

Blazing saddles

On location in the Land of Enchantment

by Wolf Schneider



Richard R. Twarog

Above—Rugged terrain challenged the film crew of *The Last Outlaw*, shot in various locations around Santa Fe. *Opposite*—Dermot Mulrooney takes aim in *The Last Outlaw*.

Tufts of sagebrush under cerulean skies filled filmmakers' heads that night. Pintos and Appaloosas straining at the bit, leather chaps and silver spurs on their riders' legs, dusty felt Stetsons clamped down against the wind—the images flooded through as producers and directors watched Clint Eastwood squint into the camera lights last year to accept the best picture Oscar for *Unforgiven*.

The next day, in motion picture offices everywhere, screenwriters were urged toward final drafts and location scouts sent scrambling to secure a piece of the American West. In many cases, the itinerary called for New Mexico.

"I love the West for its vastness," said producer Jim Wilson as his location scouts, who had begun roaming northern New Mexico months prior for *Wyatt Earp*, now started booking the Western sets. "It represents untamed things, the horses, the wardrobe."

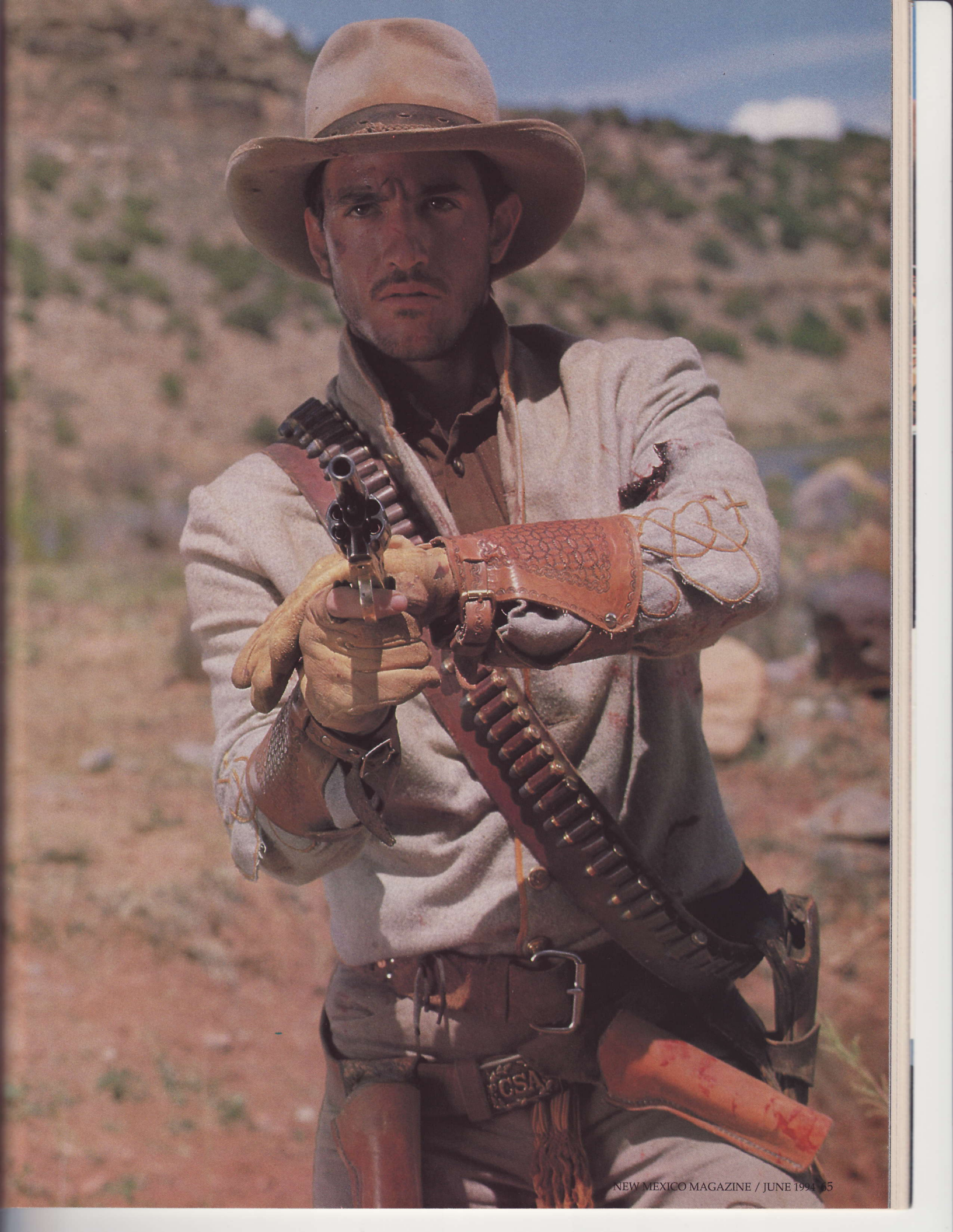
"We want to strike a balance between quirky reality and a certain romanticism," described Australian director Simon Wincer, who would soon cross the ocean to New Mexico—where he

