



Main street at the J. W. Eaves Movie Ranch, the state's first Western movie set, south of Santa Fe.

Movie towns set stage for a Western revival

story and photography by Dennis Wall

With the recent success of such films as Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, the Western is back with a steely-eyed vengeance. Filmmakers searching for a classic Western townsite need look no farther than the Santa Fe area, where three of moviedom's prime Western movie sets are found.

Boarded up and empty between shoots, these throwbacks to Old West days rattle and creak like ghosts complaining. But after the trucks arrive and the set designers and crew begin "dressing" them with paint and plywood, these make-believe communities come alive. Soon decent folk and desperadoes fill their streets, and the sets bustle like the century-old cowtowns and whistle-stops they're meant to portray.

The state's three major Western movie towns—Glenn Hughes' Bonanza Creek Ranch, the J. W.

Eaves Movie Ranch and the Cook Ranch Movie Set—are characters in themselves, each possessing its own unique talents. Like most good actors, the sets are chameleons, able through skilled cosmetic tinkering to alter their appearance again and again, creating new and often memorable settings for the tales they tell.

All three sets are located within an hour's drive of Santa Fe. That's no accident: Producers of Western movies require not only suitable terrain and authentic-looking structures, but also proximity to hotels, eating places and other practical amenities for cast and crew, which can number in the hundreds. Santa Fe offers all those amenities, along with a population that allows visiting celebrities a degree of privacy and anonymity.

Access to a skilled work force is also critical, and here again Santa Fe fills the bill. The city teems with movie production people—some Hollywood refugees, others

homegrown—and is fast becoming a sort of mini-Hollywood, complete with a growing cast of big-name stars taking up full- or part-time residency. Garson Studios on the campus of College of Santa Fe provides first-rate soundstages for "interior" filming. Other nearby sites, such as El Rancho de las Golondrinas Museum and a Mexican village set located near the Eaves Movie Ranch, serve as primary and collateral film sites.

In addition, photogenic locales exist throughout New Mexico, including historic neighborhoods in Las Cruces and Las Vegas, the red cliffs of Chama and Gallup, the mountains of Ruidoso and northern New Mexico, and the white sands and endless plains near Alamogordo.

Since 1898, when Thomas Edison filmed New Mexico's landscape, hundreds of movies have been made here. But a new phase in Western moviemaking began in 1968, when J. W. Eaves took

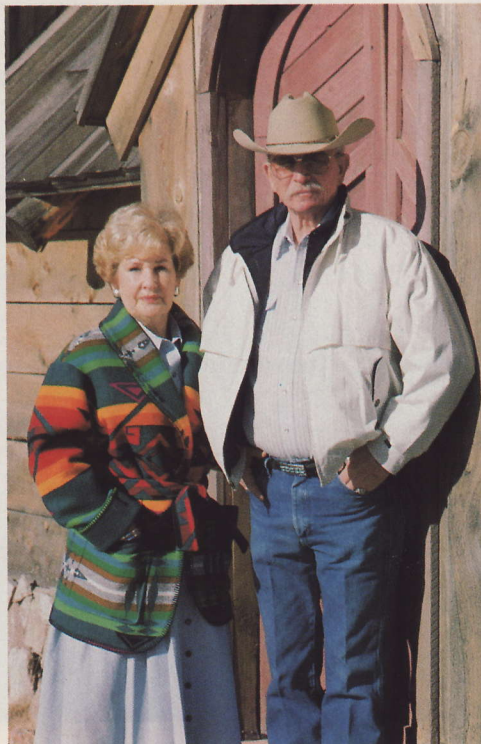


Buildings at the Eaves Movie Ranch look authentic, but a step to the side reveals that some are actually false-front structures.



The church at the Bonanza Creek Ranch stands solemnly on a hill above the town.

Right—Imogene and Glenn Hughes operate the Bonanza Creek Ranch, a 16,000-acre spread south of Santa Fe. Far right—A close-up view of one of the storefronts at the Eaves Movie Ranch.





