Hollywood's Back Lot

New Mexico has been a favorite of filmmakers for more than 80 years. But even with three "movie ranches" providing a dizzying array of film sets, the state is stuck with an image as a place good only for making westerns.

By Tamar Stieber

SANTA FE – Belying the boyish pleasure he derives from his four-decade relationship with Hollywood, retired Santa Fe trucking millionaire J.W. Eaves affects a macho ennui about a partnership that began in 1960 when Columbia Pictures shot "Empire," a western television series starring Richard Egan, on his 1,600-acre ranch off the scenic Turquoise Trail.

"I could care less about the movies," Eaves said gruffly from behind the wheel of his sport utility vehicle. "It's just a business to me."

A moment later, lighting a fresh cigarette off the one on which he'd just been dragging, Eaves took back his off-the-cuff remark.

"I didn't mean that," he mumbled in a Texas drawl still distinct after 50 years in New Mexico. His tone barely softening, he said, "Sure, I enjoy it. I've met all the big shots – Jimmy Stewart, Henry Fonda, Shirley Jones, John Wayne. I've made some long-lasting friendships. They was all good friends of mine."

Ornery even in the best of times and darned proud of it, Eaves, 80, showed signs of battle fatigue from waging a losing war against the colon cancer eating away at his wife of 62 years, Ermalea. And he was on a mission. Ermalea wanted Werther's candy, and he was driving the 15 miles into town to get some.

At Albertsons, Eaves grabbed half a dozen large bags of sweets, paid the cashier and headed back out to his car where, with undisguised annoyance, he responded to an employee's reported comment that the movie business is his "toy."

"It's not a toy for me," he barked. "I make money out of it or I wouldn't do it."

How much money would that be?

"Well," he said coyly, "I've got one and a half million dollars invested in that thing."

"That thing" is the J.W. Eaves Movie Ranch, an elaborate Old

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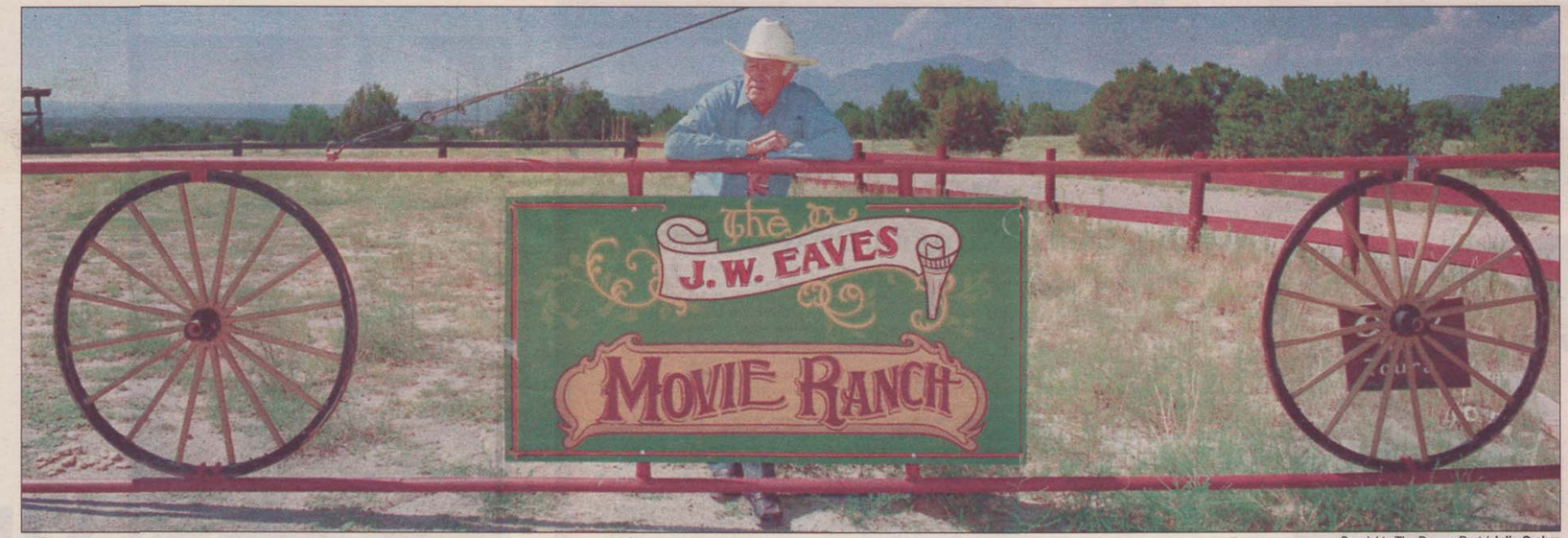
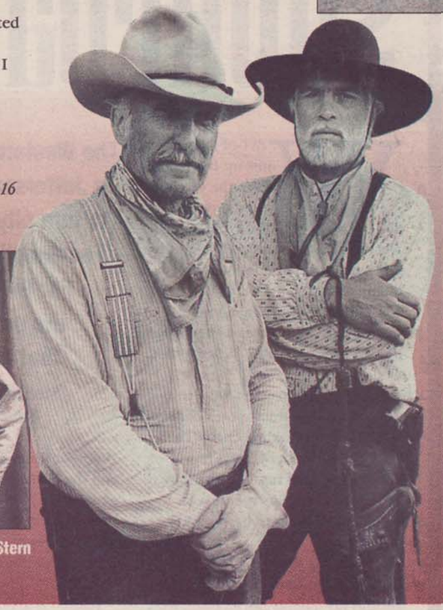


