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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Horse Heroes: Comings, Goings, Beringia, and Climate Change

By David Frew
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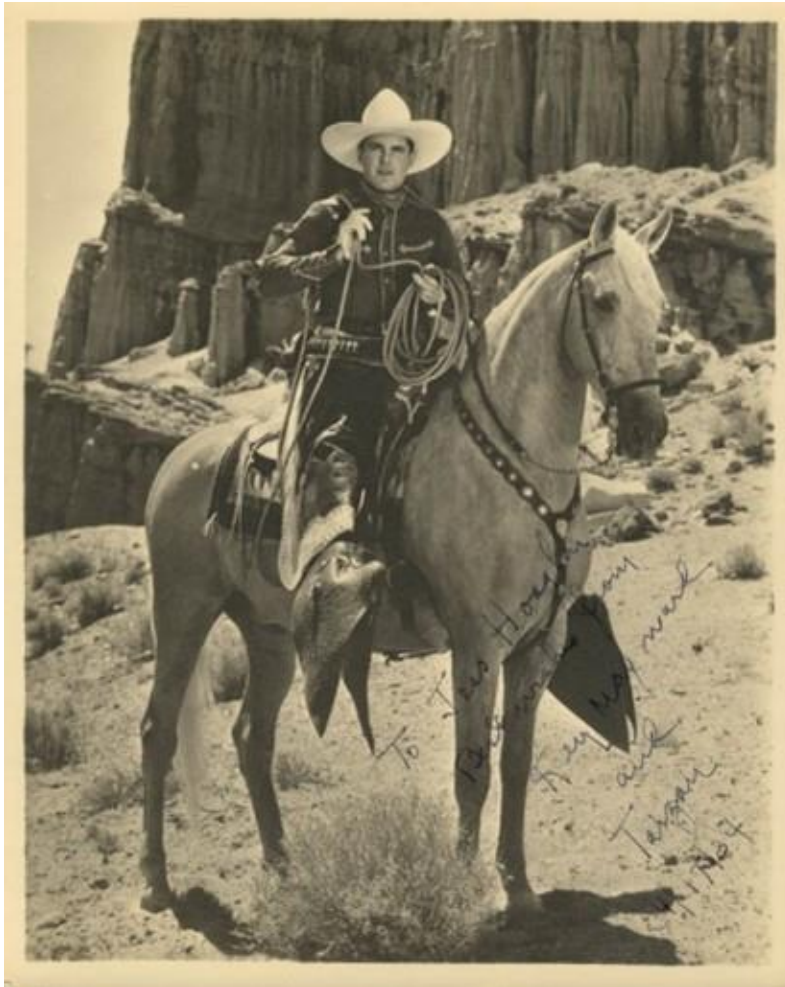
Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in December 2021.



Tom Mix poses with his horse, Tony. The early cowboy film star was born in Driftwood, Pennsylvania, south of Emporium in Cameron County.

Bay Rats were cowboy aficionados. We knew them all. And because we were introduced to these film heroes at our neighborhood theater, the Gem, we were exposed to the popular cowboys of the 1930s as opposed to the “modern” stars of the 1950s. The Gem was saving money by showing “vintage” films. Therefore, we watched Tom Mix and Ken Maynard films long before we had learned about Hoppy, Gene, and Roy on radio and television (Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry). Mix and Maynard were actual rodeo cowboys who found their way into movies because of their horsemanship skills. And both Mix and Maynard rode amazing horses, Tony and Tarzan, respectively. The horses, in most ways, seemed more heroic than their riders. Maynard’s horse, Tarzan, did dozens of great tricks, including bowing when he met a new cowgirl.

Ken Maynard made a large number of “B” movies, typical Gem Theater fare. Toward the end of his film career, he teamed up with two other seasoned stunt rider-cowboys, Hoot Gibson and Bob Steel, to make a final series of films. The heroic threesome was known as the “Trail Blazers.” To describe Trail Blazers’ films as second-rate would be an enormous compliment, not that we noticed as we ate our popcorn and cheered wildly.



Ken Maynard and his horse, Tarzan



The “Trail Blazers” in action: Bob Steel pummels a hapless bad guy while Hoot Gibson (left) and Ken Maynard (in his signature back outfit) watch.

The more modern (1950s) generation of cowboys, Hoppy, Gene and Roy, also rode horses that often seemed more remarkable than their riders. Gene and Roy both made cameo appearances in Erie with their horses, Champion and Trigger. They sang songs and told stories when they were at Gannon’s basketball auditorium but the biggest round of applause came when they asked their steeds questions, which were answered in a code in which the number of hoof beats on the floor indicated the response. For example. Question: Roy asks, “Trigger, how old are you?” Answer: Trigger responds with 10 percussions of his right-front hoof on the floor. Amazing!