Actors and extras prepare to portray "Men Who Ride Sidesaddle and the Women Who Love Them" for a humorous beer commercial. Smiley Productions shot the commercial at the Bonanza Creek Ranch.

producer Gene Kelly's advice and built a complete Western town on his ranch south of Santa Fe for the film *The Cheyenne Social Club*.

Produced by Kelly and starring Henry Fonda and James Stewart, this quirky tale of a vagabond cowpoke who inherits a brothel ushered in the modern era in New Mexico filmmaking. The state always has had some of the world's most magnificent scenery; now it offered a Western set rivaling anything Hollywood had ever conjured up.

The J. W. Eaves Movie Ranch since has been the location for scores of films, including classics such as *The Cowboys* (starring John Wayne), *Easy Rider*, *Billy Jack* and more recently Warner Brothers' epic film *Wyatt Earp*. Eaves also leases the set for music videos, commercials, still photography for catalogs and print ads, and private parties, complete with dramatic shoot-outs and assorted horseplay.

Glenn Hughes, owner of the Bonanza Creek Movie Ranch just south of Santa Fe, remembers a visit by actor Jimmy Stewart for the 1955 film *The Man From Laramie*. That was the first film shot on Hughes' 16,000-acre working ranch, long before his permanent set was built. The ranch since has been used for more than 50 film productions, including cattle-drive sequences for the 1960s TV series *Rawhide* and on a dramatically different note, background for the campy Tab Hunter/Divine comedy *Lust In the Dust*.

In the late '70s, producers of *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* built a Western town on the ranch, but Hughes says that one didn't last long: "It was all false fronts, and we had a horrible time with it, with walls always blowing over. So we tore it down." In 1983, director Lawrence Kasdan built a ranchhouse and barn on Hughes' property for his movie *Silverado*. The tiny set was used several

times thereafter, including a stint as Claire's house in the TV mini-series *Lonesome Dove*.

An Italian film company built Hughes' present town in 1989, taking advantage of the site's nearly unobstructed 360-degree view backdropped by mountains, prairie and stream-cut arroyos—a varied terrain that can simulate a wide range of geographical settings. The present Bonanza Creek set features free-standing, structurally complete buildings, and has its own water and electricity.

Bonanza Creek Movie Ranch often is used in films depicting a pioneerish, rough-hewn period of Old West history, such as the upcoming Mickey Rooney/Gene Pauly production *The Legend of O. B. Taggart*, filmed there in late 1993. Like his neighbor Eaves, Hughes also makes the set available for TV commercials, ad photography, music videos and private parties.

Despite the Disneyesque quality



The Bonanza Creek Ranch duplicates the look of the pioneer phase of Western settlement.

of the towns, neither owner plans to open his set to public access à la Arizona's Old Tucson. Insurance costs and the hassle of dealing with large crowds put both men off. In fact, says Hughes, given the choice of supervising 200 tourists or 200 longhorns, "I'd take the cows anytime."

A third Santa Fe-area Western town, the Cook Ranch Movie Set, was built in the mid-1980s as the primary setting for Lawrence Kasdan's *Silverado*. Since then it's been used at least half a dozen times for a variety of films. But none compares to the five-month cinematic workout the town experienced in 1993, when *Silverado* principals Kasdan and Kevin Costner returned to produce Warner Brothers' *Wyatt Earp*.

Publicist Spooky Stevens wouldn't confirm the film's rumored \$60 million budget, but she did say, "The town went through an enormous alteration. Our production designer, Ida

Random, did both *Silverado* and *Wyatt Earp*. A lot had fallen down in the eight years since *Silverado*, so it was completely rebuilt. The town was expanded from seven to 14 acres; we used about 100 local construction people for the job. Some new buildings were put up, and we added a little Chinatown alley.