J. W. Eaves, standing by the sign for his ranch, has been bobnobbing with Hollywood types since the '60s.

Special to The Denver Post / **Julie Graber**

CITY SLICKERS Jack Palance, Jon Lovitz, Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern



LONESOME DOVE Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones

DANCES WITH WOLVES Kevin Costner

SILKWOOD Meryl Streep, Kurt Russell, Cher

THE GRAPES OF WRATH Henry Fonda

CONTACT Jodie Foster

CHISUM John Wayne

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West movie set on 27 acres built in 1969 for "The Cheyenne Social Club" (1970), starring Fonda, Stewart and Jones.

Eaves figures at least 100 other movies from "Chisum," a 1970 John Wayne vehicle, to "Wyatt Earp," Lawrence Kasdan's 1994 epic starring Kevin Costner, have used the set.

"I've dealt with all the big companies in Hollywood," Eaves said matter-of-factly, and not only as landlord. A member of the Screen Actors Guild, Eaves has had bit parts in a number of movies, though he's not keen on the experience.

"Too much standing around and waiting," he said. "It's not my kind of life."

More to his liking has been the wheeling and dealing with Hollywood, which he said gained momentum after the 1968 release of "Where Angels Go . . . Trouble Follows," a B-movie starring Rosalind Russell, Stella Stevens and Robert Taylor. The film used his ranch as a setting before the more elaborate movie sets were built a year later.

"Hollywood, New York, all of them, they saw it and began coming here," Eaves recalled, warming to the subject. "It was the beginning of the movie business in New Mexico."

Not so, says his neighbor, Glenn Hughes, who owns the 12,000-acre Bonanza Creek Ranch just up the road.

"J.W. is wrong," said Hughes, 68. "We did a movie called 'A Man from Laramie' with Jimmy Stewart and Henry Fonda. We started that in the fall of '54."

In fact, both men are wrong. New Mexico's movie industry, such as it was, began with a 1911 silent oater called "The Dude" and snowballed, peaking in 1993 when the state hosted 11 productions. Of course, there have been dry years – some more arid than others – but as film historian and educator Joseph Dispenza of Santa Fe put it: "New Mexico has been Hollywood's back lot, particularly with westerns, for all its history."

Special to The Denver Post / **Julie Graber - The New Mexican**

Robert Urich films a scene for TNT's "The Lazarus Man" at the Bonanza Creek Ranch.

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Of the three major movie ranches in New Mexico, the upstart is the 20,000-acre Cook Ranch in Galisteo, where Columbia Pictures built a set in 1984 for Lawrence Kasdan's epic, "Silverado," released the following year. Since then, the ranch has played host to a number of other films – mostly westerns – including "Lonesome Dove" (1989), "Young Guns II" (1990), Kasdan's "Wyatt Earp" and last year's "Last Stand at Sabre River" and "Last Man Standing." Cook Ranch is currently on the market, movie set and all, for $15 million.