previously had shot the miniseries *Lonesome Dove*—this time to film *Lightning Jack*, the tale of an Australian outlaw.

Perusing possible locations, the filmmakers contemplated individualistic protagonists fighting for right as they saw it, courageous and self-reliant in a vast unknown land. Was there a landscape anywhere left that held the potential of boundless opportunity that called to the wild, the restless and the rootless?

By the time brittle tree branches budded green last year, movie cameras were rolling into New Mexico for *The Last Outlaw* with Mickey Rourke; *Wyatt Earp*, starring Kevin Costner; *Lightning Jack* with Paul Hogan; background scenery or "second unit" work on the rodeo film *8 Seconds*; *The Cowboy Way* with Woody Harrelson and Kiefer Sutherland; *The Legend of O.B. Taggart*, starring Mickey Rooney and Randy Travis; *Desperate Trail*, top-lined by Sam Elliott; and TV projects *Doc Holliday: The Man and the Legend* and *Nobody's Girls*—Westerns all.

Never had New Mexico had such an active year for film and television production, not in





Above—Familiar stars Mickey Rooney and Gloria DeHaven shine in *The Legend of O.B. Taggart*.
Opposite—Ben Johnson's quintessential Western aura adds drama to the set of *O.B. Taggart*.

the almost 100 years and more than 200 movies shot here, including the Westerns *Silent Tongue*, *City Slickers*, *Silverado*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Lonely Are The Brave* and *The Man From Laramie*.

In 1993, movie makers spent \$60 million in New Mexico, representing a total economic impact of about \$180 million, said New Mexico Film Commission Director Linda Taylor Hutchison. "It was the best year ever recorded. And in the first six months of the current fiscal year, which began July 1, 1993, we did \$43.4 million, also the best ever. Our previous fiscal year was \$25.7 million, so we just about doubled it in the first six months of this fiscal year."

Of the 19 features that lensed here in 1993, about half were Westerns, either contemporary or period, according to Hutchison. And the trend continues. A German-Italian coproduction, *The Fight Before Christmas*, was filmed this past spring in the Santa Fe area. *Hunter*, a contemporary Western, was set in Ruidoso. The state also served as backdrop for another episode of *Doc Holliday: The Man and the Legend*.

The West still lives

On a dusty dirt lane lined with wooden storefronts lettered "City Meat Market," "Miner's Exchange" and "The Red Garter Saloon," smoke streams skyward from narrow chimneys. Waves of it billow into the air from the incense that production assistants keep burning. Streams of it puff out of smoke machines. The

profusion of smoke served as a natural filter, visual texture for the movie *Lightning Jack*. Along the street, horses are tied to hitching posts, tails patiently swishing flies under the hot sun. They are tacked up with old blankets doubled over and plain leather saddles, no silver conchas or saddle-tooling, just simple brown saddles with high cantled backs. The 1870s American West was gritty, though attractive enough for an outlaw with a dream.

On a narrow wooden bench, his stomach washboard-flat, hair yellow-blonde, Aussie star Paul Hogan watched intently as Simon Wincer directed *Lightning Jack*, an American-Australian Western about an Aussie outlaw who ventures forth to the American West. *Lightning Jack* Kane, played by Hogan, is a fictional character, but the Younger Brothers gang with whom he hooks up was real enough, as are the details of this Western period street on the Bonanza Creek Ranch near La Cienega, south of Santa Fe. Looking very different indeed, this Western set previously was used by Wincer for Anjelica Huston's homestead in *Lonesome Dove*.