"Ida did a lot of research, using old books, historic photos of Tombstone; a lot of the signage is authentic. We used one street for Dodge City. For that we added stockyards at one end of town, and all the buildings suddenly had second stories. We also brought in about 300 cattle, since Dodge was a big cattle town."

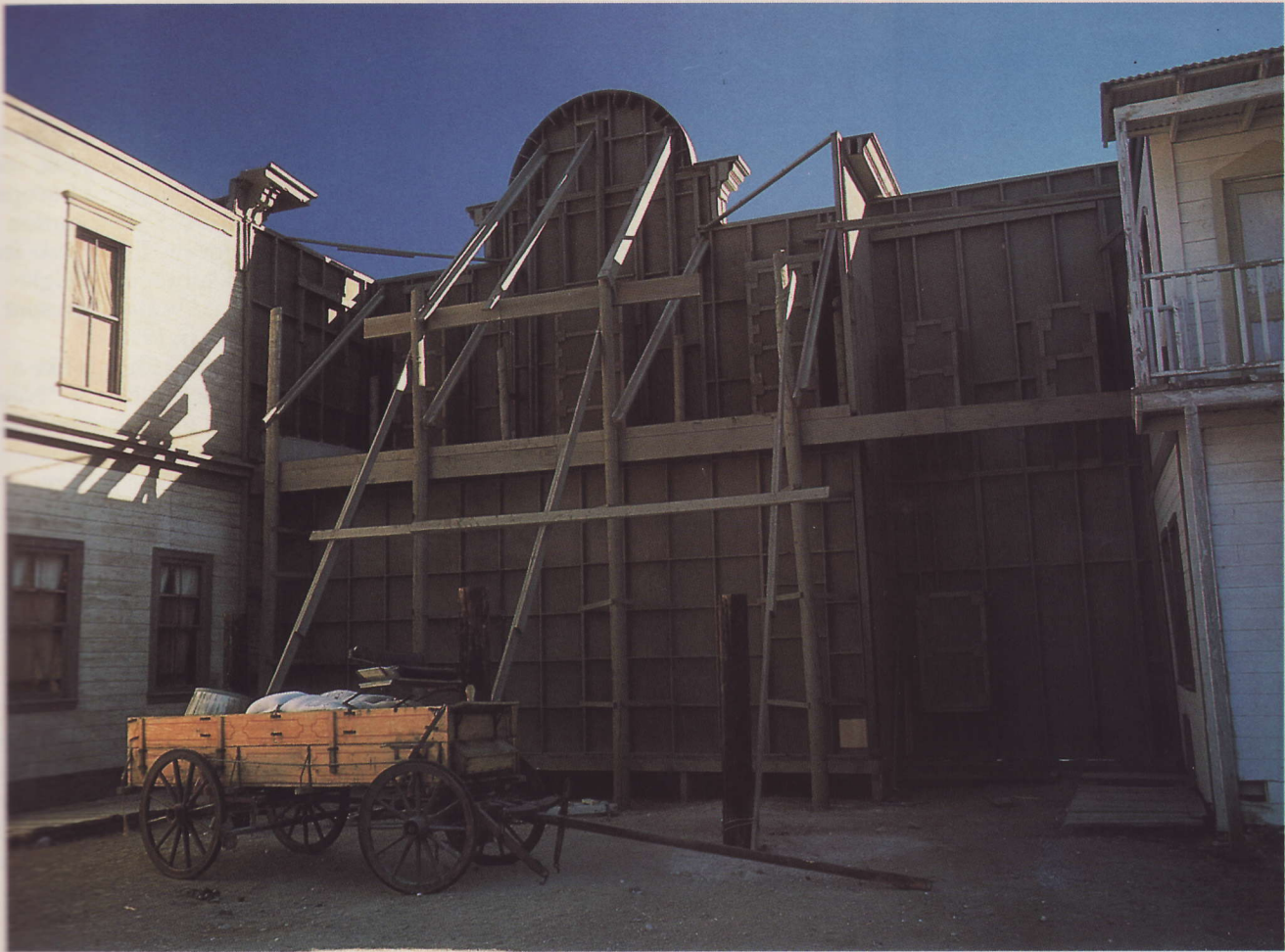
Filming of *Wyatt Earp* alternated between the Cook and Eaves ranches, with a few scenes shot at El Rancho de las Golondrinas near La Cienega. Eaves says as his town was being re-dressed, the Cook site was used for filming and vice versa. Together, the two

sites portrayed a total of 10 separate towns.