Among them, the three northern New Mexico ranches account for most of the westerns and a good number of the other genres shot in New Mexico since the 1950s. Hughes figures Bonanza Creek has 60 credits to its name, among them "Cowboy" (1958) with John Ford and Jack Lemmon, "The Cowboys" (1972) with John Wayne and a newer generation of westerns such as "Silverado," "Lonesome Dove" and even a series of spaghetti westerns, "Lucky Luke" starring Terence Hill, that left behind a beautiful Old West town with 22 buildings. Some of the films were shot at more than one ranch.

While most films shoot for only a few days, others like TNT's television series "The Lazarus Man" stick around for months on end. Paloma Films, the Italian studio that produced the "Lucky Luke" series, stayed 2½ years.

At $250 to $1,000 a day – the price varies depending on whether they're filming a shootout, for example, or a cattle stampede – that amounts to big bucks. But Hughes, whose primary business interests are in oil and construction, said, "We're not in it for the money."

"If you're in it for money, you're in the wrong business," he said. "They pay well when they work, but they're not here 365 days a year. Lots of times you have a nine- to 10-month dry spell.

"We do it for the community," he said. "They hire anywhere from 400 to 800 people any time they make a movie."

Hughes figures his ranch has brought in more than $150 million to New Mexico over the past 15 years.

"And that's just our ranch. I'm sure 'Wyatt Earp' and the others they did at the Cook Ranch and at J.W.'s, they've probably done as much as we've done," he said.

Eaves was less forthcoming with numbers, though he acknowledged that the movie business has been "lucrative," both for him and the state, right from the start.

"It was a good deal then and it's been a good deal since," he said without elaboration.

In sharp contrast to his boss' studied indifference, Eaves Movie Ranch manager Al Cantz is as enthusiastic about his business as a boy showing off his collection of Matchbox cars.

"There's been 120 movies shot here over 30 years," he said, reeling off title after title, barely stopping to catch his breath. As he spoke, rock music from a hidden loudspeaker blared incongruously across the nearly deserted set, creating an odd clash between the Old West and the new.

Cantz led the way into a large room appropriately titled The Gallery. Originally built as a front for a bank in "Wyatt Earp," it now displays more than 200 photos, dozens of news clippings and bits and pieces of memorabilia from movies and stars that have visited Eaves' ranch.

Kirk Douglas, Clint Eastwood, Henry Fonda and, of course, the Duke, stare out from the walls along with relative newcomers such as Kevin Costner, Sam Elliott and Robert Urich. Cantz boasts that he's met many of them.

Originally from Manassa, Cantz, 54, began working for Eaves in 1978 when he coordinated a gunfight at a show Eaves put on for real estate agents interested in his plans to subdivide his ranch. Since then, Cantz has worked in a dozen capacities at the movie ranch – actor, driver, wrangler, stuntman, stunt coordinator, and prop-, costume- and set dressing-master.

"I'm a one-man band," said Cantz, who takes credit for helping Eaves capitalize on the movie business in New Mexico. "I am the movie ranch."

While Cantz showed off his fiefdom, including a wardrobe room with enough vintage costumes collected over the years to dress 150 actors, carpenters were preparing the set for an upcoming PBS feature called "Wishbone," based on a children's television series about a talking Jack Russell terrier.

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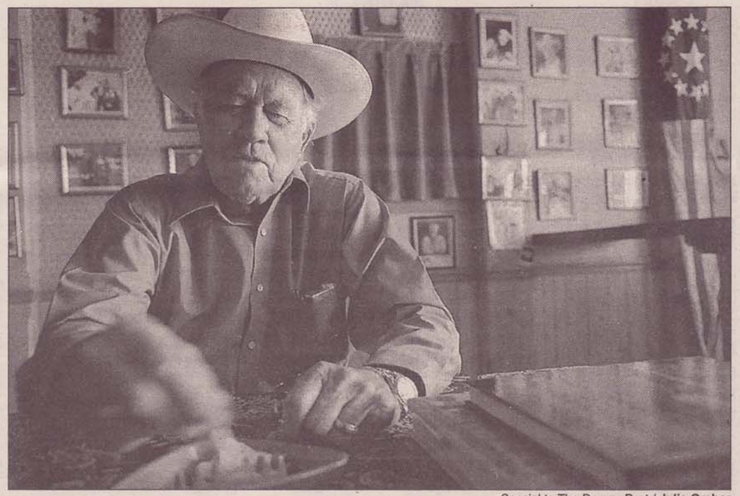
In the saloon, where a couple of costumed dummies play poker near a stairway leading to a nonexistent brothel, Cantz reminisced about 1988, a banner year for filmmaking in New Mexico that produced the likes of "Lonesome Dove," "Young Guns," "Twins," "The Milagro Beanfield War" and a bunch of lesser-known movies.

