
The Continuing Cinematic Presence of Kansas and the West

Film Reviews

edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch

Two hundred years ago this year Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out on their great western trek, and next year around this time we will commemorate the Corps of Discovery's sojourn through our region. After leaving behind their winter encampment at Fort Wood (near St. Louis), Lewis and Clark would follow the Missouri River along the border between Missouri and Kansas, heading northwest across the Great Plains on their way to the Pacific Coast. Between June 26 and July 10, 1804, the expedition explored and camped on both sides of the Missouri River on their trek outward, and the Corps followed the river's Kansas side on its return in 1806.¹ Lewis and Clark carried no camcorder with them; for our visual sense of the expedition we remain dependent on the remarkable written descriptions, the sketcher's art, and our own imaginations.

Half a century later, when the Kansas–Nebraska Act opened up Kansas Territory to white settlement and set up the terms not only for a new phase of conflict with Native Americans but also for the brutal internecine conflict over the issue of slavery, summarized in the label Bleeding Kansas, the camera would be there to record events. We have faded portrait images of the heroes and villains of the era, 1854–1865: pictures of Lawrence before and after its repeated sackings, snapshots of new-founded towns and Indian encampments and sod huts. But the pictures did not move.

The motion picture would come quickly to the frontier, however, finding its way here not long after the famous first display of the new art by the Lumiere Brothers in Paris in 1895. At the Trans-Mississippi and International Exhibition in Omaha in 1898, the event's *Official Guide-Book* tells us, visitors to the midway could be en-

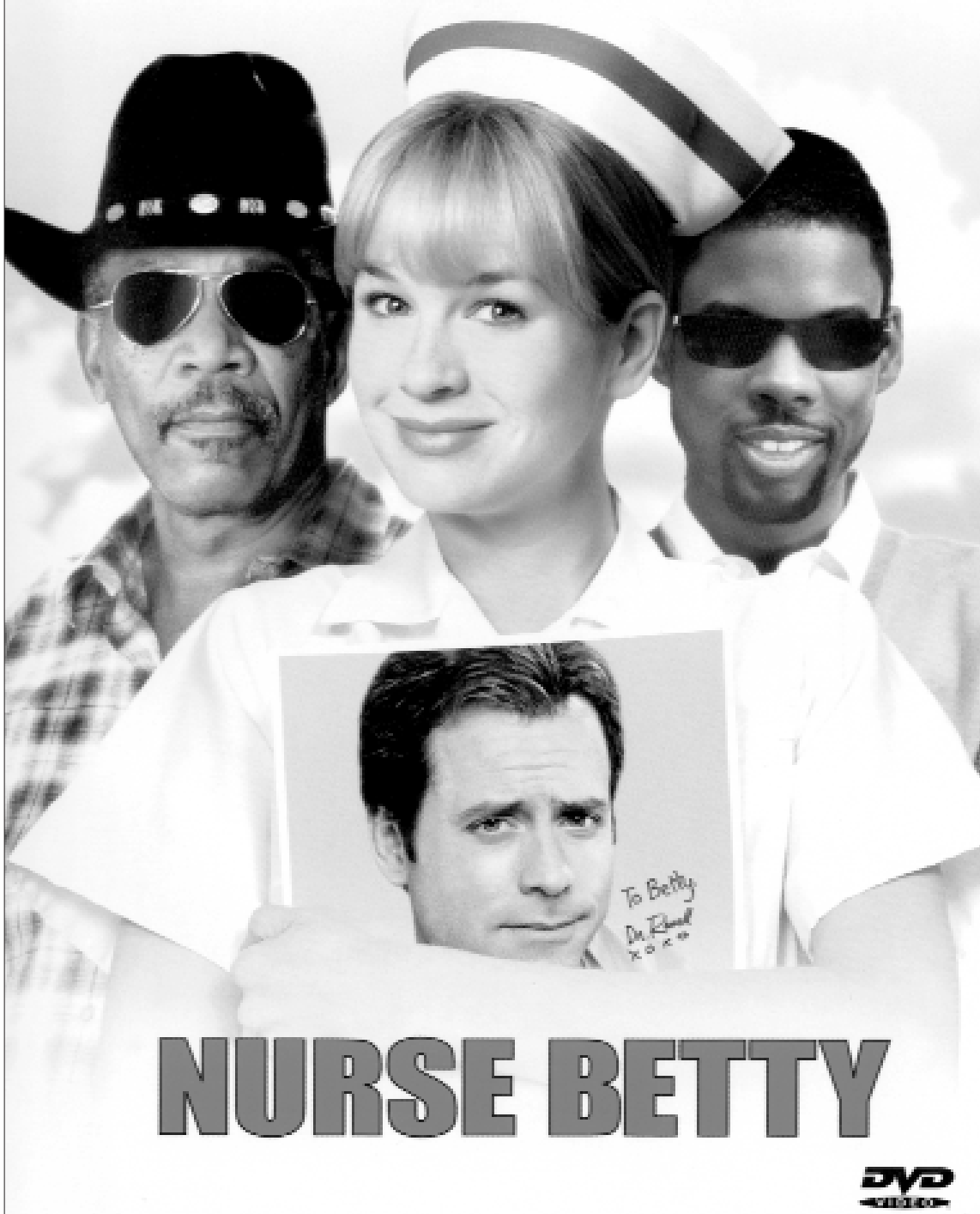
Thomas Prasch earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1995, and currently he is an assistant professor of history at Washburn University. He has provided regular film review sections for *American Historical Review*. His previous Kansas History film review appears in the summer 2001 issue.

1. Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, August 30, 1803–August 24, 1804*, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); *ibid.*, *June 10–September 26, 1806*, vol. 8. See map 54 in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Atlas Accompanying the Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806* (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1959).

Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 26 (Summer 2003): 114–25.

MORGAN RENÉE CHRIS GREG
FREEMAN ZELLWEGER ROCK KINNEAR

She's chasing a dream...they're chasing her.



tertained by Thomas Edison's moving pictures of the Spanish–American War, viewing the bombardment of Cuba's Fort Matanzas, as filmed from the deck of the U.S. battleship *Cincinnati*. And Kansas and other Plains states and territories would become film's subject as early as 1903, when Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* introduced that resilient genre, the Western.² By the time Kansas celebrated its territorial centennial while at the same time witnessing the the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision on *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* of 1954, film would be part of the making of history, not just its representation: film footage shot in segregated schools in the South was employed to make the case against the principle of "separate but equal."

We are approaching years of momentous commemoration for the history of Kansas: the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition; the sesquicentennial of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, and after it Kansas statehood; and the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Such commemorations doubtless will be accompanied by a rich new range of film explorations of Kansas's past. In the meantime, during the two years since *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* last looked at film representations of Kansas and the Great Plains, we find ourselves in familiar territory. Kansas continues to figure in the complex histories of American westward expansion and the struggle over slavery that culminated in the Civil War. And Kansas remains for filmmakers a routine gesture to embody midwestern-ness and its accompanying values.³

In this year's survey we once again have chosen a classic Kansas picture to open the section, this time one that reflects not only on Kansas as subject but Kansas as producer of film: Lawrence native Herk Harvey's cult horror classic *Carnival of Souls* (1962). The film has recently been re-released on DVD with, among other additional features, an accompanying documentary by a Topeka filmmaker: Bill Shaffer, who produced *The Movie that Wouldn't Die*. The film is reviewed for us by Omaha novelist Timothy Schaffert, whose *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters* (2002) suggests (without the horror-story trappings) his own deep awareness of the dis-ease of midwestern souls.

2. For the early history of the Western, see George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western, From Silents to the Seventies*, rev. ed. (New York: Grossman, 1973), 8–23.

3. James H. Nottage and Floyd R. Thomas Jr., "'There's No Place Like Home': Symbols and Images of Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 8 (Autumn 1985): 154.

Among the "heroes" (and film icons) to emerge from the Bleeding Kansas era was Jesse James, who rode with the notorious William Clarke Quantrill before beginning his more familiar career as outlaw and train robber. The exhumation this past May of Jeremiah James in a quest for the "real" Jesse James's body suggests the continuing power of the outlaw's myth. T. J. Stiles, whose *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (2002) provides a rigorous dismantling of the myth of Jesse James, seemed the perfect person to review *American Outlaws* (2001), Hollywood's latest distillation of that myth.

Offering a counterfactual alternative perspective on the Civil War, with an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of race then and now in American society, University of Kansas professor Kevin Willmott's new film *CSA* (which was premiered in Lawrence in February) imagines American history if the South had won the war. Reviewing the film is John Tibbetts, a film historian with a long established interest in filmic portrayals of the West, as well as a deep engagement with counterfactual approaches to history.⁴

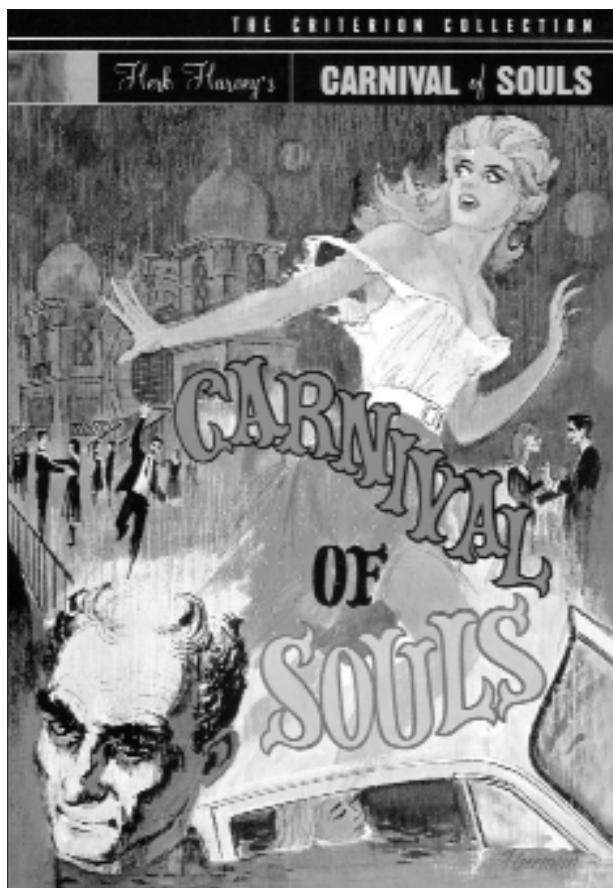
Paralleling the violence of Bleeding Kansas and continuing in the decades that followed the Civil War was the less overtly bloody (although sometimes just barely) white settlement of Kansas. PBS's series *Frontier House*, set in Montana, tested modern families against the exigencies of imagined frontier life. Ryan J. Carey, who reviews the series for us, has just defended his Ph.D. dissertation "Building a Better Oregon: Landscape Perception and the Production of Space" and will be lecturing at the University of Texas–Austin this coming fall.

