

## Walter Brennan ~ 31 Films and more



Like Clive Dunn (*aka* Corporal Jones of *Dad's Army* fame), Walter Brennan built a career on portraying characters much older than his real self. The loss of many teeth in a 1932 accident, rapidly thinning hair, scrawny build and unusual vocal intonations all made him seem older than he really was. He used these features to great effect. In many of his film roles, Brennan wore dentures; in *Northwest Passage*, a film set in the late 18th century, he wore a special dental prosthesis which made him appear to have rotting and broken teeth. Brennan was particularly skilled in playing the sidekick to the protagonist or the "grumpy old man" in films such as *Meet John Doe*, *Pride Of The Yankees*, *To Have And Have Not*, *Red River* etc. In *Banjo On My Knee* and elsewhere he played "old coot" Southerners, complete with cackling laugh and thick Southern accent, even though in reality he had somewhat of a New England accent, having being born and raised in Massachusetts. In fact, his range was enormous. He could play sophisticated businessmen, con artists, yokels, cowhands and military officers with apparent equal ease. Though not often cast as the villain, notable exceptions include his Judge Roy Bean in *The Westerner*, Old Man Clanton in *My Darling Clementine* and Jeb Hawkins in *How The West Was Won*.

Walter Andrew Brennan was born in Lynn, Massachusetts on 25 July 1894, but little more concerning his early years is known. During his lifetime Brennan

offered so many different accounts that it is virtually impossible to separate fact from fancy. He may have left home aged eleven or perhaps remained at home until his graduation from high school. He may have trained to be an engineer like his father, but whether he attended college for this purpose is open to speculation. It is very likely that he worked as a lumberjack, ditch digger and bank messenger but less likely that he raised pineapples in Guatemala. While he undoubtedly served with the 101st Field Artillery in World War I, the assertion that he acquired his grating high-pitched voice following damage to his vocal chords caused by poison gas is probably apocryphal.

After returning from France, Brennan settled in Los Angeles and worked in the real estate business until encouraged by a co-worker to re-channel his flamboyant sales technique into acting. Brennan entered films in 1923 as an extra and stuntman, earning \$7.50 per day. His first important assignment came in 1930, when he was prominently featured in Universal's lavish musical revue *The King of Jazz*. Thereafter, he played a variety of bit parts and featured roles, ranging from youthful Cockneys to elderly patriarchs. Whenever assigned one of these character parts, he would inquire of the director: "With or without?" When asked "With or without what?" Brennan would remove his dentures and answer: "Teeth!"

Hired for a minor role as a cabbie in producer Sam Goldwyn's *The Wedding Night* (1935), Brennan so impressed Goldwyn with his characterisation that the producer signed him to a long-term contract, which led to a larger assignment in *Barbary Coast* (1935), the first of the actor's seven collaborations with director Howard Hawks. Brennan's breakthrough role was that of the Swedish lumberman Swan Bostrom in Goldwyn's *Come And Get It*, which earned him his first best supporting actor Academy Award. Brennan is one of three men (the others being Jack Nicholson and Daniel Day Lewis) to win three acting Oscars and the only man to have won the Best Supporting Actor award three times, for *Come And Get It* in 1936, for *Kentucky* in 1938 and for *The Westerner* in 1940. In 1941 Brennan received a fourth nomination for *Sergeant York*. Other noteworthy film roles include garrulous "rummy" Eddie in *To Have And Have Not* (1944), cold-blooded patriarch Old Man Clanton in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and cantankerous cattle hand Nadine Groot in *Red River* (1948 - see image below). By the end of the 1940s, he was earning \$5,000 a week and also owner of a working 12,000-acre cattle ranch in Joseph, Oregon, which for most of his adult life was the place he called home.

Continuing to flourish into the 1950s with such films as *Bad Day At Black Rock* (1955) and *Rio Bravo* (1959), Brennan also became a television star when, in 1957, he was cast as mulish West Virginia farmer Amos McCoy on the weekly situation comedy *The Real McCoys*, which ran for six years and 224 episodes.