"It was like a little Hollywood here," Cantz said, waving around an unlit Havana cigar. "That doesn't happen here very often."

But it happened again just a few years later. In the 1993-94 fiscal year, New Mexico played host to 11 movie productions, including such big budget features as "Wyatt Earp," "Natural Born Killers," "Speechless" and "Buffalo Girls."



Special to The Denver Post / **Julie Graber**

J. W. Eaves loves wheeling and dealing with filmmakers who want to use his ranch.

Producers forked out $62 million that year in expenses directly related to production, nearly triple what they spent only two years before. Meanwhile, visiting directors, actors and crew members bought homes, artwork, jewelry, clothing, dinners, drinks and other items that contributed an additional $124.2 million to New Mexico's economy.

The following year, when the science-fiction series "Earth 2" landed in New Mexico along with Spike Lee's "Clockers" and seven other productions, direct filmmaking revenues came to $57 million, resulting in nearly $171.3 million total income.

That's the year a USA Today poll ranked New Mexico No. 7 among the top 10 states in income from feature films, commercials and videos. While still a long way from California's $19.1 billion, New York's $2.1 billion or even Florida's $500 million, that put New Mexico – one of the poorest and least populous states in the nation – right up there with the big boys, behind North Carolina, Texas and Utah.

New Mexico's bean counters were positively gleeful as they watched state coffers fill up with nearly $17.9 million in tax revenues from film production over those two years, according to figures from the New Mexico Film Commission.

"But it was downhill from there," said commission director Linda Hutchison, "to a measly $32 million last year." That's almost half the income from just two years earlier.

While the thrill isn't exactly gone, Hollywood's infatuation with New Mexico has certainly waned over the past few years, in part because the public has evidently had its fill of westerns, at least for this go 'round. But Hutchison, who is also president of the Association of Film Commissioners International, remains optimistic.

"We have reached a valley and we're on the way back up," she said. "With the amount of interest that is returning to the state, we will find that we'll be on the upswing again."

She's right, of course, if only because the film business in New Mexico as elsewhere outside of Hollywood and New York is cyclical, rising and falling in sync with the public's whims and fancies.

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The task facing Hutchison and other New Mexico film professionals is to get word out that the state has more to offer the movie industry than merely backdrops for westerns. The varied terrain – from high desert to alpine, from skyscraper-studded skylines to undulating highways and waving plains of grain like those in the Midwest – means "you can shoot five different states and never have to move," said David Manzanares, a Santa Fe-based film production coordinator.

That saves time. And in the film business especially, time is money. After the landscape, which has always been New Mexico's No. 1 attraction for filmmakers, lower costs rank high on the list of assets. Supplies, accommodations, food and especially the labor pool – by all accounts as professional as anywhere in the country – traditionally have been cheaper in New Mexico than in larger venues.

What had long been missing, however, was a professional sound studio. Directors improvised with rented warehouses and empty buildings until 1990, when Garson Studios – named for Hollywood legend Greer Garson – opened at the College of Santa Fe. Garson, a part-time resident of Pecos, N.M., for 47 years, donated $3 million to build the studios, which house two state-of-the-art soundstages with a total area of 21,000 square feet and 3,000 square feet of office space.

"Before the paint was dry we had to get a special occupancy permit because Billy Crystal was knocking on our door," recalls the studios' founding director, Joseph Dispenza, who started the school's Moving Image Arts Department. "He shot 'City Slickers' there for two months. Part of the cattle stampede was actually shot inside – the close-ups."