Finally, Neil LaBute's film *Nurse Betty* was released in time for mention in the introduction to *Kansas History's* latest set of film reviews but not in time to evaluate more fully how the film plays on the archetypal territory most fundamental to Kansans' film image, *The Wizard of Oz*. Tom Averill, who has limned the legacy of Oz for Kansas in *Kansas History*, takes on the task here.⁵ His own latest reimagining of the contours of Kansas identity, the novel *The Slow Air of Ewan Macpherson*, is due out in July.

4. John C. Tibbetts, "Riding with the Devil: The Movie Adventures of William Clarke Quantrill," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Autumn 1999): 182–99. Tibbetts was responsible, for example, for bringing Kevin Brownlow and his film *It Happened Here* (1965) to Lawrence a year or so ago.

5. Thomas Prasch, "The Cinematic Presence of Kansas and the West: Film Reviews," *ibid.* 24 (Summer 2001): 136–98; Thomas Fox Averill, "Oz and Kansas Culture," *ibid.* 12 (Spring 1989): 2–12.

CARNIVAL OF SOULS. Produced and directed by Herk Harvey; written by John Clifford. 1962; black and white; Criterion Collection.



By the early 1960s Herk Harvey had built a career as a director for an industrial film company based in Lawrence, Kansas. Harvey's body of work includes Kansas tourism propaganda featuring stately rock formations and dramatic sunsets; training films for gas station attendants; films for corporate sales meetings; and one of the most haunting and respected horror movies of the second half of the twentieth century. *Carnival of Souls* was Harvey's only feature film, and it was plagued with serious distribution problems upon its initial release in 1962. More than ten minutes of the final cut were trimmed to make it fit a drive-in double bill, and the distribution company eventually abandoned the film and fled the country with Harvey's profits. Nonetheless, the supernatural thriller continued to walk among the living, like one of its

own kohl-eyed zombies. It played on late-night creature features, creeping into the sensibilities of filmmakers such as George Romero and David Lynch, who surely appreciated its moody atmosphere as much as its coyly articulated philosophical ideas on the ease of the soul.

The DVD release of *Carnival of Souls* (Criterion Collection) includes Bill Shaffer's documentary about the making of the film *The Movie That Wouldn't Die*, developed on the occasion of a reunion of the film's cast and crew in 1989. In Shaffer's interviews with Harvey and the film's screenwriter John Clifford, we learn that the inspiration for *Carnival of Souls* was the long abandoned Saltair amusement park in Salt Lake City, Utah. The site had once been a grand entertainment palace with a dance pavilion be decked by elaborate Russian-style turrets; when the level of the lake lowered, the beach retreated and the park was cast adrift on land.

It is not surprising that Harvey would be so taken by the elegant ruination of Saltair on his brief visit to Utah. After making tourism films highlighting the plains and horizons of the Kansas landscape, Harvey likely found this once-seaworthy fantasia a poetic statement about the pull of water on the human soul. Saltair, although once so close to a majestic body of water and intended as an architect's tribute to the invigorating salt air, ultimately was defeated by land and nature.

But all Harvey really was after was something atmospheric. He turned over all writing duties to Clifford, who cleverly worked the Kansas River into his script. The grim journey of Mary Henry (played by nineteen-year-old New Yorker Candace Hilligoss, one of the few non-Kansas residents in the cast) begins with an impromptu drag race, a staple of juvenile delinquent movies in the 1950s. During the race, a carload of girls goes over the side of a bridge and vanishes in the rushing waters of the river. As these are good midwestern folk, the boys who initiated the race stick around to talk to authorities, who treat them with stern yet grandfatherly questioning. ("You're sure you didn't crowd 'em off?" an older officer asks one of the boys, in a voice both gentle and gruff.) After dragging the river for hours, the townsfolk see Mary miraculously step from the water. Mary is only muddied and in a light state of shock.

Mary eventually leaves Kansas, and Harvey's camera follows her road trip along country highways as if tracing a finger along a vein. The viewer understands that her soul has been unsettled and that her relocation is marked by unease. *Carnival of Souls* features a gorgeous and deliciously outdated score of organ music by Gene Moore, a composer from Kansas City, Missouri, whom Harvey had met in his work with industrial films. Although the score harkens back to the silent movie era of horror, suggesting *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), it is far from melodramatic. The music becomes integral to the film's theme of spiritual unrest. Mary takes a job as a church organist, but she is adamant about being entirely unreligious herself. With the organ, Harvey and Clifford give their heroine an occupation and motivation, provide the film a lush and unique sound, and offer viewers even more atmosphere by making use of a Kansas organ company and its magnificent pipes.

Despite the fact that the minister regards her as "an organist capable of stirring the soul," Mary finds her own soul disturbingly still. The church unable to offer comfort,

Mary seeks it from therapy, solitude, and companionship. All the while, she is mysteriously drawn to the amusement park. Eventually, Mary is dismissed from her job, following a moment of possession at the keys of the organ and an interlude of "profane" music, and she finds her way past the barricades and into the empty park. There she witnesses the lost souls, and Harvey dips into a German Expressionist paint box, turning the pavilion into a hall of dark beauty and shadow. Mary, at last, has found her eternity among the giddy chaos of the undead.