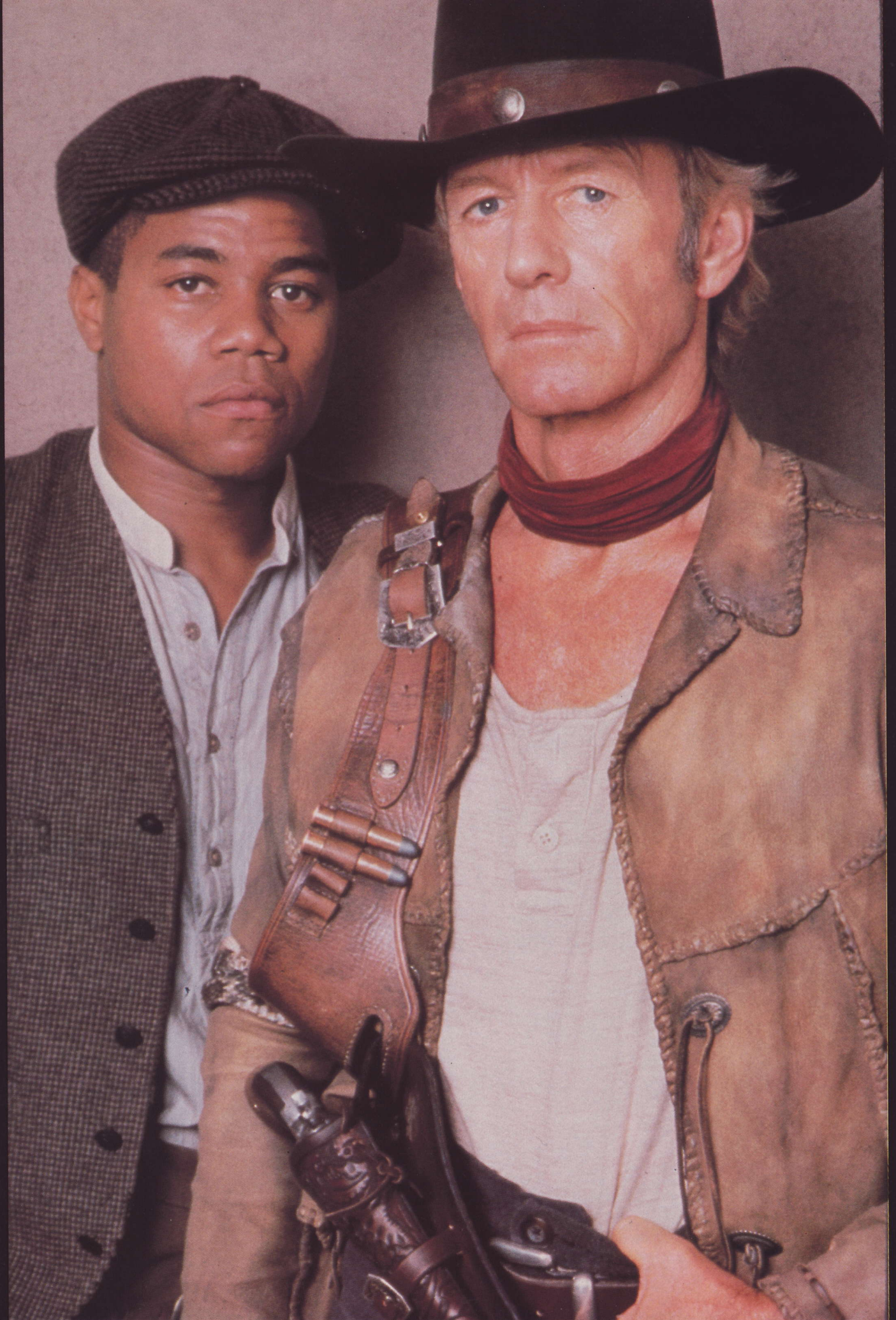
"We've restored it into a quirky little town," Wincer said. "We'll have six different towns. This is our smallest and quirkiest. In the movie, it'll be in the Four Corners area, a fairly remote place called Wayside Flats."

