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Author(s): James E. Babbitt

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WHEN HOLLYWOOD CAME TO TUBA CITY

The Filming of Zane Grey's *Sunset Pass*

by
James E. Babbitt

AN ARTICLE IN THE NOVEMBER 2, 1928, *Coconino Sun* noted the arrival of Sidney S. Street in Flagstaff. Street, business manager for the Paramount Famous Players-Lasky motion picture company, was on his way to Tuba City to make advance preparations for the filming of *Sunset Pass*, the latest in a series of silent movies based on the western romance novels of Zane Grey. The rest of the film company, actors, extras, cameramen, and production staff, joined Street on location several days later, and, for a brief period, the sleepy desert outpost of Tuba City basked in the excitement and glory of Hollywood.¹

Zane Grey, one of the most prolific and popular American writers during the first half of the twentieth century, produced eighty-nine books in his lifetime, including fifty-six western novels, many of which first appeared in serial form in magazines of huge circulation. Generations of magazine readers enjoyed the Grey serials, which reached whole new audiences when published in book form. Hollywood discovered Grey's work in 1918. Since then, forty-six of his novels and stories have been made into motion pictures and many titles have been remade through the years. Yet there was little in Zane Grey's early background to suggest that he would have huge successes as a writer.²

Grey was born in Ohio in 1872, a descendant of a Danish family that had emigrated to America in 1678. The family included Col. Ebenezer Zane, a hero of the Revolutionary War, who led

James Babbitt is president of Babbitt's Backcountry Outfitters in Flagstaff and a frequent contributor to *The Journal of Arizona History*. He presented an earlier version of this article at the 1998 Arizona Historical Convention in Prescott.

the successful defense of Fort Henry, near present-day Wheeling, West Virginia, against repeated British attacks and was commended for bravery by George Washington. The Continental Congress rewarded Zane with a land grant in the Ohio Valley, where he later established the town of Zanesville. It was here that Colonel Zane's great-granddaughter, Josephine, married Lewis M. Gray, an Irish preacher-turned-dentist. This union produced five children, including Pearl Zane, the future novelist who would later drop the feminine "Pearl" and alter the spelling of his last name to become "Zane Grey."³

Young Pearl Gray developed a love of outdoor activities, particularly baseball and fishing. Little interested in academics, he was a voracious reader and dreamed of becoming a writer. Admitted to the University of Pennsylvania on a baseball scholarship, Gray received only average grades, graduating in 1896 with a degree in dentistry. After graduation, he moved to New York City and established a dental practice on West 74th Street. The reluctant dentist began to write in his spare time, selling his first magazine article, a fishing story, in 1902. He completed his first

Zane Grey in Monument Valley, c. 1912. (OHS #8864)



novel, *Betty Zane*, in 1903. The book centered on the exploits of the Zane family in colonial times. Grey soon decided to close his dental office and devote full time to his writing.

In 1905, Grey married his longtime sweetheart, Lina “Dolly” Roth. The newlyweds took a honeymoon trip to California early the following year, stopping in Flagstaff along the way and making a side trip to the Grand Canyon. The majestic San Francisco Peaks towering above Flagstaff and the spectacular view of the Grand Canyon from the El Tovar Hotel made a deep impression on Grey, for they were unlike anything he had ever experienced. He was immediately attracted to Arizona’s rugged landscape and was determined to return at the first opportunity.

While practicing dentistry in New York, Grey often attended meetings of the Campfire Club, where he heard big-game hunters and explorers relate adventures from around the world. One meeting featured a lecture by Charles Jesse “Buffalo” Jones, a hunter and former game warden, who had established a buffalo reserve near the Grand Canyon’s north rim. Jones explained his efforts to breed buffalo with cattle to create herds suited to northern Arizona’s arid environment. Concerned with the rapidly declining number of mountain lions, he also told of capturing cougars in the wild and removing them to game preserves and zoos in an attempt to save the species. Grey, listening with rapt attention, began to think about using Jones’s stories as the basis for a book. After the two became acquainted, Jones invited the tenderfoot Grey to visit his ranch.⁴

Grey departed for Arizona in March of 1907, planning to spend several weeks with Jones gathering story material. In a letter to Dolly written in Flagstaff’s Commercial Hotel on April 8, 1907, he said, “We shall start in a day or two. We travel with the Mormons for over a hundred and eighty miles. I’ll get to study them and get to go into the Moki and Indian towns. This ought to make great material for the occasional short story I want to write.”⁵

