



CAST AND CREW

Starring
Henry Fonda

with
Dana Andrews
Mary Beth Hughes
Anthony Quinn
William Eythe
Henry Morgan

Produced and written for the Screen by
Lamar Trotti

From the Novel by
Walter Van Tilburg Clark

Director of Photography
Arthur Miller, A.S.C.

Art Direction
Richard Day and **James Basevi**

Film Editor
Allen McNeil

Directed by
William A. Wellman



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AT THE END OF THE ROPE

by Nick Pinkerton

Along with boy-meets-girl and its attendant problems, perhaps no issue has so singularly preoccupied American movies for the past hundred or more years than that of law and order: the means whereby it is established, the contingencies under which it may be bent or broken, justifiably or no. In 1915's *The Birth of a Nation*, the Klan must ride to the rescue when official means of protecting the (white) populace fail – and vigilante 'justice' has ever since remained an integral element in American pictures, through *Dirty Harry* (1971) and into the present day, its expediency confirmed or rebuffed. In Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies*, released just a century after D.W. Griffith's cataclysmic masterpiece, Tom Hanks's lawyer James B. Donovan stops to give a remedial civics lesson in due process to a CIA creep, a reminder of the rules of the game: "The rule book is called the Constitution, and we agree to the rules, and it's what makes us Americans."

The matter of justice is a favourite theme, and nowhere have so many variations on it been played as in the Western, where verdicts are administered at the end of the rope. This is true in the moment where Gary Cooper finds himself duty-bound to string up his boyhood friend in Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* (1929), when "from out of the East a stranger came, a law book in his hand" in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), or in the films of the scion of a line of frontier judges, D. Sammy Peckinpah. And it is especially true of the movie that you hold in your hands, William A. Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943).

Wellman own legend is a disorderly one. He was born into a well-heeled Boston family around the turn of the last century, and as soon as he was able started putting considerable effort into wiping off the gentlemanly polish, remaking himself as the roughneck who earned the nickname 'Wild Bill'. He volunteered with the French Foreign Legion and served with the Lafayette Flying Corps in the First World War, and this first-hand experience with aerial combat would assist his break into the major leagues, directing 1927's *Wings*. During the Pre-Code era Wellman cranked out a run of brisk, crackling, often-risqué films, probably the best-known being the archetypal tragic gangster text *The Public Enemy* (1931). And though *The Ox-Bow Incident* was made as Wellman was moving towards weightier prestige projects like *Beau Geste* (1939) and *Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), the film retains some of the same lean, hungry, ornery quality of his '30s output. ("My pictures don't lag much," he told an interviewer in 1974. "If they were bad, they got over very quickly.")



The action of *The Ox-Bow Incident*, set in 1885, is confined to a handful of locations: the interior and exterior of Darby's saloon in Bridger's Wells, Nevada, the homes of a couple of the town's prominent residents, a treacherous mountain pass, and the studio-constructed Ox-Bow Canyon, in which a big, twisted tree overlooks the entrance to a quiet, moonlit clearing where wayfaring strangers might stop for the night. It begins as two men arrive in town, followed by a stray dog, ends with the dog following two men as they ride out, and an hour-and-a-quarter of gut-twisting moral conundrum plays out in-between. The riders are cattlemen, Gil Carter and Art Croft, who've been out on the range all winter. They are played, respectively, by Henry Fonda and eternal second-banana Harry Morgan, who some may recognise as Officer Bill Gannon on the late-'60s relaunch of *Dragnet* (1967-70), another prime piece of pop cultural evidence of the American fetish for all matters legalistic. Henry Fonda is, of course, Henry Fonda, the spirit of fair play embodied: in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), he's the Springfield prairie lawyer who keeps two brothers from swinging because of false testimony; in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), also for John Ford, he's the haunted, hunted Tom Joad, vowing to dispense a justice of his own when he's discovered that there's none to be had through official channels; in *12 Angry Men* (1957), he's recalcitrant Juror 8, a bastion of incorruptibility who gradually swings his fellow jurors to his side.