He went on to star in two additional TV series, *Tycoon* (1964) and *The Guns Of Will Sonnett* (1967-69). In his final years Brennan often raised the hackles of his younger co-workers with his ultraconservative views, but few could argue with his fundamental professional philosophy: "My advice to actors? Very simple. Do your acting, son, but don't get caught at it." He is also reported to have said: "I never made a movie I would not take my family to see." And there are worse epitaphs than that.



With John Wayne in 1948's *Red River*. Brennan here is 53.

Though film historians and critics have long regarded Brennan as one of the finest character actors in motion picture history, the man himself remained somewhat embarrassed concerning the way he won his Oscars. In the early years of the Academy Awards, extras were given the right to vote. Brennan was popular with the Union of Film Extras, and since their numbers were overwhelming, he won each time he was nominated. Though no-one thought him undeserving, his third win led to the disenfranchisement of the Extras Union from Oscar voting.

In all, Brennan would appear in more than 240 film and television roles during a career that spanned nearly five decades. As if that wasn't enough, he also had four top 100 singles, including *Old Rivers* which, after first charted on 7 April 1962, spent eleven weeks on the Billboard charts, peaking at number 5.

On 17 October 1920 Brennan married Ruth Wells with the couple finally separated only by his death on 21 September 1974, aged 80. He was survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter.

## GRIEF STREET (1931)



Though credited named character parts at this stage in his career were rare, Brennan has one here as Walt, a *Chronicle* newspaper reporter who figures in five scenes with a total screen time of around six minutes. Bizarrely, both this character and the engineer Brennan plays in *Manhattan Tower* (1932) are given a speech impediment. Since in neither case is the affliction integral to the plot, there seems no rational reason why it should be so - or did producers back then - or audiences? - think stammering *funny*? Let down only by its clumsily written and over-hasty denouement, *Grief Street* is a brisk (63 minutes) and coherent locked room murder mystery involving an apparently strangled stage actor. Brennan's journo colleague John Holland (above, right) sorts it all out and gets the girl (petite Barbara Kent). Production values are pleasingly high and that slinky, shot silk, pre-Code ambience is always welcome. Good.

IMDb: Interesting as a transitional piece, as silent stars try their hands at talkies / All the female cast members look terrific / Rocks between a comedy drama in which the cops spend their time playing craps and an early police procedural / By the humble standards of Poverty Row, a first-class mystery thriller. The script plays fair as to the murderer's identity and his or her modus operandi. Fast-moving Richard Thorpe directs with a sure hand - I love the way he moves the camera back into the stalls for that startling trick opening - making excellent use of his players and sets, while cameraman Mil Anderson contributes appropriately atmospheric lighting. Diminutive but gorgeous Barbara Kent plays the heroine with just the right blend of sparkle and mystery. Comic relief James P. Burtis as Sergeant Jardine overdoes his earlier scenes but becomes less out-of-key aggressive as the film progresses. John Holland is a bit too stolid as the hero, but Lafe McKee gives a fine account of the stage doorman and Walter Brennan as a stuttering hack performs with due credit.

## *TWO FISTED LAW* (1932)



For Brennan (above right), a more substantial part this time, playing Deputy Sheriff Bendix, a character (in contrast to John Wayne's ranch hand Duke) integral to the plot's development and denouement. When *Two Fisted Law* was first released in 1932, Wayne and Brennan were its seventh and eighth credited actors, down among the also-rans. After the film's sale to TV in the early 1950s, however, its titles were remade and the two names (by now far better known, of course) were given second and third billing, behind only leading man Tim McCoy. Unfortunately, that doesn't render their modest contributions any more compelling, or this doggedly average 57 minute oater any more memorable. Two things that do: McCoy's impressive white horse Pal and some seriously huge hats. But that, sadly, is all she wrote.