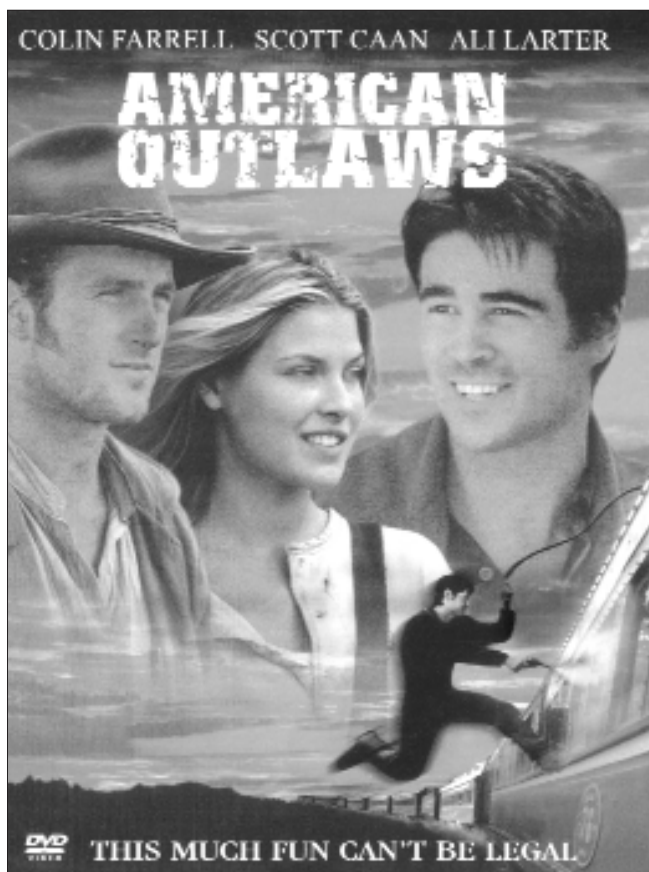
Carnival of Souls ends in the waters of the Kansas River, the car containing the bodies of the young women finally pulled up from the bottom. Here lies Mary, perhaps finally at peace, her soul irretrievably lost. And we also catch a glimpse of one of the other dead girls blinking, a gaffe that only emphasizes the charm and ingenuity of this low-budget classic.

Timothy Schaffert
Omaha, Nebraska

AMERICAN OUTLAWS. Directed by Les Mayfield; produced by James G. Robinson; screenplay by Roderrick Taylor and John Rogers. 2001; color; distributed by Warner Brothers.

A serious evaluation of the historical accuracy of *American Outlaws* is about as pointless as a discussion of the differences between bumper cars and highway driving. This is determinedly light-hearted entertainment. I have the impression that the screenwriters and director would be surprised to learn that Jesse James was an actual historical figure. It appears that the research for it consisted of several screenings of *Jesse James* (1939; directed by Henry King and Irving Cummings) starring Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda, plus a viewing of Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999) with the sound turned off (which is a good thing, since *American Outlaws* lacks the stilted dialogue of *Ride*). But, since *Kansas History* has requested a historically minded review, and because shooting fish in a barrel is actually a lot of fun, here goes.

American Outlaws does have a few things going for it, including a sense of humor, some neatly choreographed action sequences, and marvelously over-the-top performances by Harris Yulin (as the fictitious railway baron Thaddeus Rains), Timothy Dalton (as Allan Pinkerton), and Kathy Bates (in a deliriously goofy and all-too-brief turn as the mother of Frank and Jesse James). In terms of historical accuracy, it manages to hit the mark as follows: Frank and Jesse James were brothers. Bob, Jim, and Cole Younger were brothers. Frank and Jesse fought on the Confederate side in the Civil War, as did Cole. Both families lived in Missouri. The two sets of brothers, with Clell Miller, robbed banks. Allan Pinkerton hunted the James-Younger gang. Everything else is wrong. Jesse and the Youngers were not cousins, for example, but Jesse and his wife Zee were.



But this film was created because of the mythical, not the historical, Jesse James. The man on screen sticks closely to the folk hero who knocks around in the basement of historical legends, along with Molly Pitcher, Johnny Appleseed, and Mrs. O'Leary's cow. This Jesse is good with a gun but a reluctant killer, impossibly daring but devoted to his farm and mother. He is driven to crime by the evil railroad. He is a victim of injustice, a hero to the people—a social bandit, to use E. J. Hobsbawm's terminology.

The myth remains a fruitful subject for scholarly investigation, although there have been a number of excellent studies (including Hobsbawm's *Bandits* [1981], Richard White's article "Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border" [1981], and Richard Slotkin's superb books). Watching *American Outlaws*, however, I was struck by the precise points of separation between this mythical image and the historical reality. Those gaps speak to the remarkable capacity that Americans have to amend their historical memory, to reinvent their innocence.

Yes, innocence. If Jesse James stood for anything in life, it was the intense hatred that consumed the Missouri (and nation) of his day. The real Jesse James exacerbated social and political bitterness between his neighbors; he did not unite them against impersonal corporations. *American Outlaws*, like the longstanding myth, renders Jesse harmless, whereas the real Jesse was very dangerous indeed.

