas and Arizona and Utah and Nevada. Even Old Mexico and Peru and Argentina. That's because they've played all those parts and more during their 70-year Hollywood career (Holland, 1990: 4).

The small town of Lone Pine in California is the site of one of the most audacious and unusual thefts in history. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Owens River flowing from the eastern Sierra Nevada was earmarked for a federal irrigation scheme. However, in 1904 a group of prominent business leaders, operating through the City of Los Angeles, began purchasing farms and the attached rights to irrigation water. This water was then pumped nearly 400 kilometres south to fuel the rapid suburban expansion of Los Angeles, leaving Lone Pine an arid wasteland (Reisner, 1986: 61-100).

While Los Angeles stole Lone Pine's water and agricultural potential, it gave the small town Hollywood in return. From 1920 onwards films were made in the town and surrounding hills. In his 1990 guidebook Dave Holland listed 152 films and eleven television series filmed on location around Lone Pine, but added that details of 1920s and 1930s films were incomplete (1990: 92-6). Further research has uncovered these earlier films, and at least 355 films are now known to have been made at Lone Pine (Lone Pine Film Festival, 2004). Such a number is double that made on the 'Movie Railroad' at Jamestown, on the western side of the Sierra Nevada to Lone Pine (Frost, 2004B; Railtown 1897 State Historic Park, 2004), but less than those made at 'Movie Ranches' on the suburban fringe of Los Angeles (Rothel, 1990).

However, film-making in Lone Pine eventually declined. Whereas 56 films were made in the 1940s, 32 were made in the 1950s, 10 in the 1960s, two in the 1970s and three in the 1980s, before a small recovery with 18 in the 1990s and 13 since 2000 (Holland, 1990: 94-5; Lone Pine Film Festival, 2004). As film declined, Lone Pine turned towards tourism. On the major highway linking Los Angeles to Lake Tahoe and northern Nevada, Lone Pine is close to the natural attractions of Mount Whitney (highest mountain in the contiguous USA) and Death Valley. Significantly, tourism promotion has now emphasised its heritage as a film location. However, rather than focussing on the wide range of films made at Lone Pine, its destination image has been based on the Western films made there. Indeed, reflecting upon these movies, Lone Pine has reshaped itself as a Western town.

FILM AND DESTINATION IMAGE

Discussions of the role of film in developing destination images have primarily focussed on single productions which have radically transformed tourism to destinations. For example, Riley et al (1998) demonstrated how *Thelma and Louise* increased visitation to Canyonlands and Arches National Park in Utah, *Last of the Mohicans* brought tourists to Chimney Rock Park in North Carolina and *Field of Dreams* created a successful tourist attraction out of an Iowa cornfield. Other studies primarily considering the impacts of individual films and television series include those by Beeton (2001 and 2004); Busby and Klug (2001); Croy and Walker (2003); Frost (2004A, 2004B & 2004C); Kim and Richardson (2003); Tooke and Baker (1996) and Winter (2002). Such revolutionary transformations often have significant economic benefits for rural communities suffering from declining traditional industries (Croy and Walker, 2003).

However, the film industry is not constructed on individual films, but on related groups of films. These groupings may be based on genre or theme, directors or star actors. The expectations of potential filmgoers will be guided by their prior knowledge, a like or dislike of, for example: science

fiction films, the director Steven Spielberg or the actor John Wayne. Most importantly, many films are shot at a small number of established locations, either due to their scenic or cultural qualities, availability of infrastructure or cheaper costs. Often used locations include major cities such as New York, London and Paris. In recent years a number of cities such as Melbourne, Vancouver and Prague have specialised in *runaway productions*, taking advantage of their cheaper costs and ability to look like other locations. Such *multiple-films locations* have hardly been considered in the literature linking film to the development of destination image and tourism. An important exception is Sargent's 1998 study of the *Darcy Effect*, that is, how multiple films and television series based on the works of Jane Austen and her contemporaries have been used to increase visitation to National Trust properties featured in these productions.

This use of a location for multiple films increases the complexity of the process of destination image development and management. A single film projects a single image, but multiple films project different attributes and views. Different visitors may be influenced by different films and expect to see *their* image. This potential for conflict may be greater if the location has been used to represent different places or in different types of films. Tourism operators within the destination may wish to shape the destination's image to fit that projected in films, though they may also have conflicting views as to which films and images should be focussed on.

This paper considers Lone Pine as a case study of a multiple-film location which has successfully developed as a small-scale rural tourism destination. I argue that Lone Pine has been successful in selecting a destination image to project which is based on Western films. Even though Westerns were only one genre of films made at Lone Pine and the town is arguably not in the West, the image and heritage of the town (including its physical fabric) has been reshaped as that of the Wild West.