Or maybe this isn't quite the same Henry Fonda: in his first ten minutes of screentime in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Fonda's Carter has downed five shots of whiskey back-to-back, beaten a man insensate for speaking a few words of mild calumny, and puked his hate-sick guts out in the streets of Bridger's Wells. He is on the side of right, finally, but at least partway because he's spoiling for a fight. In short, he's a mean drunk: "It's like fire creepin' in the short grass," he opines after a pull of whisky. "I'll just let it spread a little while."

This bit of dialogue is adapted from Carter's interior monologue in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the first novel by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, whose 1949 *The Track of the Cat* Wellman later adapted into an odd, troubling 1954 film. Published in 1940 by Random House, Clark's debut attracted unusual acclaim for a Western, and the attentions of Wellman. He went door to door looking for a backer, which proved a difficult task. America was at war, and even if Clark's novel, as has been stated, was written in response to the rise of fascism and mob mentality in Europe, the setting placed it a little too close to home for a Hollywood that had directed its apparatus to Americana and morale-boosting. Wellman finally found a taker in Darryl F. Zanuck at Fox, who agreed to handle the material if Wellman would also make *Thunder Birds* (1942) and *Buffalo Bill* (1944) for the studio. Fox contract star Fonda, who would ship off with the Navy shortly after shooting wrapped, worked to scale, without which the film would have been impossible on the relatively meagre half-a-million-dollar budget provisioned. It was, as they say, a labour of love.

In Bridger's Well, however, hate reigns. Tensions are high and tempers are flaring, for cattle rustlers have been at work. When word arrives that the rustlers have murdered a well-liked local rancher, Kinkaid, a posse is formed in the absence of the sheriff by Deputy Butch Mapes (Dick Rich), who deputises the townsfolk without regard to the fact that doing so is beyond his authority. Imposture is everywhere. At the head of the column that forms is "Major" Tetley (Frank Conroy), wearing the uniform of an officer of the Confederate States of America though according to Gil he never saw the South until after the war was over. Many of the menfolk are thrilled at the prospect of a hanging, though a handful of dissidents also tag along with hopes of keeping order, like Tetley's pacifistic son (William Eythe), the voice-of-reason storekeeper, Arthur Davies (Harry Davenport), and Sparks (Leigh Whipper), an African-American minister who confesses to Carter that, as a child, he saw his brother done in by a lynch mob.

There is very little in the way of trimmings on the hard, compact *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which moves swiftly from Bridger's Wells to Ox-Bow Canyon, where the posse run across a group of three strangers who've bedded down for the night, and on the basis of some circumstantial evidence decide that they've found their culprits. The group includes a Mexican with a "*no hablo inglés*" line of defence (Anthony Quinn), an addlepat, weather-beaten old coot (Francis Ford, brother of John), and Donald Martin, a young man claiming to be a rancher newly-arrived from Salinas (Dana Andrews, who rarely afterwards would seem so engaged in a performance). After a cursory cross-examination and deliberation that threatens to break into violence, the three are summarily hanged from a convenient branch, just in time for the arrival of the sheriff who has arrested the men who bushwhacked Kinkaid, not dead as reported, but merely wounded. Whoopsie daisy! All of this is conveyed with a minimum of stylistic razzle-dazzle, mostly a grim procession of portrait-like medium close-ups, though in shooting the hanging, Wellman does have recourse to use a technique he'd refined since in the days of *The Public Enemy*, in which a crucial gunfight is 'shown' from outside of the building that it's occurring in, the action present only in its aural component. Here the hanging is covered through ellipsis, the condemned men represented by the haunches of the horses on which they are seated, then the shadows their dangling corpses thrown against a dirt embankment as Sparks, kneeling, sings them into the next world with 'The Lonesome Valley'. (In a clear allusion, the song recurs in the lynching scene at the climax of Joel and Ethan Coen's 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*)