For example, the movie begins with a skirmish between Jesse and Frank's Confederate cavalry unit and a company of federal troops. But there is no evidence that Jesse ever fired at a Union soldier from another state. Missourians shouldered most of the war effort on both sides of this bitterly divided state. As a Confederate guerrilla, Jesse spent much of his time murdering Unionist civilians.

Once the movie returns to Missouri, an immediate question popped into my mind: where are the black people? On the James farm there were more black faces—slaves—than white. This was Missouri's most slave-dependent region, later dubbed "Little Dixie." Jesse and Frank fought for slavery, but that doesn't fit the myth.

Surprisingly, the gang robs no trains in the movie, although they raided several in history. Railroad corporations, however, paid no attention to the outlaws until almost the end of Jesse's life. Express companies, not railways, suffered the losses in train robberies. In short, there was no war between the gang and the railroads, and agrarian populism played almost no role in the outlaws' very real popularity.

The Civil War did. In the bitter atmosphere of Reconstruction, Jesse became a polarizing figure who rallied old rebels by defying the triumphant Radical Republicans in letters to the press. Although clearly he was disposed to crime after his wartime experiences, he also allied himself with newspaper editor John N. Edwards, who aimed to spark a Confederate resurgence by glorifying his robberies and cold-blooded murders.

American Outlaws is silly, as befits the myth. There remains a much better, much grimmer movie to be made about Jesse James, one that shows the horror and lingering hatred of a nation that went to war with itself, seen through the lives of neighbors who could never forgive or forget.

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New York

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C.S.A. Written and directed by Kevin Willmott; produced by Rick Cowan. 2002; color; not yet in distribution.



“Art is the lie that makes us realize the truth.”
— Pablo Picasso

“What if the South had won the Civil War?” That is the provocative question Lawrence filmmaker and University of Kansas assistant professor Kevin Willmott asks in his new “mockumentary,” *C.S.A.* Cast in the form of a documentary produced by the “The British Broadcasting System” and aired on Confederate television, it depicts a post-Civil War America dominated by a racist government, a “Confederate States of America.” The film’s imaginary chronology begins with the Confederacy’s victory over the Northern forces at Gettysburg in 1864; continues with the flight into Canadian exile of former president Abraham Lincoln and other Northern sympathizers; and touches upon other historical events

leading up to the present day, including a “revisionist” examination of the circumstances leading up to Pearl Harbor, the “truth” about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the establishment in the Reagan era of the Family Values Act (an institutionalized form of racist entertainment programming). Threading its way through this historical progression is a storyline involving the rise to national political dominance over a 150-year period of a racist Southern family, the Fauntroys. And interspersed through it all are recreations of historical events, faked television commercials, staged media events, and on-camera interviews with two faux historians—a white southerner (Robert Pate) and an African Canadian (EvaMarii Johnson).

Willmott’s “what if?” speculation joins a distinguished list of similar interrogations of the course of American post-Civil War history, notably Ward Moore’s novel *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), MacKinlay Kantor’s historical essay *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (1961), and Harry Turtledove’s *The Guns of the South* (1992). Such “counterfactuals,” as historian Niall Ferguson dubs them in his book *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997), only recently have acquired intellectual respectability as a viable way of approaching that elusive truth known as “history.”⁶

Precedents on a broader level also are plentiful. In 1825 Thomas Babington Macaulay defined history as the locus of reason and imagination, between a map and a landscape. Anthologies such as John Collings Squires’s pioneering *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History* (1932), Daniel Snowman’s *If I Had Been . . . Ten Historical Fantasies* (1979), and Geoffrey Hawthorn’s *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (1991) have asked such questions as “What if Don John of Austria had married Mary Queen of Scots and the Reformation had never happened?”; “What if Napoleon had escaped across the Atlantic to America?” and “What if John Wilkes Booth’s Lincoln assassination had failed?”⁷ Sinclair

6. Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Papermac, 1998).

7. Simon Schama, “Clio at the Multiplex,” *New Yorker* (January 19, 1998): 40; John Collings Squires, *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1931); Daniel Snowman, ed., *If I Had Been . . . Ten Historical Fantasies* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979); Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Un-*

Lewis's novel *It Can't Happen Here* (1937) postulated a Fascist takeover of America. And a cottage industry has grown around speculations concerning the Axis victory in World War II, including Noel Coward's play *Peace in Our Time* (1948), Kevin Brownlow's film *It Happened Here* (1965), and Philip K. Dick's novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).

Ferguson suggests such speculations are not merely idle whimsies; imagining alternative histories can be a vital part of how we learn, opening up to the historian the basic method of the scientist by providing a means of testing hypotheses. Citing historian Isaiah Berlin's critique of determinism, Ferguson says counterfactuals go wrong only when they provide implausible answers to improbable questions. "In short," writes Ferguson,

by narrowing down the historical alternatives we consider to those which are *plausible*—and hence by replacing the enigma of 'chance' with the calculation of *probabilities*—we solve the dilemma of choosing between a single deterministic past and an unmanageably infinite number of possible pasts. The counterfactuals we need to construct are not mere fantasy: they are simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world.⁸

Plausibility and probability underpin some of C.S.A.'s more outrageous propositions. In a February 21, 2003, *Lawrence Journal-World* interview, Willmott revealed that he loosely based his outline for an American Confederacy on the fact that the Confederacy had indeed drawn up advance plans for a "Tropical Empire" after its presumed victory over the North. "They had an actual plan," Willmott said. "So I used that as a blueprint—I didn't make that up." Lincoln's flight in blackface and capture by Confederate soldiers—one of C.S.A.'s more amusing sequences—acquires a kind of authenticity because it is told by way of a convincing pastiche of a D.W. Griffith Biograph short (and we are reminded that, in real life, Jefferson Davis purportedly tried to avoid capture by fleeing south dressed as a woman). Another film pastiche, an excerpt from a faux biopic *The Jefferson Davis Story*, captures perfectly the look and manner of a 1940s Hollywood film.