Italian-born actor/director/producer Terence Hill was impressed enough with New Mexico's real and make-believe Western milieu to move his production company, Paloma Films, to Santa Fe in 1993. Hill is probably best known in the U. S. for his roles in two 1970s "spaghetti Westerns," *They Call Me Trinity* and *Trinity Is Still My Name*, as well as for another '70s classic (filmed in New Mexico), *My Name is Nobody*, co-starring Henry Fonda and directed by legendary shoot-'em-up icon Sergio Leone.

Hill is one of the most popular stars in Europe, a continent that loves Westerns—with a little less violence and a bit more sentiment than their U. S. counterparts. Many of them are shot in the U.S., in English. For European distribution, voices are dubbed or subtitles are added.

Hill's recent production of *Lucky Luke*, an affectionate look at



*A peek behind the scenes at the Eaves Movie Ranch.
The set served as a primary locale for Kevin Costner's new Western Wyatt Earp, due out later this summer.*



*Left—The Mexican town set
near the Eaves Movie Ranch.
Dozens of movies were shot at
the site, including the Billy
the Kid saga Young Guns.*

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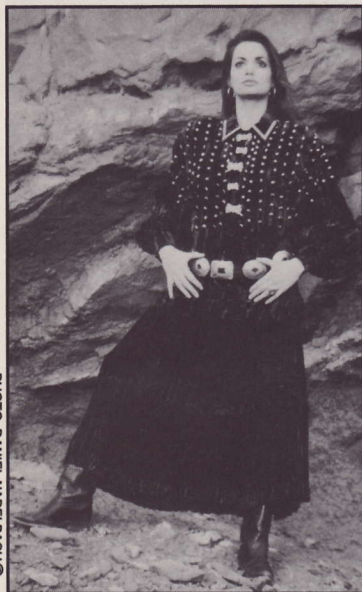


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a cowboy and his horse based on a popular French comic book, was well received throughout Europe and should see U.S. distribution soon. It was for the *Lucky Luke* feature film and subsequent eight-part series that Hughes' present town was built in 1990.

"Doing cowboy films is like a vacation for me," Hill says. "New Mexico is ideal for Westerns. I'm nuts about the light here. Spain has some wonderful Western towns, but the light is not the same. This makes a big difference."

His present film, *The Fight Before Christmas*, was filmed in the spring of 1994 on the Eaves movie set and Bonanza Creek Ranch. German production company Rialto Film chose Eaves' site as its main setting because, Hill explains, "the script called for more of a settled, civilized town."

The relationship between actor and environment is critical to a film's impact, Hill said before shooting *The Fight Before Christmas*. "There's a lot of comedy in this one. So we want a realistic background, and we'll probably tone down some of the colors. If you make everything stand out equally, it all becomes too sweet, and the humor suffers. It's the same for my character. My costume has to be the same colors as the background. Nothing stands out."

Hill says that except for a few key people, most of his crew came from Santa Fe. With those resources, the area's movie sets and New Mexico's rich scenery, Paloma Films is settling into Santa Fe for the long haul. "New Mexico has just about everything you need to make movies," he says. "I can only say positive things about the area. I've become a resident, so that's obvious." ✦

Dennis Wall is a free-lance writer/photographer based in Santa Cruz. His stories and photographs appear in a wide range of publications, including Southwest Art, Popular Science and Third Coast magazine.

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