In one thrilling film episode, after Roy Rogers had unfairly been locked in a town prison, it was Trigger who busted him out. Roy simply leaned through the metal bars covering the back window of the jailhouse and whistled. When Trigger heard the sound of Roy’s shrill whistle, he cleverly untied himself from the hitching post with his teeth and trotted to the back of the building. Next Roy instructed Trigger to pass a rope through the window, which was tied to the metal bars. Then on Roy’s command, Trigger slowly backed away from the window, ripping the metal bars out and collapsing the entire back wall of the jail. Roy climbed out and rode away as town constables fired wildly over Trigger’s head. As he rode away, Roy performed a circus maneuver, slipping to the side of the saddle so that he was shielded from the bullets by his faithful horse. Amazing!

Lone Ranger and Tonto rode similarly heroic horses (Silver and Scout). Once when Tonto had been sent into town to do something that was taking way too

long, Lone Ranger managed to get himself bit by a rattlesnake. Lying near death on his side next to a campfire that he had been building, Lone Ranger instructed Silver to ride to town and find Tonto. Somehow Silver knew exactly what to do. He trotted into town, stood outside the building where Tonto was doing whatever he was doing and made enough horse sounds to attract the “faithful Indian companion’s” attention. Tonto immediately knew that something was terribly wrong. Leaping gracefully onto Scout, he told Silver to lead them to Kemosabe. Silver, who obviously must have been bilingual, set off at a gallop. Finding Lone Ranger near death and next to the campfire, Tonto knew exactly what to do. Using his razor-sharp, Indian knife, he cut an X-shaped opening at the snake bite, sucked the poison out of the wound and spat it into the fire. Moments later, Tonto was feeding Kemosabe spoons full of a special Indian tonic that he had cooked over the campfire. Once again, the horse had proven to be the hero. (EMTs are still trying to convince people my age, who watched cowboy movies, not to make X-shaped cuts at the site of a snake bite)

But where did the great horses of the western movies originally come from? How did the cowboys and Indians get them? Anthropologists tell us that there were no horses in North America in the early days. But anthropologists have ways of defining “early days” that are almost unimaginable to ordinary people. Their definition of the early (pre-horse) days in North America is a reference to the era when Native Americans arrived. And unbelievable as it now seems, having watched so many old western films in which Indians on horseback fought against the Europeans who were settling the country, Indians did not originally have horses. Horses were brought to this country by Spanish and other Europeans who carried them from Europe in sailing ships. Then in their haste to conquer, the Europeans (particularly the Spanish) carelessly allowed horses to escape. The newly arriving animal quickly adapted and thrived on the western prairies. Within a few decades, there were thousands of wild horses in America and Native Americans captured and domesticated them.

Surprisingly, however, the horse actually came from North America in the first place. It evolved here but in its original form it was much smaller and more deerlike than the horse that we associate with Native Americans and cowboys. It did not yet have hooves. As the anthropological ancestor of the modern horse evolved, persistent climate change pushed it north and west across the continent, where it continued to thrive until the Ice Age. Between 16,500 and 30,000 years ago, a large land mass developed between Alaska and Asia. Stretching from today’s McKenzie River in Alaska and the Lena River in Russia (Siberia), the new sub-continent was created when newly forming glaciers caused by climate cooling effectively sucked so much water out of the world’s oceans that water levels fell by hundreds of feet.

Early anthropologists who first proposed this “land bridge,” connecting the continents, suggested a narrow and temporary strip of land that would have made

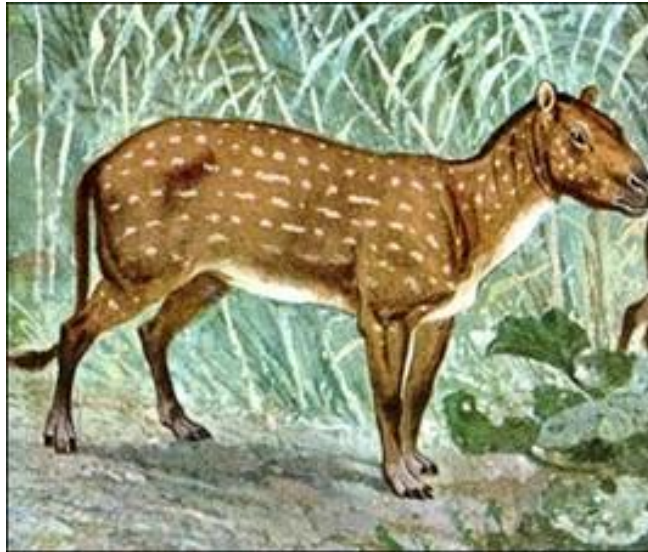
a crossing between continents tenuous, difficult, and dangerous. Since carbon dating and DNA technologies have added to the general knowledge of continental change, however, a vastly different reality has emerged. First, the land bridge was enormous, measuring more than 1,000 miles in width. Second, it persisted for 14,000 years, almost seven times as long as the history of world since Jesus Christ. In that time the land bridge, often called Beringia, was able to evolve a diverse environment, which included rivers, lakes, grasslands and mountains. Surrounded by water, it was a warmer and more diverse environment than the edges of the continents that led to it. Thus, Beringia became a magnet for all kinds of life from either side (Russia and Alaska).