The Confederate government's use of tax abatements to induce the Northern population into taking up slave ownership recalls similar techniques with which our government currently entices big business into desired actions. The organization of the NAACP takes on a dreadful alternative existence as the National Organization for the Advancement of *Chattel* People. The exploitation of the Chinese immigrant population on the West Coast and the subsequent expansion by the C.S.A. south to Mexico and South America seem disturbingly rational, given the circumstances depicted. The reasons advanced for the C.S.A.'s participation in Kennedy's assassination—his support of the abolition of slavery—remind us that, in real life, one of the many conspiracy theories in circulation contends that anti-civil rights factions in our own government frowned on Kennedy's pro-civil rights stance and may have played a part in his assassination.

Even the television commercials interspersed throughout have the ring of truth. We might think, for example, that the ads for "Nigger Hair Tobacco," "Darkie Toothpaste," and the "Coon Chicken Inn" restaurant chain take Willmott's parody too far, until the end credits inform us that such products actually existed! Another commercial depicts a Home Shopping Network-type program that specializes in marketing slaves ("today we have forty Negroes right off the tarmac, waiting for you!"). Most painful to watch, perhaps, is a commercial for "The Shackle," a device useful in tracking down runaway slaves ("made of a lightweight aluminum alloy so it won't weigh your Tom down; perfect for children").

The not-so-subtle conclusion of this film is that yes, indeed, the South really did win the Civil War, and a deeply entrenched racism still exists today. "The South may have lost on the battlefield," argues Willmott, "but it won the fight for ideology. Look at Lawrence, a town founded on abolition but which later turned to segregation." This is the racism that, in many quarters, still contends that "states' rights," not slavery, was the key issue in the Civil War.⁹ As Willmott argues: "There are a lot of people today who want to divorce slavery from their Southern heritage. My film restores slavery as the centerpiece of that conflict."

Willmott began working on C.S.A. in 1997, while finishing up a previous project, *Ninth Street* (reviewed in the

Understanding in History and the Social Sciences (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

8. Ferguson, *Virtual History*, 84–85.

9. For the most recent instance of this claim, see the Ted Turner-produced *Gods and Generals* (2003).

summer 2001 issue of *Kansas History*). By dint of a PBS-affiliated grant from the National Black Program Consortium, the assistance of cinematographer Matt Jacobson (also a professor in the University of Kansas film studies program), and the cooperation of many students, colleagues, and professional Kansas City actors, he has persevered through five years of changes and revisions. The film

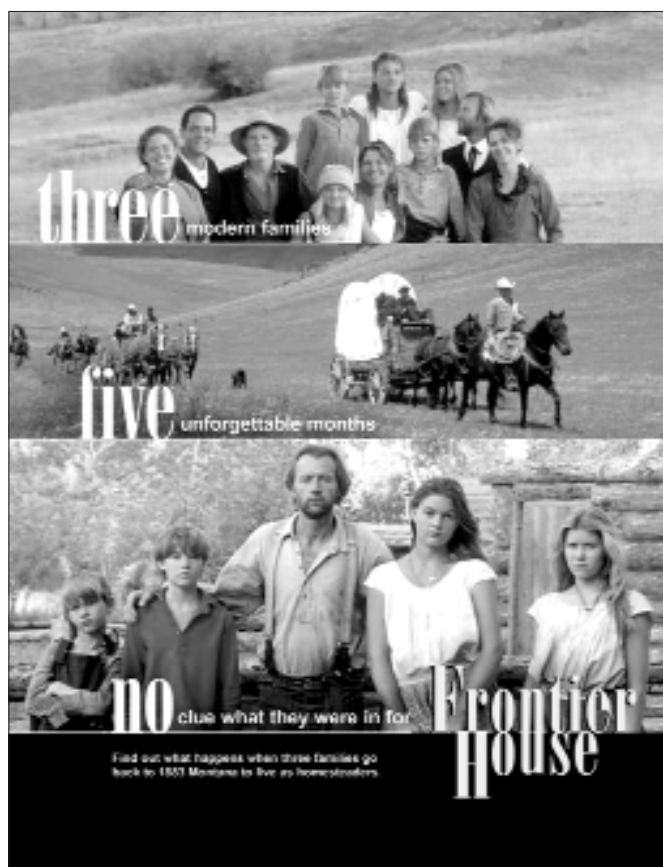
received its premiere at a benefit screening at Lawrence's Liberty Hall on February 21, 2003.

John C. Tibbetts

Kansas University

(John C. Tibbetts wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Mark von Schlemmer in the preparation of this article.)

FRONTIER HOUSE. Directed by Nicholas Roether Brown and Maro Chermayeff; produced by Thirteen/WNET New York; Beth Hoppe and Alex Grahm, executive producers; Micah Fink and Mark Saben, associate producers. 2001–2002; color; six episodes; distributed by PBS.