Today, filmmakers who shoot in New Mexico have a second choice – Duke City Soundstage in Albuquerque, which last year opened an 84-by-80-foot sound studio with 9,000 square feet of production rooms and office space.

Adding to New Mexico's movie appeal is legislation Gov. Gary Johnson signed last year – after a little behind-the-scenes arm-twisting by Eaves and others – giving a tax break to film- and video-production companies that do business in New Mexico. That represents a savings of up to 6.8 percent on all goods and services they purchase in the state.

Still, a growing contingent of New Mexico film professionals, many of whom came from larger markets to settle in trendy Santa Fe, complain that the state is not aggressive enough in wooing filmmakers to the state. Noting that "times are tough," the film commission's Hutchison said, "Certainly we have been a target."

Hutchison pointed out that she's limited by a $470,000 budget, almost half of which goes for salaries. With ads in Variety running $4,000 to $5,000 a page, that doesn't leave much room to maneuver, she said.

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"We can cry the blues that we can only buy 10 ads in Variety for $50,000, but we don't spend money that way," she said. "We really look at it as where we get the longest shelf life, the largest bang for the buck."

While New Mexico's neighboring states have similar budgets, Hutchison notes that they also have more city film commissions with budgets of their own. Projected 1996 film revenues for Arizona, Texas and Utah are expected to be $150 million, $134.9 million and $100.7 million, respectively. Colorado and New Mexico are running neck and neck with $29 million and $26.7 million, respectively.

For director Jonathan Wacks ("Pow-Wow Highway," 1989), those are poor excuses. Using the new tax break as an example, he said, "There's a hideous lack of awareness that the opportunity exists."

"When people come through the door, we sort of tell them about it and they say, 'Oh, cool,' " said Wacks, a South African native who came to Santa Fe via Los Angeles. He replaced Dispenza as director of Garson Studios and chairman of the College of Santa Fe's Moving Image Arts Department.

"They said they put ads in Variety. But you can't put out one ad and that's it. They have to be in people's faces."

Wacks said that's why he helped found Focus, a fledgling nonprofit organization created to help market New Mexico's sophisticated movie industry. Its president, Santa Fe-based casting director Sarah Koeppe, stressed that Focus will complement the state film commission, not replace it. And because it's a private organization, Focus can go where government can't – in a word: schmoozing, one of Hollywood's favorite activities.

"Hollywood is all about wining and dining people," said Koeppe. "But here in this state we have an anti-donation clause. If a producer comes to town, the state can't take him (out). We can do that."

Gone are those halcyon days in the late 1960s when New Mexico's star-struck governor, David Cargo, waived all varieties of rules and regulations as a personal favor to directors and producers.

Cargo loved the movie business and actively wooed Hollywood in its own backyard as well as his own. He commuted to Southern California on a regular basis to schmooze with film dignitaries, whom he often invited to New Mexico as his personal guests. It was Cargo who set up New Mexico's film commission in 1968. He likes to boast that his was the first such commission in the nation, though Colorado claims the same distinction.

"We brought into the state of New Mexico $1.5 billion in production," Cargo said in a June interview, just days before announcing his candidacy for Albuquerque mayor. "It's one of the more successful things that's been done here."

It was also fun, said Cargo, who played bit parts in 11 of the films he brought to the state, including "The Good Guys and the Bad Guys" (1969) with Robert Mitchum; "The Cheyenne Social Club"; "Bunny O'Hare" (1972) with Bette Davis; and even, unknown to him at the time, a risque film he now euphemistically calls a "hippie movie" – "Up in the Cellar."

Regardless of the politics du jour, filmmakers can't seem to keep away from New Mexico. They never have. Even Thomas Edison found himself drawn to the state in 1898, when he shot 40 seconds of film at Isleta Pueblo's Indian Day School.

Edison's footage is the earliest in a list of 264 movies – 380 if you include the 16 Tom Mix westerns and 100 Helen Holmes melodramas that were so popular in the silent era – filmed in New Mexico over the past 99 years.❑

Tamar Stieber is a writer who lives in Santa Fe. Her last story for Empire was about Indian camp experiences for non-Indians in Navajoland.