IMDb: Though second billed to star Tim McCoy, Wayne is in the unaccustomed role of sidekick and actually has very little to do. McCoy, a silent Western star, seems to have made the transition to sound easily enough. Note good performances also from Tully Marshall as the father figure sheriff and a young Walter Brennan as his less than scrupulous deputy / Though an enjoyable Western with a determined performance by McCoy, *Two Fisted Law* is mainly notable for also featuring John Wayne, who, despite second billing, has very little to do. Third billed Walter Brennan fares much better as a corrupt sheriff's deputy / Bad guys Wheeler Oakman and Richard Alexander shine and Brennan, as usual, stands out in one of his early appearances. I recommend *Two Fisted Law*, despite the pointless generic title / A decent oater, more plot-heavy than most, but nothing special / Where did they get that absolutely stunning white horse?

[MANHATTAN TOWER \(1932\)](#)  
[THE LIFE OF VERGIE WINTERS \(1934\)](#)  
[BIOGRAPHY OF A BACHELOR GIRL \(1935\)](#)

Three examples of Brennan's uncredited pre-breakthrough screen appearances. In *Manhattan Tower* (first below) he has three scenes (including the film's last), ten lines and about two minutes' total screen time as an unnamed, speech-impaired electrical engineer. The film, by the way, is a decent little 66 minute drama set in a New York skyscraper, only flawed by the nonsensical notion that the upper-storey windows of high-rise buildings are glazed with plain and easily-broken window glass. In *The Life Of Vergie Winters* (second below), in a slightly bigger part, Brennan plays a snooping, scandal-mongering barfly called Roscoe and in *Biography Of A Bachelor Girl* (third below) a newshound named Hendricks in the script but, on IMDb, merely "Reporter on Ship". *Bachelor Girl* was Brennan's 115th film, which just goes to show that you never can tell when Madame Fortune will deign to come knocking (if ever at all). Note that *Vergie Winters* and *Bachelor Girl* are both more fully considered in the Ann Harding file.



[Manhattan Tower](#): Brennan (left) with James Hall. Aged just 31, Hall is making his last screen appearance (of 33) before alcoholism finally did for him in 1940. The film also stars Mary Brian, Irene Rich, Noel Francis and Nydia Westman. "Manhattan Tower" is in fact the Empire State Building, which opened (then the world's tallest) in May 1931, eighteen months before this film's release.



IMDb on *Manhattan Tower*: The writing is definitely the star here, serving up a film chock full of wonderful dialogue, plot twists, soap opera, suspense and a cracking finish, even if the fight does come off as a bit dopey / A surprisingly entertaining B-movie about intertwined lives during a typical day in a downtown office tower. The cast is attractive and there's a suitably despicable villain who gets his just desserts. It has no street exteriors - saving money - and moves satisfyingly fast, with second-tier actors showing their stuff. Look out for an unusual scene-changing device that makes good use of the skyscraper's vertical architecture / Given the production's limitations, nicely done and well acted. The story is a gem / The cast is top drawer - look out for Irene Rich as Mrs. Burns, fed up with her philandering husband and finding a more loving partner in Hale Hamilton, gorgeously decadent Noel Francis as a secretary who is happy to fool around during office hours and an uncredited Walter Brennan.

## NORTHERN FRONTIER (1935)



This time a credit - "Stuttering Cook" - but still a thankless, anonymous bit part with half a dozen lines and very little screen time in a here-and-gone Poverty Row B-pic. The story, in which Brennan plays no significant part, concerns an intrepid Mountie's infiltration and capture of a counterfeiting gang. 57 minutes of very small beer, not worth pursuing.