Survivor: Montana. I admit it, I watch *Survivor*. After missing the first season, which by all accounts was a watershed moment in recent American cultural history, I refused to be left behind again. Since then, I have seen every episode of every reincarnation of the television series that, along with its cultural cousins in the rest of “reality TV,” has dramatically altered contemporary television. When the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) decided to try its hand in this new cultural mode, I was intensely skeptical, but completely interested. *Frontier House*, a six-episode series about three modern-day families trying to live as Montana homesteaders circa 1883 is a wonderful example of the possibilities and pitfalls of reality television as educational media. As a teaching tool used in combination with the show’s informative website (www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse) and a good grounding in Plains or western history, *Frontier House* opens up a host of avenues for making Plains history accessible to undergraduate students. Plus, the PBS imprimatur affords us the fiction that *Frontier House* is not just “Survivor: Montana.”

The show puts three families on 160-acre parcels in a Montana valley for the spring, summer, and fall, with an end goal in mind (it retains the patina of a game show, a holdover from its roots in reality TV): to be prepared for a Montana winter. Thankfully, the producers do not expect

the families to actually weather the sustained cold of the Montana plains. The families themselves provide the dramatic elements necessary for what is, at its core, a set of very well-edited home movies. There are the Clunes, a family of five from what appears to be a fairly exclusive section of Malibu, California. To appease their teenaged daughter, they brought along one of their nieces of the same age. Then there are the Glenns: Mark, Karen, and Karen's two children from a previous marriage. Unfortunately, the series spends much time on the dissolution of their relationship; by the end, Mark and Karen have separated. Finally, there are Kristen McCleod and Nate Brooks, a wonderfully in-love and engaged couple who actually get married on the show. In the beginning Nate is joined by his father, Rudy, while the two build the homestead cabin where Nate and Kristen will live.

Of course, it would be easy to discount the series; plenty of aspects of it would make western historians cringe. For all of the ethnic variety of life on the nineteenth-century Great Plains, the composition of this corner of Montana seems to be more a product of twentieth-century multiculturalism than of the happenstance of history. Kristen McCleod is a white case manager for a local welfare-to-work program in Boston. Nate Brooks is a black administrator at a small college in Boston. They appear to do a magnificent job of navigating the difficulties inherent in being an interracial couple in modern-day America. But the ease with which they and the rest of the *Frontier House* residents deal with Nate's race ignores some of the incredibly pervasive and racist notions of blackness in the nineteenth-century.

But, for all its problems, *Frontier House* works. After watching the first episode, I could not bear to miss another. It was interesting, from the perspectives both of a television viewer and a historian. The families are as compelling as their situation: Montana in 1883. In negotiating the possibilities of that moment in history, the show's producers do a good job of incorporating some of the more interesting aspects of new western history, especially concepts of property and the complex sets of gender relationships in the late nineteenth century.

The frontier families constantly were confronted with the importance of property in the American West. Land, livestock, and even their own labor are hotly contested on the show and provide some of the more obvious moments that reveal the vast gulf between the myths and reality of

western history. At one point, a cattle rancher in the valley drives his herd through the community. The families are shocked and outraged when they are informed that the Montana open-range law obliges them to fence their own claims. At another point, disputes within the community erupt over "neighborly obligations." What are the limits of obligation in boarding a fellow homesteader's stock while they are building a new corral? When is it acceptable to not help out a neighbor in building those corrals?

Unfortunately, the show ignores the connections among property rights, capital, and the state. The show chose to "re-create" Montana in 1883, the very year the Northern Pacific railroad (NPRR) went from a twenty-year transcontinental fantasy to a reality of steel rails. How did the quarter sections of the *Frontier House* families compare with the NPRR's magisterial congressional land grant?

The issues revolving around gender were equally interesting. The male participants put on a tough face. They dutifully performed the normative male work of the Great Plains. Doing so allowed them to act out the lone man-in-nature so important to western myth. At the same time, however, the female participants were explicit, and often angry, about the drudgery and difficulties inherent in their labor. If viewed against the backdrop of "frontier diaries" selections and a provocative academic piece (for instance, Annette Kolodny's *The Land Before Her*, on domestic gardens and women on the frontier), *Frontier House* could be the starting point for a fascinating discussion of gender on the Plains.¹⁰