The very presence of Sparks – his introduction accompanied by the sound of an ethereal choir, a rare moment of directorial overkill here – suggests another omission. Though African-Americans made up the majority of documented victims of lynching by an almost two-to-one ratio, screen depictions of lynching almost invariably depicted a white target. (*The Ox-Bow Incident*, it should be noted, does make a point of showing the particular ease



with which Quinn's Mexican bandito is offered up as a sacrifice.) The exception to this rule is *Within Our Gates* (1920), directed by a black man, Oscar Micheaux, and incidentally released when lynching was still really and truly epidemic. If *The Ox-Bow Incident* is to be taken as a cry for social justice, it must be said that it arrived a little late – as did Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936) and Cy Endfield's *The Sound of Fury* (1950, aka *Try and Get Me*), the latter based fairly explicitly on the circumstances surrounding the lynching of two white men, Thomas Harold Thurmond and John M. Holmes, in San Jose, California, 1933. (Apocrypha has it that child star Jackie Coogan was there and got in on the action.)

The credited producer and writer on *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Lamar Trotti, had dealt with the subject of lynching in scripts twice before. Atlanta-born and a reporter on *The Georgian* prior to his coming to Hollywood, Trotti knew something about Southern vernacular speech – and about the native culture of violence. His previous credits included *Young Mr. Lincoln*, in which the future Great Emancipator dissuades a mob from storming Springfield prison, and 1934's *Judge Priest*, also by Ford, which originally included a scene depicting the lynching of the character played by the black comedian Stepin Fetchit, cut at the behest of the studio Fox.

The other structuring absence of *The Ox-Bow Incident* is the absence of women. The few who do appear are pretty hard specimens – Margaret Hamilton, with a pungent walk-on as the scowling housekeeper of Bridger's Wells's bloviating Judge, or "Ma" Jenny Grier, a husky middle-aged gal who rides along with the posse, disconcertingly played by Jane Darwell, *The Grapes of Wrath*'s Ma Joad, who spends most of the outing tipling and flirting with the vilest member of the party, a grotesquely mugging Paul Hurst. When Carter and Croft first belly up at Darby's, Carter comments on a shabby painting hanging behind the bar depicting a scalawag creeping up behind an oblivious, scantily-clad woman. "That guy is awful slow in gettin' there," says Carter, to which Darby replies he feels sorry for the guy, "Always in reach and never able to do anything about it." This exchange anticipates the structuring tension of the movie to come – where is that damn sheriff? – and also gets at the heart of the madness that afflicts Bridger's Wells, and its men without women, men who don't trust anyone but, per Darby, "fellas they sleep with". (One so inclined may use this to suggest a subtext inspiring Marc Lawrence's Jeff Farnley, an old friend of Kinkaid's, to particular heights of lust for vengeance.)

In this same opening scene, Gil learns that he has been unlucky in love, and that Rose Mapen, the eligible bachelorette who'd promised to wait for him, had been run out of town by its tight-assed married women: "No tar and feather, no rails," explains Darby, "Not that she ever did anything, they just couldn't get over bein' afraid that she would." In a drum-tight film that is almost monomaniacally driven towards its tragic climax, the one scene

whose role isn't immediately evident involves Carter's brief reunion with Rose (Mary Beth Hughes), newly married to a sawed-off, self-important San Francisco slickster, when the posse runs afoul of the stagecoach carrying her, and shots are fired. Even in this seemingly unnecessary digression – Art is wounded, and Gil is treated to a dressing down from his old flame's new beau – the core themes of the film are evident. We are left with a sense of just how itchy trigger fingers are in this country, and the degree to which the law is only respected with regards to property rights, here those that bond man and wife.

Like the man says, "That guy is awful slow in gettin' there." Martin, a husband and a father, is finally condemned by his lack of a bill of sale for the cattle that he claims to have bought legally. There is a protracted wait – as Manny Farber once observed, "Wellman's favourite scene is a group of hard-visaged ball bearings standing around" – a drop, and, in the sickish aftermath, a final piece of elision. As Carter reads Martin's impossibly-eloquent handwritten eulogy, a private letter for his wife, Carter's eyes are blocked out by the brim of his partner's hat, leaving only Croft's eyes visible in the foreground. It's an elegant, ambiguous camera gesture, suggesting two men completing one another, a possible abashment at the intimacy of the message being read, and the blindness of justice – or injustice. The closing shot echoes the opening, as Carter and Croft ride out in the company of a stray mutt – the same riders, but not the same – better off with dogs than with fellow men.