IMDb: Sooner or later, Sam Newfield was bound to make a good film - and *Northern Frontier* is it! Kermit Maynard's second movie as the star player (*The Fighting Trooper* made in 1934 was his first) reveals both an amazingly nimble actor - Kermit performs six or seven spectacular stunts right in front of the camera - and an amazingly nimble director with lots of location tracking shots from the fast-moving camera car as Kermit pursues his quarry through the dirt track roads of the Canadian frontier. The picture was actually shot at Big Bear Lake and Valley in the San Bernardino National Forest in California, but don't let that worry you. It all looks like Canada to me! Yes, this picture was produced on a much higher budget than the norm for Poverty Row. The aim was to present Kermit Maynard as an actor who could and would perform his own spectacular stunts, particularly flying leaps into the saddle. I don't know how his horse manages to stand still, but Kermit never misses! Fast paced with surprisingly high production values, *Northern Frontier* also presents Eleanor Hunt as the pretty heroine and a solid support cast including Walter Brennan doing his customary turn at this stage of his career as a tongue-tied cook and Dick Curtis as a henchman named Pete. Tyrone Power is said to have played one of the recruits watching Kermit's saddle stunts, but I didn't spot him! Good value / An unpretentious, low budget quickie shot on location at Big Bear Lake for Ambassador Pictures. Star Kermit Maynard (whose beautiful white horse deserves equal billing) pits his wits against perennial B Western villain LeRoy Mason (pictured above) who plans to double cross his fellow ne'er-do-wells in a very special way. Walter Brennan, in a small role as an abused cook, had been in many films, mostly Westerns, for years. The same year that *Northern Frontier* came out, he received his first real critical notices in Sam Goldwyn's *Barbary Coast*.

## THE WEDDING NIGHT (1935)



A poorly scripted piece of fluff in which a miscast Gary Cooper (above, in his first of six films with Brennan) lamely attempts to impersonate a soulful writer helped over his writer's block by Polish-American farm girl Manya. She is pretty and capable. He fails to convince - or perhaps the weak material set him an impossible task. Brennan's part is small - just three scenes - but played with his usual winning (not to say scene-stealing) charm. A forgettable 83 minutes.

IMDb: In which Cooper, in a thinly veiled characterisation of F. Scott Fitzgerald, gets involved with some Polish immigrants. *The Wedding Night* was supposed to launch new Goldwyn discovery Anna Sten. For some reason she didn't catch on with the public, though she does give a fine performance. However the film's best comes from Helen Vinson as Cooper's wife / This sweet and simple tale has all the elements of great drama, but never reaches the heights it is trying to attain. The leads are young and attractive and the plot moves briskly, but even with excellent production design and direction by the masterful King Vidor, it still lacks that magic that could have made it explode into something special. There is no chemistry between Cooper and Sten and their unsympathetic partners, Vinson and Bellamy, are not really fleshed out as characters. Walter Brennan adds some zest to a few scenes as another local, but the end result is a drama that seems like something Lillian Gish may have starred in during the silent era / The acting is fine, the characters complex and the direction up to Vidor's high standards - though be prepared for a bittersweet ending / Not bad, but no more than a time-passer. It's easy to see why it's pretty much forgotten. As for the ending, that would have been dictated by the new Production Code, under which the love between Cooper and Sten could *not* be allowed to result in happiness.

## BANJO ON MY KNEE (1936)



After eleven years of scuffling either well down the credits or not named at all, Brennan finally gets to show that, given the chance in a half-decent part, he can mix it with the best of them - in this case, Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea. Indeed, as in *The Westerner* (1940, with Gary Cooper), he goes one better by quickening his character with sufficient charm and brio to make the film his own. Based on a novel by Harry Hamilton, *Banjo On My Knee* is part musical, part romance, part drama and a delight on every front. Brennan plays Mississippi shanty boat patriarch Newt Holley, a character in his late sixties, and though just 42, the actor wholly convinces. 92 minutes.