WESTERN FILM AND THE WESTERN TRADITION

The period of the Wild West may be loosely defined as between 1860 and 1890. Even at this time, the media was providing hungry audiences in the east and Europe with a romanticised mythic image of the West. Buffalo Bill Cody was popularised through the *dime novels* of Ned Buntline, which ultimately led to the extensive touring of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (Carter, 2000). In that show Native Americans 'performed in New York and London while others fought their last battles in the deserts and mountains, or starved on their reservations' (Calder, 1974: xi). The enduring legend of Jesse James was due to James' success in convincing contemporary newspaper correspondents that he was an heroic southern rebel rather than just a bank and train robber (Stiles, 2002: 207-226). In the twentieth century, film and television became the main shapers of the Western image, though novels, music, children's play and toys, events (particularly rodeos) and tourism also contributed (Hitt, 1990; McGrath, 2001; Penalzoza, 2001; Stanfield, 1996).

The appeal of Western films and the West extends well-beyond its geographical area, being particularly strong in the eastern USA, South America, Europe, Japan and Australia (Calder, 1974: xiii; Fenin and Everson, 1977; McGrath, 2001; Penalzoza, 2001: 369). While the Western landscape may be attractive, it is the stories and personalities, the romance, the *myth* of the West which dominates both films and the image of the West. This mythic image has three overlapping components.

First, Westerns are 'America's unique contribution to that body of mythic lore familiar to most of the human race' (Pilkington and Graham, 1979: 1). However, while unique, Westerns refer to, and are in the tradition of, widely known romantic myths and stories such as Greek epics and medieval knighthood (Coyne, 1997: 8; Peary, 1982: 235-6; Pilkington and Graham, 1979: 1; Stiles, 2002: 224). Furthermore, Westerns follow mythic conventions by portraying the battle between 'good' and 'evil' (Calder, 1974: 37). As such, most Westerns are concerned about battles between human adversaries, with the environment as a setting rather than a protagonist. In adopting the patterns of such universal stories, Westerns extend their appeal both within and beyond America.

Second, while Westerns are set in an historic period, historical accuracy is highly fluid. As Rosenstone noted of historical romances in general, film-makers tend to concentrate on getting the historical image right, and 'as long as you get the look right, you may [then] freely invent characters and incidents and do whatever you want to the past to make it more interesting' (1995: 60). One of the most celebrated 'inventors' was John Ford, who in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) constructed a fictional story around the real-life personage of Wyatt Earp and then proceeded in *Fort Apache* (1948) to portray an accurate version of the Battle of Little Big Horn, but with fictional characters and setting (Hutton, 1992; McBride, 2003: 431). Nonetheless, even though such disregard for authenticity is widely known, it is accepted and enjoyed by audiences as part of the Western myth, and 'no amount of elucidation of the facts will destroy the myth' (Calder, 1974: xii).

Third, a significant motif in the Western is the 'good' bad man, the outcast or outlaw who rights wrongs, but can find no place in society. In many cases the spread of civilisation, particularly the closing of the frontier, has displaced the hero and the Wild West values he represents (Calder, 1974: 18-21; Coyne, 1997: 5-6). Such themes of alienation and the evils of modernity have a broad appeal, particularly in times of rapid change. The universality of the outlaw myth extends the appeal of the Western and is reflected in a range of popular outlaw films and writings throughout the world (for Australian examples, see Beeton 2004; Frost 2004A & Frost 2004B).

Western film has allowed the wide-scale consumption of the Western myth. As Hollywood churned out Westerns a range of places evolved as film locations. Indeed a pattern developed of filmmakers primarily using a limited range of familiar locations. Figure 1 lists some of these locations and their characteristics. Lone Pine was but one of these competing locations.

Figure 1: Multiple-Film Western Locations

Name	First film	Location	Features	Current status
Big Bear	c1910	Sierra Nevada foothills	Pine forests and mountains. Often substitutes for Canada or Alaska	Holiday area, little used
Iverson Movie Ranch	1912	Outside Los Angeles	Rocky hills and town set. It is claimed that 3,000 films were made here	Housing estate
Melody Ranch	1915	Outside Los Angeles	Town set. Various owners included Gene Autry	Burnt in 1962 fire
Jamestown	1919	Sierra Nevada foothills	Sierra Railway	State Park. Still used
Lone Pine	1920	East of Sierra Nevada	Rocky hills. Mountains and desert	Still used
Monument Valley	1925*	Utah	Desert scenery dominated by spectacular mesas. Closely associated with John Ford. Local Navaho used as actors	Still used
Corriganville	1937	Outside Los Angeles	Rocky hills, town set, Fort Apache set. Operated as a theme park 1949-1966	Fire in 1970. Now a regional park
Old Tuscon	1940	Tuscon, Arizona	Built as a film set, developed as theme park	Still used
Pioneertown	1949	Palm Springs	Town built as a western location by a Hollywood syndicate	Now a real town. Not used
Alamo Village	1953	Texas	Town and Alamo Mission set	Still used
Golden Oak Ranch	1960	Outside Los Angeles	Town set owned and used by Disney	Still used
Eaves Ranch	1970	Santa Fe, New Mexico	Town set	Still used
Cook Ranch	1985	Santa Fe, New Mexico	Town set	Still used

Sources: Rothel, 1990. * Rothel gives first film as 1939, but McBride, 2003: 288 lists earlier productions.