Mormon guide Jim Emmett led the party north from Flagstaff across the Little Colorado River and through the Painted Desert. Crossing the Colorado River at Lee’s Ferry, the travelers rested at Emmett’s ranch before arriving at Jones’s ranch in House Rock Valley. Jones and Emmett guided Grey up onto Buckskin Mountain (the Kaibab Plateau) where they chased and killed “Old Tom,” a



Zane Grey and Jack Holt, 1928. (OHS #5580)

huge mountain lion. Absorbing frontier culture, Grey learned to ride, rope, and shoot a rifle as he drank in the strange new landscape. After becoming acquainted with the local Mormon pioneers, he came to admire these hardy men and women, who struggled to eke out a living in the remote reaches of northern Arizona and southern Utah. Returning to the East full of western lore, he wrote *The Last of the Plainsmen*, a novel that incorporated his Arizona experiences and marked his transformation into a writer of the West.

On another trip to Arizona, in 1911, Grey was exposed to the wide expanses of northern Arizona's Indian reservations and to the lore and culture of the Navajo and Hopi people. Arriving in Flagstaff in April, Grey hired Al Doyle, a well-known local figure, to guide him through Indian country. They explored the colorful scenery of Tsegi Canyon and Monument Valley, visiting the Wetherill trading post at Kayenta, where Louisa Wetherill entertained them with accounts of Navajo customs and legends. Grey also visited the ruins at Betatakin (now Navajo National Monument) and learned about the prehistoric cultures of the

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region. The unique high-desert landscape and exotic native cultures provided another rich source of story material for Grey's writing. *The Rainbow Trail*, published in 1915, was the first of several books using Indian themes and reservation settings.⁶

Grey came back to Arizona in 1915 to accompany Al Doyle on a hunting trip to the White Mountains and the Mogollon Rim. This rugged wilderness of sprawling pine forests and sparkling streams captivated Grey. He also found that the area had an intriguing human history. He listened to Doyle's campfire tales of range wars, cattle rustling, and frontier conflict—stories probably inspired by the Graham-Tewksbury feud and the Pleasant Valley war in the 1880s. Grey's infatuation with the area was reflected in his writing. Fourteen novels, including *To the Last Man* published in 1922, were set in rim country. He returned to the area many times and in 1920 purchased a hunting lodge just below the Mogollon Rim.⁷

In 1918, Grey moved his family to California, where he established a residence in Altadena. He developed an interest in the budding film industry, realizing that this new medium could carry his western novels to vast new audiences. Edward Stanton

Tuba trading post, 1920s.



Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, released in 1903, was a huge box-office success and helped to make the western a favorite with motion-picture audiences. Films such as *The Bandit Makes Good* (1908) and G. M. Anderson's Bronco Billy series (1910–1915) fueled the movie-going public's love affair with westerns. In 1916, Grey sold to William Fox the motion picture rights to three of his novels for \$2,500 each. Fox Studios produced *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *The Rainbow Trail* in 1918. The success of these first two pictures, both filmed on location in northern Arizona, established Grey as a major figure in the motion-picture industry. During the 1920s, an average of four films based on his novels were released per year.⁸

On another hunting trip to the Tonto Basin in 1919, Al Doyle's son, Lee, recounted to Grey a story of early-day cattle rustling in the Sunset Mountains south of Winslow. The story inspired Grey's 1927 *Sunset Pass*. The hero of Grey's novel is Trueman Rock, a virtuous and hard-working cowboy recently returned to the small town of Wagontongue after a self-imposed exile following a deadly gunfight. Upon his return, Rock is smitten by Thiry Preston, a lovely young lady whose family has taken up residence on a ranch in Sunset Pass. Rock follows Thiry back to the ranch and is hired as a rider for the Preston outfit. Ash, Thiry's jealous brother, does everything in his power to keep Rock away from Thiry. Meanwhile, rumors swirl about the disappearance of cattle from ranches surrounding Sunset Pass. After determined, but unsuccessful, efforts to win Thiry's love, Rock discovers that Ash Preston and his father, Gage, are indeed rustling their neighbors' cattle, butchering them, and selling the carcasses in town. Rock confronts the rustlers, and kills Ash in a heated gunfight. Finally Rock wins Thiry's love, and the couple returns to live at Sunset Pass, where Rock has been hired by the ranch's new owners.⁹

The Paramount Famous Players-Lasky Company planned to film four Grey novels in 1928, including *The Water Hole*, based on *Lost Pueblo*, and *Avalanche*, based on a Grey short story. *Avalanche* was filmed near Flagstaff at Lake Mary and on the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks. *The Water Hole* was filmed near Kayenta and in Monument Valley. Late in 1928, the company decided to bring Grey's new novel, *Sunset Pass*, to the screen. Although the original