IMDb: Walter Brennan never did a bad job in his life, and this is one of his best / Loads of fun / The combination of Buddy Ebsen and charismatic veteran actor Brennan in their typecast personalities provides most of the authentic feel, with some help from Helen Westley as a pipe-smoking granny and Spencer Charters as the judge / Brennan gives a great performance, warming our hearts with his simple melodies / A complete dud / Warm, funny characters brought to life by delightful actors. Stanwyck shines as the uneducated "land girl" who weds McCrea's "river boy" despite significant differences in their background and world view. Brennan assays one of his best roles as McCrea's good-natured, contraption-playing father. Ebsen singing and dancing to the title tune, Walter Catlett as a would-be Lothario in hapless pursuit of Stanwyck and Katherine DeMille as a voluptuous harpy after McCrea all turn in fine performances. One of the film's best elements, however, is the music. We not only have Brennan's rousing renditions of "Dixie" and "St. Louis Blues" but the latter also rendered to perfection by the marvellous Hall Johnson Choir / Brennan is the heart and soul of the film.

## *AFFAIRS OF CAPPY RICKS (1937)*



Brennan is given the lead here and does well enough, but the material is thin and his cranky old man act starts to grate after a while. Since everything is done and dusted within 56 minutes, however, your patience will not be unduly tried.

IMDb: The acting, while not outstanding, is good enough for a simple, mildly amusing comedy such as this / A pretty lightweight comedy. Brennan is great, as is the whole cast, but it runs on far too long / Brennan goes full steam as the curmudgeonly "old salt-shaker" who stubbornly resists the encroachment of technology and is horrified on returning home to find his daughter's future mother-in-law running his house and business and poised to merge his company with rival Bottomley (William Davidson, above), a purveyor of all things automated! Cappy launches a counter plot to set things straight, giving the story the bulk of its humorous situations. The silly plot is well served by nice performances from Brennan, Georgia Caine, Frank Shields and perky, attractive Mary Brian as Frankie / Clearly a B-movie - i.e. a small-budgeted film with no pretence - featuring some really cheap model ships. But it's fun, which, for a B, is enough to make it a success, even if the plot is a bit hard to believe. Enjoyable and slight. Both Brennan and Talbot are very good / Brennan is not his usual lovable old salt in this plot and situation retread. Trying to boss Brennan around, Georgia Caine as Amanda Peasely has some good moments / In one of his few starring roles while he was winning all those Best Supporting Actor awards, Walter Brennan fronts this amusing comedy for Republic. With no leading players to steal scenes from, he's given a full head of steam by the director. His only competition comes from Georgia Caine, wife of William Davidson, with whom Brennan's business is merging. Mary Brian as Cappy's feisty daughter Frankie also shines. Definitely one for Brennan fans.

*THE WESTERNER* (1940)



Above average Western fun. Cooper is good but Brennan makes the difference with an Oscar-winning turn as Judge Roy Bean, dealing rough justice from behind his bar while helplessly smitten by Lily Langtry. A standard cattlemen v. homesteaders yarn with knobs on. By gobs, that's m' rulin'. 100 minutes.

IMDb: William Wyler, such a superb director, has somehow given us two movies. The first is about, you guessed it, sodbusters, regular folks like you and me who, according to Hollywood, just want to put down roots, raise their families and build decent lives. The husbands are always pulling out tree stumps and the wives are always whomping up pies. Against them ride the cattlemen, and every cliché in the book is thrown into this part of *The Westerner's* story. The second movie, however, is the sly, sometimes funny and somewhat vicious story of Judge Bean, his dictatorial character and his obsession with Lily Langtry, a beautiful singer from over the seas and a woman the Judge has idealised for years / While Coop (above) is great, it is, lock, stock and blazing barrels, Brennan's performance as Judge Roy Bean that steals the show. What a deeply nuanced character! His Best Supporting Actor Oscar was richly deserved / The title of this movie should have been *The Story Of Judge Roy Bean* starring Walter Brennan / Brennan is ideally cast as the eccentric Bean, although the ending where a terminally wounded Bean drops dead after Lily Langtry greets him is a little weak as well as fanciful. The facts were that Bean left Langtry to visit another town, and saw Lily Langtry act there. By the time that Lily Langtry did visit Langtry, Texas, Judge Bean had recently died - of natural causes / Brennan's portrayal of Judge Roy Bean results in one of the more memorable characters in Westerns. He manages to tread the very thin line between parody and homage perfectly / A classic - don't miss it.

