



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE LOST LONE PINE TOWN OF ANCHORVILLE

In 1935, the original “Bar 20 Ranch” in Paramount Pictures’ then new Hopalong Cassidy series was set at a distant, real-life, rented cattle ranch few knew – then or now -- the Lubken Ranch. Located way north and far away from Hollywood in the Owens Valley, this remote beef cattle ranch was situated a few miles southwest of a short, rural Main Street in the sleepy, small town of Lone Pine.



But the Hopalong Cassidy production unit would soon migrate a relatively short ways to the competing Anchor Ranch as its home base. This spread was closer to town, at its southern edge, on the same plane, about a mile from the still tiny city’s lone traffic light there today.

The Anchor Ranch was named for the proprietor’s family cattle brand. The place was owned and operated by Russ Spainhower, who for decades was the primary liaison working with anyone shooting motion pictures in the area. He was *the* man who studios would contact for western gear, horses, cattle, wagons, buckboards, props, wranglers, extras, advice and locations. When scouting movie sites for visiting producers, naturally he favored the grounds of his own picturesque cattle ranch.

After principal photography on Lone Pine’s signature adventure film ***Gunga Din*** was completed in 1938, Spainhower went up into the Alabama Hills and disassembled the production’s large Tantrapur village set, plus the fort, also the temple, and moved all the massive remnants back down to his own Anchor Ranch. He used these raw materials in constructing variously a large Spanish mission, hacienda, and ranch house as a single, integrated, standing set for movie-making.



This walled, adobe complex constituted the only permanent set in Lone Pine. Both the Hopalong Cassidy and Tim Holt filming units soon made good use of this impressive expanse. Set dressers would make minor alterations and upgrades to suit their purposes from picture to picture.



The mission-hacienda served as Gene Autry’s Flying A Ranch in ***Trail to San Antone*** (1947). The Tim Holt Company shot scenes there for such superior westerns as ***Thunder Mountain*** (1947), ***Wild Horse Mesa*** (1947), ***Indian Agent*** (1948), and ***Stagecoach Kid*** (1949). Among the first films to employ the new setting were Hopalong Cassidy entries ***Law of the Pampas*** (1939), and ***Range War*** (1939).

In the real world, following the real world war which ensued, cowboy star William Boyd himself assumed executive production of the Hoppy series – in order to save it, and, because he was by then typecast, also to sustain his own career. He negotiated a distribution arrangement with United Artists for eighteen pictures, but only managed to make a dozen of

these so-called Northvines before the sudden emergence of television rendered theatrical B-westerns a losing proposition.

This technological development in exhibition happened so fast, that Spainhower and Boyd did not foresee the impact television would have on the movie business in Lone Pine. In 1947, they had just partnered with a local lumber yard dealer named Rudy Henderson to construct a full, false-front western street adjacent to the Spanish mission-hacienda, both for Boyd's own use, and as a business venture to attract other movie companies to Lone Pine, and to the Anchor Ranch.

The plot of land selected was a beautiful, flat pasture on the Anchor Ranch. The one street mapped out ran east-west across the rangeland, and was perpendicular to Highway 395, which further north also served as Lone Pine's Main Street. The trio of entrepreneurs built late 1800s-era structures on both sides of their movie street to constitute a western town. As was true of the mission set, all the town buildings were facades intended for exterior scenes only; interiors had to be shot inside sound stages at studios back in Hollywood.



Pointing the camera to the east afforded use of the Inyo Mountain Range as a backdrop, while shooting in the opposite direction would capture the more spectacular Alabama Hills, and above them the snow-capped Sierras and majestic Mount Whitney and Lone Pine Peak. This added significant production value which easily justified the long trek from Hollywood of up to a hundred-man cast and crew, plus the key horses and equipment.

During this period anyone driving north toward Lone Pine could glance to the left and see the east end of this movie town very near the one highway through the area. The three partners named their creation Anchorville. The west end of the substantial street led directly into the main gate and courtyard of the adjacent, sprawling mission-hacienda set.

The town of Anchorville was completed and opened for business as a movie location in June of 1947. Unfortunately, however, owing to competition offered by television, B-western film production had peaked, and would soon be fast declining.

Though shown to good advantage in such lesser, later Hopalong Cassidy westerns as ***Hoppy's Holiday*** (1947), ***Sinister Journey*** (1948), ***Borrowed Trouble*** (1948), ***False Paradise*** (1948), and ***Strange Gamble*** (1948), Anchorville turned out to be an unwise investment. The venture was ill-timed, and was little used following the demise of the theatrical Hoppies. Western production moved to television, where action framed by an awesome panoramic vista such as Lone Pine afforded, was lost to viewers on the belittling dimensions of a small TV screen.

The obsolete and soon-weathered western street and building fronts of Anchorville fell into disrepair over time, and were at last removed completely sometime during the 1960s. Spainhower's daughter, Joy Anderson, could not be sure of exactly when. Evidently the event made no news, and was lost to history.



A Spainhower grandson, Tom Noland, recalls hearing the account of the time when “a strong Owens Valley wind came and knocked most of the town over,” he said. “The town was pretty much gone by the late 1950s. I do remember a few large walls, but they were all on the ground.”

The last productions to be shot employing the mission-hacienda sets included a two-part **BONANZA TV** episode (which also lensed at the Lubken Ranch), **plus Nevada Smith (1966)**, starring Steve McQueen, and **The Bamboo Saucer (1968)** with Dan Duryea. Down the cast list in this one was Tim Holt's most frequent and lovely leading lady, Nan Leslie, so memorable in the RKO westerns they made together on the same Anchor Ranch decades earlier.



The hacienda-mission complex was finally removed in 1975 – save for a still-decaying strip of stucco wall by a little stream, where even now western fans can (and do) visit to pay their respects, and conjure up memories of the better Holts and Hoppies produced there .

Today in place of the mission is a newer, working ranch house – a real one, used by descendants of Russ Spainhower still engaged in the worthy enterprise of raising beef cattle.

So the western movie town of Anchorville has been returned now to its original use as an open, green field, happily occupied by cattle seen grazing there by everyone driving through Lone Pine. The smart ones among the passersby stop, and stay awhile, because they know, as Dave Holland, the late, lamented Lone Pine Film Festival co-founder used to say, “The rocks, and the memories, will always be waiting for you.”

Written by Richard W. Bann

Museum of Western Film History
PO Box 111 Lone Pine, California 93545
760-876-9909

Website: www.museumofwesternfilmhistory.org