Nick Pinkerton is a New York City-based writer and programmer born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has written extensively for publications including Film Comment, Artforum, Sight & Sound, Reverse Shot and The Village Voice.

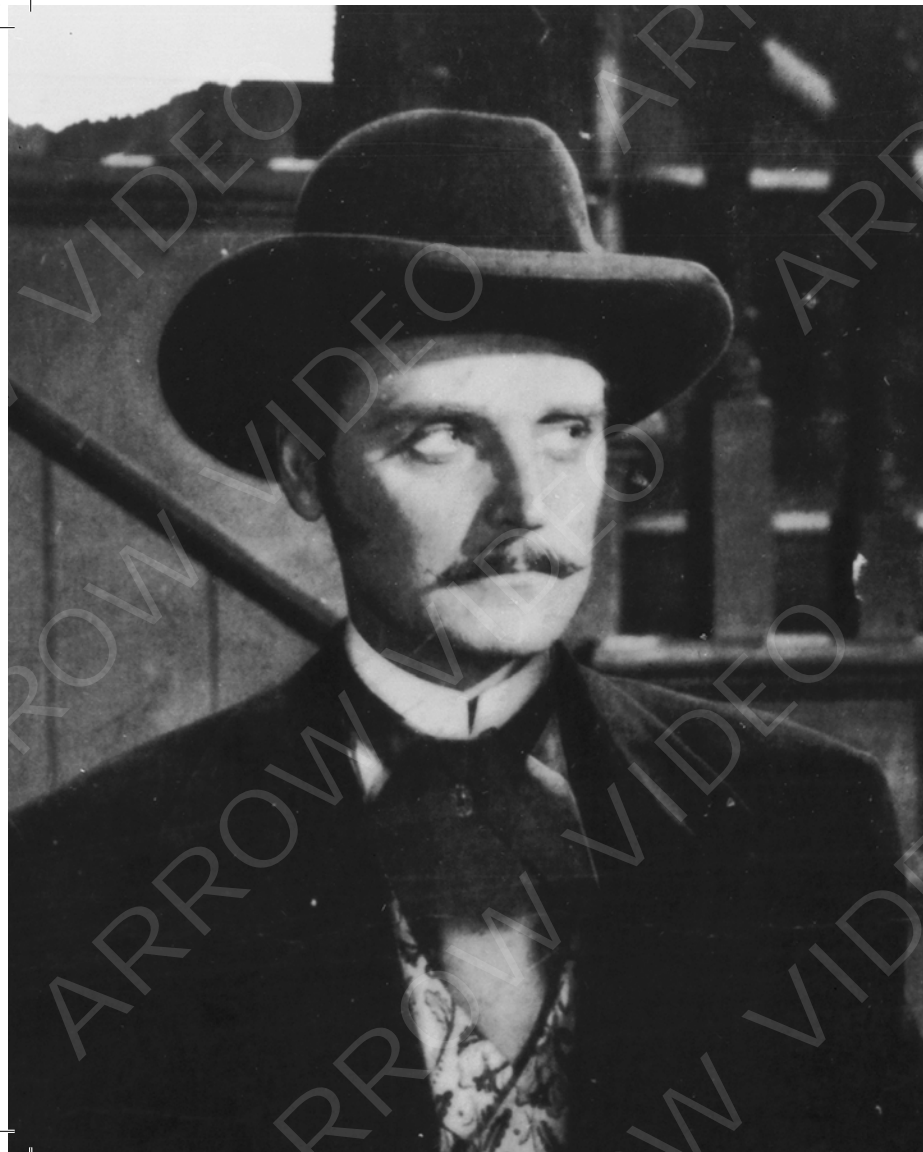




ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Ox-Bow Incident is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono sound. The HD master was made from 20th Century Fox's 4K restoration from 2015. A 35mm dupe negative was the source for the picture and the 35mm optical sound negative was sourced for the audio. The restoration work was performed at Cineric Labs, New York. The HD master was provided by 20th Century Fox via Hollywood Classics.





PRODUCTION CREDITS

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