## MEET JOHN DOE (1941)



In 1925 Gary Cooper (second right above) befriended another young struggling would-be actor named Walter Brennan. At one point, they even appeared as a team at casting offices and although Cooper won major and leading roles first, the pair would work together in the good years, too, eventually appearing in six films together: *The Wedding Night*, *The Westerner*, *Meet John Doe*, *Sergeant York*, *Pride Of The Yankees* and *Task Force*. For more on *Meet John Doe*, see the Barbara Stanwyck and Gary Cooper files.

IMDb: An absorbing story, one of Capra's best, with some great, at times mesmerising acting / Edward Arnold (above, left) is exemplary as the manipulating moneybags and Brennan's straightforward Colonel is insightful as Coop's obstinate buddy who sees his friend falling into the same opportunistic trappings he is supposedly rebelling against / *Meet John Doe*, from Capra's worthwhile second tier, ends up uneasily advocating Christianity as the healer of society's festering wounds / The film's message is that dreams can never be destroyed. John Doe isn't a nobody, he is a somebody, because he is everybody / Capra has been called a 20th Century Dickens. Taking into account the quality of the best of his work, with *John Doe* at its epicentre both temporally and thematically, this "timeless" accolade is well deserved / Capra deftly handles his actors, prising superb performances from Arnold, Stanwyck, Gleason and Brennan / Brennan is on top form as the Colonel, an inveterate cynic and free spirit, a drifter comfortable with being no one, warning of the pitfalls of obligations to a regular life. He sees the manipulation of Doe before John does, and rails against it incessantly. Capra uses him as a foil to the ambition of everyone else and as a mirror into a past before technology. His clichés reach back into the 19th century with remarkable authenticity.

## SERGEANT YORK (1941)



Gary Cooper (above, right) plays Alvin York, a simple but savvy Tennessee farm boy who starts out as something of a tearaway, then gets religion, then gets called up and, after basic training, is shipped off to France (the film is set in 1917) to become a reluctant war hero. Cooper's hesitant, slightly perplexed style is perfect for the part - and duly won him a first Best Actor Academy Award (of two - the other for *High Noon*). Brennan (with specs, above) offers his usual good value in the supporting role (also Oscar nominated) of Pastor Pyle. 129 minutes.

IMDb: The authentic portrayal of mountain life, an honourable protagonist portrayed by a great actor in his finest role, hard decisions in the time of war mixed with a healthy dose of levity, not to mention an outstanding supporting cast are just a few of the reasons why *Sergeant York* has always been my favourite movie. I am aware that this was a WWII propaganda film but I'm just idealistic enough to buy the whole package / Hawks did a masterful job in casting this film with some actors well used to playing rustics: Ward Bond, Noah Beery Jr. Howard DaSilva, Clem Bevans and most of all, as Pastor Pyle, Walter Brennan, tripling as preacher, postmaster and owner of the general store. Brennan was Best Supporting Actor Oscar nominated, but since he'd already won three of them, the Academy voters gave Donald Crisp a break that year for *How Green Was My Valley* / Brennan as the preacher is good despite his crazy eyebrows / Superb performances by Brennan as the preacher and the amazing Margaret Wycherly as the mother / I'm always amazed at how convincingly Brennan could play old men, even when quite young. Maybe his dentures helped. He certainly had the voice perfected / Walter Brennan - probably the greatest character actor of all time.

## SWAMP WATER (1941)



Though Brennan receives top billing here, Dana Andrews leads as stout-hearted Ben, with able support from Walter Huston as his pa Thursday, Anne Baxter as the love interest and Eugene Pallette as Sheriff McKane. Set in the Georgia swampland, the story concerns a wrongly convicted killer who hides out (for five years!) until his name can be cleared so (nearly) all can live happily ever after. 72 minutes.