Dust jacket of *Sunset Pass*. (NAU Fronske Collection #85.3.1458)

story was set in northern New Mexico, studio executives decided to switch the setting to Tuba City. The film company had made *The Vanishing American* there in 1925 and was already familiar with the area. The beautiful sandstone canyons outside Tuba City afforded the perfect setting for the cattle-rustling scenes in *Sunset Pass*.¹⁰

The screenplay by Ray Harris and J. Walter Ruben differed from Grey's original storyline in several respects. The hero of the film version is Jack Rock (played by Jack Holt, father of actor Tim Holt), a U.S. marshal who voluntarily serves time in an Arizona penitentiary in order to obtain clues about a suspected cattle rustler. A convicted rustler tells him to watch a newly arrived English rancher, Ashleigh Preston (played by English actor John Loder). After helping Preston out of a tight spot in a Wagontongue saloon, Rock goes to work on Preston's Sunset Pass ranch, where he learns of Preston's plan to set fire to Dry Valley in order to divert a large cattle drive to Sunset Pass. Meanwhile, Preston's daughter Leatrice (played by Nora Lane) unwittingly rides out to Dry Valley and is trapped by the fire. After Rock rides to her rescue, the pair discovers their love. Jack then warns other cattlemen of the rustling plan and rides with them back to Sunset



Lobby poster for Sunset Pass.

Pass, where a furious gunfight erupts. Although badly wounded, Rock kills Preston and returns his body to the ranch, telling Leatrice that Ashleigh was killed fighting the rustlers. The final scene finds the local bartender (played by Chester Conklin) relating how Rock has given up his marshal's badge, married Leatrice, and returned with her to his ranch in Texas.¹¹

The Tuba trading post and Shekayah guest ranch, owned by the Babbitt Brothers Trading Company of Flagstaff, was headquarters for the seventy-five members of the motion picture company while they were in Tuba City. C. J. Babbitt had entered the Indian trading business at nearby Red Lake in 1891. In 1902, Babbitt bought out a small trading store owned by Charles Algert at Tuba City and constructed a large new trading post in the shape of a Navajo hogan. A dining room and several guest cabins were added some years later. The guest ranch and trading post were the only facilities for travelers for many miles in any direction.¹²

Tuba City itself was something of an oasis in the surrounding desert. Anasazi ruins dot the cliffs above Moenkopi Wash, evidence that since prehistoric times the area's abundant springs and fertile agricultural land has attracted human settlement.

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Hopis from Oraibi, under the leadership of Chief Tuvi, established farms and gardens at Tuba and later built the village of Moenkopi nearby. Navajos and Paiutes also settled in the area. In the 1870s, Mormons from Utah established a colony at Tuba, claiming homesteads, planting orchards, and laying out a town-site. In 1900, the federal government added a large tract of land around Tuba City to the Navajo reservation, purchasing the interests of the Mormon settlers, who relocated to the upper Little Colorado River. The U.S. Indian Service made Tuba the administrative agency for the western Navajo Reservation and built a large school and hospital for the Indians. Because the trading post was considered an important service, the Babbitts were allowed to continue in operation and were issued a patent for an eighty-acre parcel within the reservation.¹³

When the *Sunset Pass* crew arrived in November of 1928, the Tuba trading post was managed by Jot B. Stiles; Marjorie, his wife; and Jess R. Smith. Coming to Arizona from Texas in the 1880s, the Stiles family was involved in a number of trading and ranching ventures, including management of the Tuba operation from 1925 to 1929. Stiles and Smith operated the trading post and tourist excursion business, while Mrs. Stiles ran the guest ranch and dining hall. "Shekayah," a Navajo expression meaning "my home," was advertised as a place of recreation, where fresh milk, vegetables, and pure spring water were always available. Evidently, the Hollywood people appreciated the hospitality of the Shekayah ranch, as attested by several entries in the guest register:

November 3, 1928, George Rigas, Paramount camera crew

"One must come here to experience this country and Mrs. Stiles hospitality."

November 10, 1928, Sidney S. Street, Paramount business manager

"Just another guest that ran Mrs. Stiles out of her own house—and got away with it, but gee, what a great grand smile I got after the company left for Blue Canyon."

