

Tom Mix: America's First Superhero

BY MARSHALL TRIMBLE, OFFICIAL ARIZONA STATE HISTORIAN

THE 1920S WAS an age of superheroes: Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Red Grange, Gertrude Ederle, and Charles Lindbergh. But the greatest superstar of them all was Tom Mix.

Tom Mix was the first superhero and was perfect for the times. Post-WWI audiences wanted to return to “normalcy,” a new word coined to mean “forget problems and escape to fantasy.” Mix’s movies were pure frolic and delight. He was the man in the white hat who rode into town and battled the bad guys. The films were loaded with fistfights, slapstick stunts, and pretty ladies, and to the relief of his adolescent fans, Mix seldom rode off into the sunset with any of them. He also led the “Shooting Stars” in marriages—five of them in all. One spouse took a shot at him but fortunately missed.

Tom Mix was born in Mix Run, Penna., on Jan. 6, 1880. He headed out to Guthrie, Oklahoma, where he worked as a bartender and played semi-professional football. The Miller Brothers saw him and hired him as a trick rider for their Wild West show. Hollywood discovered him after he was selected All-Around Cowboy at the Prescott Rodeo. By the 1920s, Mix was making \$17,500 a week, spending much of it on a lavish Hollywood lifestyle. He eventually made 300 silent films and nine talkies.

Mix was in his forties when he performed the stunts that made him famous. Every bone in his body had broken at one time or another. He was an action actor

who loved to make fun of his acting ability. Once, he asked a director, “Do you want expression number 1, 2 or 3?” Legend has it that the advent of talkies ended his career because he had a weak voice. Truth is, his voice was fine; he thought talkies would ruin his action films.

Mix’s horse, Tony, was the only horse who starred in his own movie, *Just Tony*, in 1922, with Mix in a supporting role.



Tony leaped steep canyons, swam raging rivers, galloped through fire, and walked over to a table where he picked up Mix’s six-shooter and brought it to him. Tony, like Mix, had lots of onscreen flirtations, only his were with comely colts.

An overeager agent embellished Mix’s biography, saying he was a Texas Ranger, was a U.S. Marshal, rode with Pancho Villa in Mexico, and fought in the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Boer War in Africa, and the Spanish American War. He’d done none of these, but he was one heck of

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a rider, and he loved his horse more than anything. Once, Tony was nearly injured performing a stunt, and from then on, Tony had a double while Mix performed his stunts. It was the only time in Hollywood when the star’s horse had a double but the star didn’t.

In 1929, the cowboy genre was declared dead. Charles Lindbergh was the new hero in town. Many experts predicted talkies would be the end of cowboy movie stars whose virtuous character was seen as old-fashioned. One critic wrote, “Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, and Ken Maynard had better switch to aeroplanes or retreat to the old actors home.”

Mix was killed near Florence, Ariz., on Oct. 12, 1940, when his 1937 yellow Cord Phaeton convertible crashed. Too late, he saw barricades on a bridge detour. He swung into a wash, jolting the car and causing an aluminum suitcase to fly up from the back seat, breaking his neck. He got out, took one step and fell to the ground. Tony the wonder horse died two years later. ❧

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He has been called a cowboy singer, a humorist, and a storyteller, and is Arizona’s official state historian, but Marshall Trimble’s most treasured title is teacher. He hopes people will realize the im-

portance and fun involved in Arizona history and culture. marshall@northvalleymagazine.com