IMDb: An altogether impressive production with the overpowering atmosphere of the Okefenokee beautifully captured by Renoir and veteran cinematographer Peverell Marley. The use of shadowy lighting is especially striking. The film's concern with realism also extends to some rather physical violence for the time and a couple of unnerving scenes involving prowling alligators and snakes. Underrated in the director's canon, *Swamp Water* may have served as a dry run for *The Southerner* (1945). It also looks forward to *Intruder In the Dust* (1949), which similarly deals with a miscarriage of justice. I don't agree with Leonard Maltin's claim that Brennan's fugitive constitutes "bizarre miscasting" (certainly no more so than his uncharacteristic if brilliant turn as Old Man Clanton in Ford's *My Darling Clementine*). Despite enjoying relatively little screen time, his presence permeates the entire film, one of the most endearing aspects of which is the unconditional love shown by both Brennan and Andrews for the latter's wayward dog, Trouble, who gets the last shot via a well-deserved close-up / Impressive / A beautiful, sometimes extremely delicate and often very eerie film of love and death in the nearly primordial Okefenokee swamp. Director Renoir and his cinematographer have created a mystical feeling surrounding the setting, which makes a perfect match for the moral complexity Renoir draws from the characterisations. It is not an easy film, but morally challenging. Andrews, anything but a transparent screen presence, is perfectly cast. Anne Baxter too, has an unspoken pain about her that's ideal, and Brennan, as always, is wonderful. Evocative and magical.

## PRIDE OF THE YANKEES (1942)



Between June 1925 and April 1939, Lou Gehrig made 2,130 consecutive appearances for the New York Yankees before retiring himself from the team due to a sudden, serious and inexplicable loss of form. Within six weeks he was diagnosed as suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and within two years was dead, aged just 37. This sudsy, Mom's-apple-pie biopic must have gone into production very soon after his untimely passing and received no fewer than eleven Oscar nominations - though only one statuette, for editing. (Cooper, who had won the previous year for *Sergeant York*, was beaten out this time by James Cagney.) Leonard Maltin liked the film enough to award his full four stars. But, whilst enjoyable enough as a sincere tribute to Gehrig's extraordinary career, it lacks dramatic tension and is disappointingly light on detail - for example, his disease is never named nor his death documented, though doubtless all contemporary viewers would have been well aware of these ancillary details as us Johnny-come-latelys are not. Cooper (above) does his best and there are some touching moments (Babe Ruth, Mark Koenig *et al.* too), but it's all a bit two-dimensional. Brennan's part as sports reporter Sam Blake hardly stretches him either. 128 minutes.

IMDb: Cooper does a great job, Brennan is brilliant as always and Teresa Wright is stunning. Seeing Babe Ruth, Bob Meusel, Bill Dickey and some other team mates of Lou's made the movie even more enjoyable. I also like the 'innocence' of a film like this that can be viewed by all the family, from small children who love real-life heroes to the elderly who can actually remember them. Although there are a few biographical errors about Gehrig's life, overall, the film is fantastic, even if you're not a real baseball fan - and if you *are* a real baseball fan, *Pride Of The Yankees* is a must-see! / Brennan drops a lot of his cornball mannerisms and plays it straight with excellent results.

## THE NORTH STAR (1943)



*The North Star* is a divisive anti-Nazi propaganda film enjoyed and admired by some and loathed for its "dishonesty" by others who view Lillian Hellman's screenplay as pro-Stalinist poison. When viewed as an example of its kind, it's hard not to be won over, for the film makes a powerful statement; hope to find some version of literal rather than allegorical "truth", however, and you'll seek in vain. Brennan (above, centre) plays Karp, an old farmer turned gunrunner, with his usual cracker-barrel conviction. (See also Ann Harding file.)