Lunch on the set of the \$25 million film is a good deal tastier than the vittles offered cowboys 100 years ago.

Over grilled swordfish, salad, green beans, potatoes au gratin and squash, washed down



Amphibious
Panther
BEAR
I LOVE THE...
ON SUNDAY...





Opposite—Australian-produced *Lightning Jack* added a new dimension to filming in New Mexico. *Above*—Cuba Gooding Jr., Paul Hogan and Beverly D'Angelo conspire in a saloon scene in *Lightning Jack*.

with lemonade, Australian producer Greg Coote wryly pointed out, "You'll notice a fair sprinkling of Australians in this stinking hot tent." Funding for *Lightning Jack* was arranged via an offering on the Australia Stock Exchange, which required the use of Australians in various roles, including director. "It's a point system," Coote said.

This was an easy-going, egalitarian set. A brief afternoon hailstorm gives rise to a "craft services" snack break for all. Other expressions such as "like a bought one" (meaning, "right on, picture perfect") are part of the cultural exchange. "Relaxed," is how Wincer terms the mood. Or, as one American put it, "These are Australians. They aren't the type of guys that go in for therapy, OK?"

Even the complicated location logistics don't faze this cast and crew. After shooting in Santa Fe, Abiquiú and Los Alamos, *Lightning Jack* moved on to the Old Tucson and Mescal standing sets in Arizona, then to Moab, Utah, where *City Slickers II* was also in production. Next stop was Page, Ariz., where they encountered the cast and crew of *Maverick*. Finally, the crew wound up in Warner Roadshow Studios in Queensland, Australia, for 10 days of "interiors."

Glenn Hughes' Bonanza Creek Ranch, along with the J.W. Eaves Movie Ranch and the Cook Ranch Movie Set, are three of the most popular standing Western sets anywhere in the world. Period saloons, hotels, banks, jails and wood-planked streets are sequestered among rolling

hills and spacious mesas. Along with the Garson Studios soundstages, used frequently for construction and for "cover set" shooting during inclement weather, the sets make filmmaking in the Santa Fe area particularly convenient.

But most filmmakers say it's the vivid turquoise skies, violet-hued craggy mountains, open vistas and pine, mesquite, aspen and cottonwood thickets—in short, the unspoiled locations—that draw them here.

The Last Outlaw, "an artistic action film," found a white-faced Mickey Rourke in Kabuki makeup, riding his horse along the sharp-edged sandstone bluffs at Nambé Pueblo, and out at Zía Pueblo, where winds blew "like a freight train, day after day," according to crew members. The story line follows two men, once close, who had gone separate ways.

For the \$6 million film (which premiered on HBO and is destined for theatrical release in Europe), unit photographer Richard R. Twarog remembered, "We went into some very rough terrain to say the least."

In Abiquiú, the crew set up cranes alongside the mountain to get moving camerawork, as much as possible, Twarog said. "There was trouble with rattlesnakes in Abiquiú so they hired a snake lady. She went under rocks, in ravines, with her snake pole. She caught them," he said.

The light, the landscape and the weather

Wyatt Earp also trundled its caravan over to



Above and Opposite—In its five months of production, the crew of *Wyatt Earp*, starring Kevin Costner, took advantage of several locations around Santa Fe, including three Indian pueblos, several ranches and the route of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad near Chama.

Zia Pueblo to shoot a wagon train scene in a dust storm created just for the movie. "It was a transitional scene. They created this windstorm with special effects. They had 20-some wagons and mules and horses," remembered an eyewitness. "If I wasn't standing there, I wouldn't know it was here, it looked vast and green and like a wagon train on the wide open prairie in the Midwest."

Director Larry Kasdan said he came to New Mexico for his saga about controversial lawman Wyatt Earp because, "I love the light and the terrain. I think the light is different here. We built this town (at the Cook Ranch) for *Silverado*. I knew the area, I felt we could adapt it to Tombstone and Dodge," he said. "We needed eight or nine towns; there aren't that many towns around. We had to do a lot of rebuilding and changing and renovating. All these things could be accomplished in a circumference around Santa Fe, which is a town I like to work in."

Sitting on a bench out at the Cook Ranch, Kasdan, a small bear of a man, talked about "the tension between our ideals and our desires, between responsibility and freedom—that's an issue in my life and in everything I've done. *Wyatt Earp* is a perfect example."