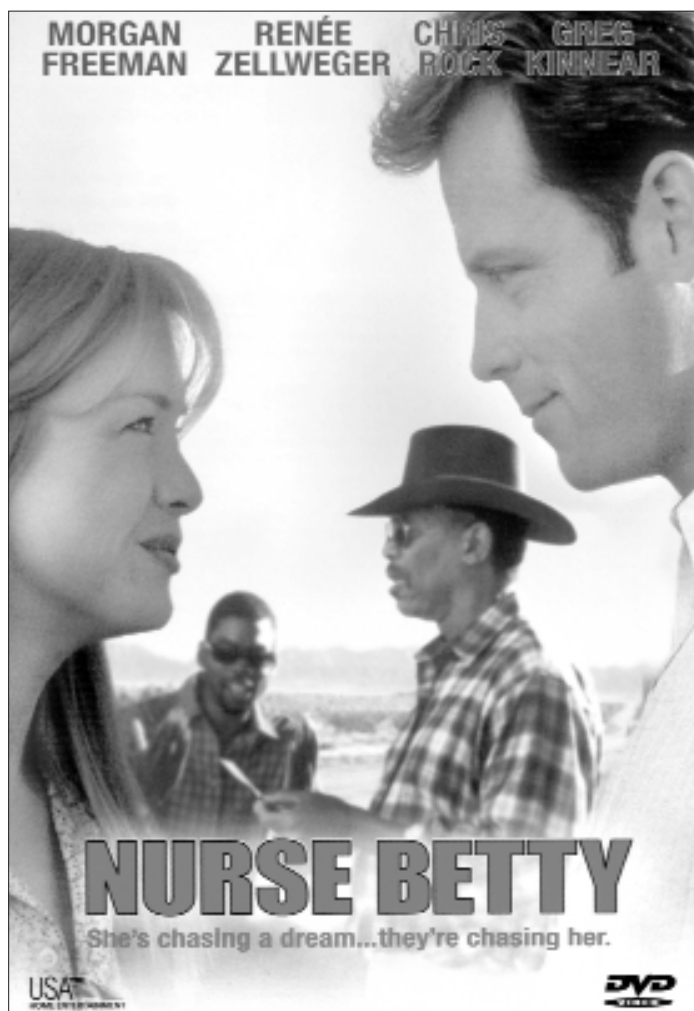
Does *Frontier House* measure up to the rigors of historical scholarship? Of course not. But as a way of negotiating what historian Richard White, speaking in Ken Burns's *The West*, called the "weirdness" of the western past, *Frontier House* seems right at home.¹¹ With the proper scholarly context, the series would be a great way to get students talking about western history, historiography, and western myths—both past and present.

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University of Texas at Austin

10. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

11. For an overview of his take on western history, see Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

NURSE BETTY. Directed by Neil LaBute; produced by Steve Golin and Gail Mutrux; screenplay by John C. Richards and James Flamberg, after a story by Richards. 2000; color; distributed by USA Films.



Nurse Betty has a simple plot. After the murder of her husband in a drug deal gone haywire, Betty (Renée Zellweger) leaves Kansas in search of her soap opera hero, Dr. David Ravell (Greg Kinnear). She is pursued by a father/son team of hit men, Charlie (Morgan Freeman) and Wesley (Chris Rock). In her traumatized state, Betty does not know the difference between fantasy and reality, but her crazed innocence fascinates everyone around her. By the time she finally snaps back to reality, she has managed to win everyone's heart. She is rescued from evil and lands a role on the soap opera *A Reason to Love*. At

movie's end, she sits in Italy ("the Europe"), well-satisfied with herself.

The finely acted film is winning as serious satire about the thin differences between Hollywood and real life in contemporary culture. But further, any aficionado of *The Wizard of Oz*—the film more than the novel—will be head scratching early in the viewing of *Nurse Betty*, thinking, "Gee, Toto, I guess we're not in *Nurse Betty* anymore."

Maybe it's Betty, with her Dorothy innocence, donned with the gingham apron she wears for her job at the Tip Top Cafe in Fair Oaks, Kansas. Her feet sport red shoes.

Maybe it's Betty's strong sense that her destiny is somewhere other than Kansas: she stares up at the rainbow mobile over her bed and thinks, "I just know there's something special out there for me." She is not singing about happy little bluebirds, but close.

Maybe it's her stormy marriage, whose violent end spins her into a journey while she is in a post-traumatic state akin to dream.

Maybe it's that her journey takes her to Los Angeles, a place as oddly fantastical as Oz, during which her confirmed innocence protects her from all evil and corruption.

Maybe it's her helpfulness to everyone around her, as when she saves a young man's life by inserting a tube through a bullet wound in his chest to allow him to breathe. The pretend nurse becomes the real nurse.

Maybe it's her unlikely allies: Roy Ostrey (Crispin Glover), a lame-brained, but finally smart, reporter from Kansas; and the blustering Kansas Sheriff Ballard (Pruitt Taylor Vince), who turns courageous when necessary.

Maybe it's the many wizards, seemingly powerful icons who turn out to be just men, after all. Betty's fixation on Dr. David Ravell stops when she finally sees the actor's world from behind the scenes, although it's not Toto who parts the curtain. Betty's fear of thug Charlie disappears when he reveals how captivated he is by her. His advice is typical Wizard: "You don't need that doctor. You don't need that actor. You don't need any man. It's not the forties, honey. You don't need anybody. You've got yourself . . . and that's more than most people can say." Like the Wizard in the Oz film and book, after giving counsel, Charlie disappears into the heavens (he is shot).

Maybe it's that final shootout, where the bad guys are eliminated with the help of a fish tank. They don't exactly melt, but a rush of water is involved.

Finally, maybe it's that Betty awakes from her stress-induced state and realizes that her dream is both over and yet real. She can be who she is. She has found her place.

The *Wizard of Oz/Nurse Betty* connection was mentioned in passing in several reviews of the film. The parallels are worth the mention, but viewers should avoid becoming trapped in comparisons. Sure, the OR (operating room) of the soap opera is as fake as OZ when Dorothy

and her friends first seek audience there. And maybe the OR/OZ is intentional in the making of the film.

But the real interest lies in the parallel that might not be so intended. In his storytelling L. Frank Baum exploited an archetype: the innocent who doggedly pursues a dream, who makes the world a better place, and who finds a place in that better world. That's Dorothy's story, and *Nurse Betty's*, a story very American, and very Kansas, too.

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