LONE PINE AS A FILM LOCATION

The prime attraction of Lone Pine to Hollywood was the Alabama Hills. Arid and rocky, they provided a spectacular backdrop to many action films. In addition, other nearby mountains and desert plains were utilised. A generic arid landscape, Lone Pine could be used to represent a wide range of geographical settings. This diversity is demonstrated in the list of major films shot at Lone Pine in Figure 2. In particular, it is notable how Hollywood used this location to represent India.

Figure 2: Major films at Lone Pine

Year	Film	Star	Setting
1934	Lives of a Bengal Lancer	Gary Cooper	19 th Century India
1936	Charge of the Light Brigade	Errol Flynn	19 th Century India and Crimea
1939	Gunga Din	Cary Grant	19 th Century India
1941	High Sierra	Humphrey Bogart	Contemporary
1949	Samson and Delilah	Victor Mature	Biblical
1950	Kim	Errol Flynn	19 th Century India
1951	Along the Great Divide	Kirk Douglas	Western
1953	King of the Khyber Rifles	Tyrone Power	19 th Century India
1955	Bad Day at Black Rock	Spencer Tracy	Contemporary
1960	North to Alaska	John Wayne	Gold-Rush Alaska
1962	How the West was Won	Gregory Peck	Western
1972	Joe Kidd	Clint Eastwood	Western
1989	Tremors	Kevin Bacon	Science Fiction
1989	Star Trek V (also Star Trek VII in 1995)	William Shatner	Science Fiction
1992	Kalifornia	Brad Pitt	Contemporary
1994	Maverick	Mel Gibson	Western
2000	Gladiator	Russell Crowe	Ancient Rome

Sources: Holland, 1990; Lone Pine Film Festival, 2004.

While Lone Pine was used for a variety of settings in major movies, most movies filmed there, perhaps 300, were B grade Westerns made between 1920 and 1950. These included productions starring Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, Ken Maynard, William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy), Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tim Holt and Randolph Scott. Cheaply produced and relying on stock characterisations and plots, few of these received any critical appreciation, the exception being the 1950s films directed by Budd Boetticher (Dibb, 1996; Kitses, 1970). However, many of these were immensely popular, both in first release and then later on television.

In filming at Lone Pine, Hollywood took advantage of the support of the local community. With agriculture declining due to water shortages, local people saw films as an important source of income. Russ Spainhower, a local rancher, became the key supplier of livestock and western equipment to the film companies. Local authorities provided construction crews on request and town buildings were modified as required (Holland, 1990: 20-3 & 74; Rothel, 1990: 70-80). Such established contacts drastically reduced the costs of filming and increased the attractiveness of filming at Lone Pine. Such co-operation was partially built on Los Angeles' control of the area, for

example the key location man Spainhower came to Lone Pine as a foreman with the Los Angeles Department of Power and Water (Holland, 1990: 22).

While the scenery at Lone Pine is dramatic, there were many arid and rocky locations much closer to Hollywood. Furthermore, some actors found the conditions on location primitive. Errol Flynn complained that the accommodation was poor, the weather freezing cold and the food gruesome (Flynn, 1961: 184). Why then was Lone Pine so popular? From the earliest days of film, Westerns were one of the few genres which were given freedom of location by studio executives (Dickinson, 1971: 85). Filming on location allowed directors to escape financial and artistic control. Many stars enjoyed Lone Pine for its outdoor life, hunting and fishing and break from the city (Rothel, 1990: 63; see also McBride, 2003: 102 & 419). Some found that the town offered less wholesome pursuits away from the prying eyes of Hollywood. During Prohibition Lone Pine was noted for its bootleggers and brothels catering for the film-makers (Rothel, 1990: 69; see also McBride, 2003: 149).

HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN LONE PINE

Heritage and tourism in Lone Pine is projected primarily in terms of film. Its chief attraction is the Alabama Hills on the outskirts of town. Relatively undeveloped, it has no on-site interpretation or walking tracks, though guides and maps are freely available in town. It is in Lone Pine that tourism development is found. Since 1990 it has held the annual Lone Pine Film Festival in October, a community project organised by 500 local people. Its core event is a programme of films made in Lone Pine. Other activities in the festival include parades, concerts, barbecues, discussion panels and guided tours of locations. Much of the appeal is in the presence of actors and film-makers who worked at Lone Pine. For example, the 2004 festival includes panels of both stuntmen and children of the stars (Lone Pine Film Festival, 2004). The incorporation of film heritage into this small town's annual festival gives Lone Pine a distinctive destination image. None of the other twelve Western locations listed in Figure 1 has developed a film festival, though Jamestown uses film as the background for its two events: the Movie Railroad Days and Gunfighters' Rendezvous.