As he watches, cast and crew ready themselves for a scene in which Isabella Rossellini, resplendent in violets and reds, will sweep into Dodge City on a buckboard wagon driven by Doc Holliday (Dennis Quaid). Kasdan reflected, "We're at 7,000 feet. There's something about

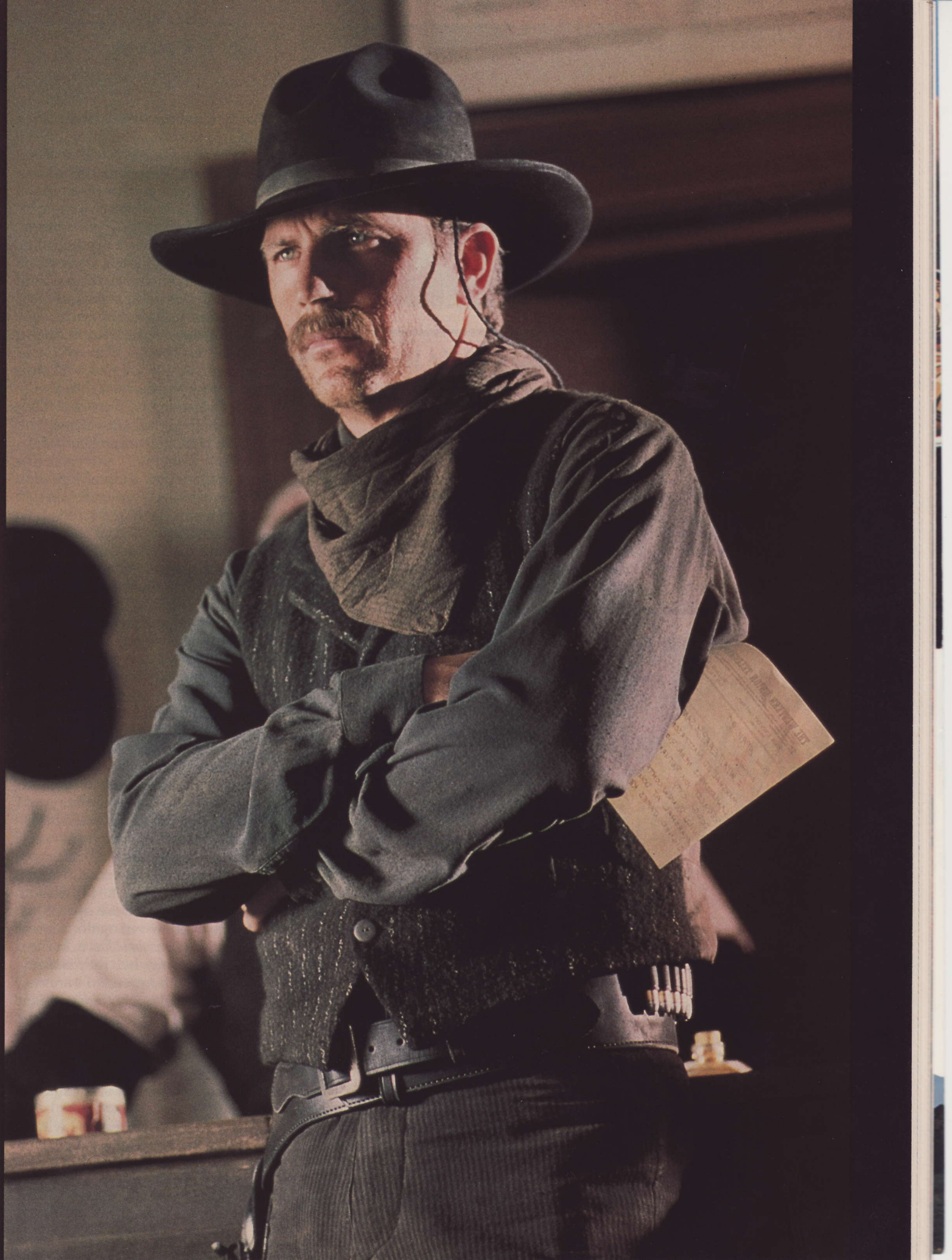
the atmosphere, there's a clarity to it which I like very much in the images in the film. The colors are magnificent, the blue of the sky, the red of the Earth. We've used various subtle filtration throughout the picture as we did in *Silverado*, but I'm not drawn to much filtration. Sometimes you use filtration to enhance those colors, or break down the contrast or soften the look."