While hundreds of species moved back and forth between Eurasia and North America on the new landmass (calling it a bridge understates its immense size and diversity) some of the most interesting were the horse, which left Alaska and continued into Eurasia, and the bison, which moved from Eurasia to the Americas. The early bison was much larger than the animals that we all now associate with the early West. It was closer to the size of the mastodon, which also came across the land bridge to North America. The land bridge was a runway, enticing other species to travel as well. The most remarkable of the new arrivals to North America from Beringia were the ancestors of Native Americans.

Beringia was not the only ancient human route to the Americas. Recent evidence suggests that it was one of three pathways. Asians had arrived by boat long before the land bridge and traveled south along the Pacific Coast to South America (Monte Verde Hypothesis). And Northern Europeans came from the other side of the continent, following ice flows through Greenland (Solutrian Hypothesis).



Beringia is the land bridge between Russia and Alaska. Light brown areas in the map above are now underwater.



The early ancestor of the cowboy's horse was tiny and deerlike.

The early movements of the horse offer a modern lesson about climate change. Imagining the reduction of global water levels of 100 feet or more that allowed horses to move from North America to Russia makes the predicted water level increases of three to five feet on America's Atlantic coast seem quite plausible, if not probable in our children's lifetimes. While supply-chain theorists gleefully anticipate the opening of shipping routes through once-frozen northwest passages, coastal dwellers from Florida, South Carolina, New Jersey, and other locations shudder at the thought of losing precious waterfront property. Skeptics scoff at the predictions of sea level increases of three feet or more, but comparing that change to the "100 foot reductions" that originally sent horses to Eurasia makes it seem less preposterous. The trick is to think of time like an anthropologist.

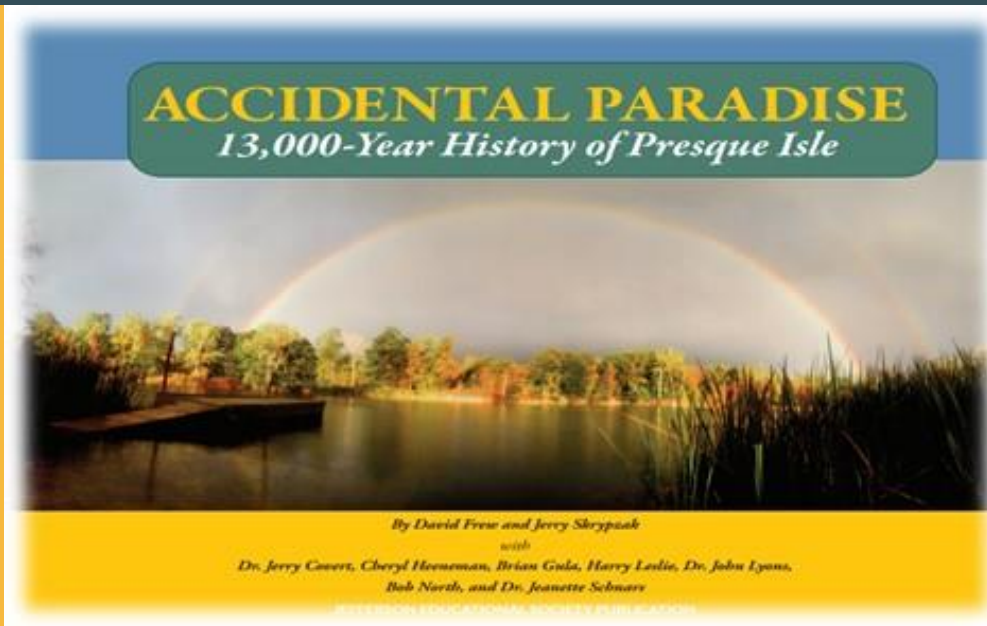
There are dozens of vintage Trail Blazers and Ken Maynard films available on YouTube.

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Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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