November 12, 1928, Robert Margolis, Paramount executive

"A sweeter hostess as Mrs. Stiles is hard to find. A place that makes you feel at home."¹⁴

Filming, under the direction of Otto Brower, went on for three weeks around Tuba City. The crew filmed a cattle stampede

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scene at Blue Canyon, then used an old Mormon building in Moenkopi Village as the Preston home. Filming moved to Turkey Tanks for the Dry Canyon fire, but bad weather postponed the shooting. The scene was finally completed when a large range fire was set with kerosene and smoke torpedoes on the Aso sheep ranch between Tuba City and Flagstaff. Back in Tuba City, the Shekayah guest ranch was converted for use in several bunkhouse and saloon scenes. Final interior filming and editing was done on the Lasky set in Los Angeles. The finished film consisted of six reels—some 5,862 feet of celluloid.¹⁵

Sunset Pass was released in February of 1929, just as talking pictures were taking over the movie industry. Flagstaff's Orpheum theater installed Warner Brothers Vitaphone "talking movie" equipment at the end of August 1929. Theater owner Mary Costigan had delayed installing the equipment for a short time to be sure of the talkies' success. Flagstaff's first talking movie, *The Singing Fool* starring Al Jolson, opened on September 1, 1929. The Orpheum advertised "100% Talking Movies" from then on.¹⁶

Nora Lane, Jack Holt, and John Loder in scene from Sunset Pass.



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The arrival of talking pictures doomed *Sunset Pass* to commercial failure. The film made only a brief appearance in theaters, apparently received no critical reviews, and was consigned to oblivion. *Sunset Pass* was never screened in Flagstaff, depriving locals of the opportunity to see the movie that had caused so much excitement only months earlier. No copy of *Sunset Pass* is known to survive.

Although the original movie version was unsuccessful because of the unfortunate timing of its release, the story line of *Sunset Pass* was popular with audiences. The plot had all the standard elements of the western myth: good triumphed over evil; honesty, loyalty, and hard work were rewarded; and love conquered all. Additionally, the book featured action scenes, such as a range fire, a cattle stampede, and gunfights, all set amid the colorful landscape of the Southwest. Because of its basic audience appeal, Paramount remade *Sunset Pass* in 1933 under the direction of Henry Hathaway, and RKO Radio Pictures filmed it again in 1946, making it one of the most enduring of the Zane Grey westerns.

The Hollywood western began to decline in popularity in the decades following World War II, as audiences responded more to realism than to idealism, more to sex than to romance, and more to violence than to sentimentality. The publicity material used to promote the original film version of *Sunset Pass* touted the movie's "emotion-stirring love sequences, fierce conflict, and tender romance, and a heroic marshal who routs menacing rustlers." Today these phrases are quaint reminders of the golden era of the Hollywood western.¹⁷

NOTES

1. *Coconino Sun* (Flagstaff), November 2, 1928.
2. Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 123.
3. The basic biography of Zane Grey is Frank Gruber, *Zane Grey: A Biography* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
6. Candace Kant, *Zane Grey's Arizona* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 22-23.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
8. Tuska, *The Filming of the West*, pp. 4-18; Jon Tuska, "Zane Grey on Film," *The Western Review*, vol. 4 (May 1991).

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9. *Coconino Sun*, November 16, 1928; Gladwell Richardson, "Zane Grey in Arizona," *Zane Grey Western Magazine* (April 1972), pp. 4-8.
10. Kant, *Zane Grey's Arizona*, p. 137.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 146. Written in 1927, *Sunset Pass* first appeared as a serial in *American Magazine*. The story was not published in book form until 1931. See Lloyd Rogers, "Zane Grey First Editions," in *Zane Grey's Arizona Call*, vol. 1 (January/February 1988); and G. M. Farley, *Zane Grey, A Documented Portrait: The Man, the Bibliography, the Filmography* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Portals Press, 1986), p. 97.
12. Dean Smith, *Brothers Five: The Babbitts of Arizona* (Tempe: Arizona Historical Foundation, 1989); James E. Babbitt, "Along the Rainbow Trail," *Zane Grey's Arizona Call*, vol. 1 (January/February 1988).
13. Herbert E. Gregory, "The Oasis of Tuba, Arizona," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 5 (1915), pp. 107-19. The Tuba store is one of the few surviving trading posts in the Southwest. Trading posts once dotted the sprawling Navajo and Hopi reservations, but their economic viability declined as the mobility of Native Americans increased and as so-called "big box" stores such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart came to dominate retailing. Hundreds of old-time businesses have closed and the few that remain have become tourist-oriented arts and crafts outlets, rather than the traditional general stores they once were. After almost 110 years, the Babbitt family is selling the Tuba trading post to the Navajo Nation's tourism enterprise and leaving the Indian trading business.
14. "Shekayah Ranch," advertising leaflet, c. 1927, author's files; Tuba Trading Post Company guest registers, courtesy of Mary May Stiles Bailey, Winslow.
15. *Coconino Sun*, November 23, 1928.
16. *Ibid.*, August 30, 1929.
17. Paramount press sheet for *Sunset Pass*, February 1929, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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