Dodge City marks the midway point of Kasdan's epic of the American West, which traces Earp and his brothers from their boyhood in the cornfields of 1860s Iowa, where their father (played by Gene Hackman) cautions them, "Nothing counts so much as blood, the rest are just strangers," through early manhood hunting buffalo on the great Western Plains and laying track for the transcontinental railroad, then as legendary gunmen who bring the law to Kansas and Arizona.

During its five months of production in New Mexico, *Wyatt Earp* roamed the Cook Ranch, Eaves Movie Ranch, Ghost Ranch, El Rancho de Las Golondrinas, Las Vegas (where a house in Lincoln Park doubled for one in 1800s Missouri where Earp's first wife lived), Zia, Tesuque and Santa Clara pueblos, and Chama and the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. The movie's scheduled for release in July.

Smaller efforts

As *Wyatt Earp* wound down, honeywagons for some smaller films were lumbering up La



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ON LOCATION

Bajada on their way north on I-25.

Mickey Rooney's *The Legend of O.B. Taggart*, described by insiders as "a two-take kind of production" and "a very clever picture with some marquee actors in an economic shoot," set up shop at Bonanza Creek Ranch, where country music stars-turned-actors Randy Travis and Larry Gatlin strummed and serenaded in between scenes of the month-long production about a man who must sacrifice a boy he loves. "It relied more on story than action. Mickey Rooney is 73 years old, he needs help getting on a horse," recalled one crew member of the \$4 million picture.

Another quick shoot, *Desperate Trail* with Sam Elliott and Craig Scheffer, also headquartered at Bonanza Creek. "It's an equal opportunity bank robber film where the woman plays just as important role in the deeds as the male," described one insider. For an action sequence with an out-of-control stagecoach, *Desperate Trail* headed out to Tesuque Pueblo, where Elliott did his own stunts, climbing out of the back of the coach to grab the reins. "It was colder than hell, raining," remembered a crew member.

New Mexico's highly changeable weather is generally cinematic if not always predictable. "When you see a film that's been shot here, the landscape and weather help make it a reality. Even if they don't need it, they've taken advantage of it," Hutchison said. "They don't close up until blue skies come out again. A great example is *Lonesome Dove*. In the original script, when they moved to Montana they needed a snowstorm. In May when they were filming here and moving to Angel Fire, we had a freak snowstorm. They locked the camera down out there and filmed. You see it dissolve from the snow scene into spring."

Hectic summertime was when *The Cowboy Way* came through last year, to shoot at the Río Arriba Rodeo Grounds near

Española. Local wranglers and bullriders staged a rodeo for the film in which Woody Harrelson and Kiefer Sutherland play childhood buddies from New Mexico, who graduate from childhood "mutton-busting" to bullriding and roping, then venture east. Some days, as many as 500 extras hired on. "I guess Kiefer was the better rider, he was a lot more concentrated on the riding aspects," remembered one insider. "They brought in some woman from New York to be the rodeo queen and she couldn't ride for nothing. They had to have a local do the riding for her."

The locals who are adept at a still-surviving Western lifestyle, the standing sets, the landscapes, the interplay between man and nature . . . all of these attract Western filmmakers. From the serenity of a horse stretched out on the hard earth to doze in the quiet winter sunlight, to the ferocity of a summer rainstorm with the heavens crackling and shrieking and striking out with crooked claws of lightning, this land presents elemental drama.

"Suppose we say that wilderness invokes nostalgia," suggested Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*, "a justified, not merely sentimental nostalgia for the lost America our forefathers knew. The word suggests the past and the unknown, the womb of Earth from which we all emerged. It means something lost and something still present, something remote and at the same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limit."

Something that cast and crew can count on everytime the clapboard strikes and a director yells, "Action." ❖

The former editor of American Film, **Wolf Schneider** moved to Santa Fe two years ago. She has written for American Film, Interview, Movieline and the Los Angeles Times as well as completing a novel and co-writing a script.



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