Revenue from the Film Festival is directed towards the establishment of a film museum. By 2001 \$US230,000 had been raised and was used to purchase a site on the main highway. Construction is scheduled to commence in 2004 (Lone Pine Film History Museum, 2004). Film memorabilia figures prominently inside a range of tourism-related businesses, including restaurants, hotels, motels and bar. These restaurants and bars are used as venues for the Film Festival and for accommodation operators it provides an out-of-season peak. The State of California's Interagency Visitors Center, while primarily concerned with nature-based tourism and recreation, features interpretation on film heritage. The close link between natural and cultural heritage is illustrated by the premier scenic drive – the Mt Whitney Portal Road, also being routed through the Alabama Hills and numerous film locations. A further feature of the area is that films are still being made and that the local county is active in seeking to attract films (Inyo County Film Commission, 2004).

In developing tourism built on its film heritage, Lone Pine has chosen to reshape itself in terms of Westerns. While most major films made at Lone Pine were set in other areas, it is the B Westerns that have come to represent the town. As Rothel noted in visiting a local restaurant, their display of famous actors included only those from B Westerns and excluded those who made big-budget films (1990: 67). The physical fabric of the town has been altered to portray a Western image. The Dow Hotel was built in 1923 in the then fashionable Spanish Mission style. However, now it has been clad in clapboards to present a frontier image (Holland, 1990: 78). The local McDonalds is also clad in weathered clapboard rather than in the conventional corporate style (Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce, 2004). However, in reshaping itself as a Western town, Lone Pine may face problems in the long term. Many of its tourists are of the older generation, nostalgic for the B Westerns of their youth. Given that the popularity of Westerns has been in decline for over thirty years, it may be increasingly difficult to attract younger tourists.

In adopting this Western image, other aspects of Lone Pine's history, such as the Gold Rushes and the battle with Los Angeles over the water from the Owens River, are marginalised. Hewison's conclusion that English heritage attractions promoted 'fantasies of a world that never was' (1987: 10) could easily be applied to Lone Pine.

In this respect, comparisons with the small town of Bodie, 260 kilometres north, are instructive. Bodie is one of the world's remaining Gold Rush gems, with well-preserved buildings and streetscapes in spectacular mountains at an altitude of 3,000 metres. Yet, like Lone Pine, Bodie is wrapped in a mythic blanket. It is promoted as a ghost town where time has stood still since it was abandoned. However, in truth it has inhabitants, some its houses have subtly disguised garages and gas cylinders and the buildings are managed, protected and repaired by California State Parks (De Lyser, 1999). Nevertheless it is the image of a 'real' ghost town which prevails, brings in tourists and benefits the nearby service centre of Bridgport.

Furthermore, Bodie is often described as having been used in movies, though this is not so. This confusion partially arises from Bodie looking like the town sets in movies such as *Shane*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *Pale Rider* (which may indeed have been based on Bodie). De Lyser reports that it is common to hear visitors whistling the theme from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and argues that 'many visitors and staff experience not Bodie's actual past, but filmic notions of the mythic West inspired by and projected onto Bodie's landscape' (1999: 611).

CONCLUSION

As a small rural town, Lone Pine needed to develop a destination image that would attract tourists and provide revenue for local businesses. Failure to attract tourists, as in many small rural towns, will lead to population loss and economic decline. In seeking its destination image, Lone Pine competes with scores of small towns across California. Many of these competitors share the same sort of attributes as Lone Pine, for example, a history as a Gold Rush town. To succeed Lone Pine requires a competitive advantage, a destination image that distinguishes it from the others and gives tourists a reason to visit.

Lone Pine has achieved this through developing a twofold image. First, as a town which has a history of films being made. That Lone Pine is surrounded by photogenic scenery reinforces the concept that filmmakers found something special there. Second, Lone Pine has adopted an image as a Western town, based on the majority of films made there (though ignoring quite a number of major films). This choice of the West has allowed Lone Pine to take advantage of a vast and persuasive mythic image.

This destination image has evolved over time, as the body of films shot at Lone Pine has continued to grow. No one film has had a revolutionary effect, dramatically transforming the town into a tourist destination. Nor has any one film become the key one associated with the town.

Furthermore the town has not been a passive recipient of a film-induced tourism *cargo* dropped into their laps. The link between film and visitation has been developed by the local community, particularly through the running of an annual film festival. Such active effort has made the difference between a small town with an interesting history and a small destination with a vibrant, attractive and enduring image.

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