*When it comes to the great war films, Lewis Milestone's All Quiet On The Western Front regularly tops the list. However, given what it contributed to the US war effort, an argument could be made for Milestone's less celebrated The North Star being a more important picture. At the time the film was made, 1943, it was becoming increasingly apparent that, if America and her allies were to triumph over Nazi Germany, they were going to have to rely on the Russians. But what was John Doe to make of the vodka-swilling, Communism-embracing Ruskies? Hopefully a film like The North Star would illustrate that not only were Mother Russia's children much like Uncle Sam's but they also shared similar dreams, qualities and objectives ... Although it now seems unsubtle and hackneyed, the power of The North Star is easy to appreciate if you can just keep the context in mind. Despite being only a few miles away across the Baring Straits, American understanding of the USSR in the early 1940s didn't extend much beyond snow and salt mines. Milestone's movie was*

*an attempt to win hearts and minds, nothing more, nothing less. The success of the exercise stemmed from Milestone's understanding of the genre (his list of war films is really long and includes such classics as A Walk In The Sun and Halls Of Montezuma) and the ability of Anne Baxter, Dean Jagger, Farley Granger and co. to play young Russians who come on just like contemporary American teens. Special mention must go to Walter Huston, who was the best thing about so many films, and Erich von Stroheim, the genius director (Greed) who proved his professionalism by being happy to play the bad German when the directing work dried up. The cinematography is also superb, but then you'd expect nothing else from James Wong Howe (Hud, The Rose Tattoo). Precisely what difference The North Star made to the war effort we'll never know. But if all Hollywood propaganda pictures conformed to Milestone's high stands, we might be less inclined to cringe whenever the studios decide to get behind the boys. [Wikipedia]*

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A contemporary review

*The story of Russia's recent ordeal has been variously reported to the world through mediums which have eminently reflected one of history's most terrible wars. And now comes a motion picture which images that conflict in a way intended to state its human meanings without any political pondering at all. It is Samuel Goldwyn's new production, The North Star, which was presented here last night at two Broadway theatres, the New Victoria and the Palace - an honour accorded to only a few previous films. Based on a script originally written by Lillian Hellman and directed by Lewis Milestone, this lyric and savage picture suggests in passionate terms the outrage committed upon a peaceful people by the invading armies of Nazi Germany And it offers a clamorous tribute to the courage and tenacity of those who have sacrificed their homes, themselves and their families in resisting the Fascist hordes in this war. Through the evidence of one happy village - apparently Russian, though that fact is strangely slurred - it indicates what the Germans ran into when they crossed a border on a fateful June day. It shows how the people of this village girded themselves for a no-quarter fight - how the men went off to the hills to become guerrillas and how the women, children and old folks remained at home to scorch the earth ahead of the invaders and to endure brutalities of the most inhuman sort, particularly the taking of blood from children for transfusion into German soldiers. And it ends with a rip-roaring melee when the guerrillas come down out of the hills, after a brave group of children and one old man have run some guns through to them, to retake the village, slaughter its Nazi garrison and liberate the populace. It is a heroic picture, the force of which is weakened only by the fact that in it Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Milestone have too freely mixed theatrical forms. The first part of the film, in*

*which the village and its inhabitants are idyllically introduced, is distinctly in the style of operetta. There are music (by Aaron Copland) and rollicking gaiety of the sort familiar to light-hearted peasants in musical comedies set in mythical foreign lands. When the people of the village gather for a sociable evening al fresco, it might even be a scene from Oklahoma. And when the children go off on a walking trip, they sing of themselves delightedly as "the younger generation and the future of the nation" in lyrics by Ira Gershwin. The contrast is therefore too prodigious when the bombs suddenly come raining down and the style of the film abruptly changes to one of vehement reality. The switch is too obvious a reminder of the theatrical nature of the film. But from that point on the tension and excitement are so extreme that reflection is not convenient. And the film is climaxed by an eloquent scene in which is stated finely the idea that all men who aid the Fascists are enemies of humanity.*

*This scene, in which Walter Huston as the village doctor kills Erich von Stroheim in the role of a Nazi surgeon who pretends to regret what he does, is by far the most trenchant in the picture, and a ringing truth lies in the village doctor's words:*

I have heard about men like you - the civilised men who are sorry. You are the real filth - men who do the work of Fascists and pretend to themselves they are better than those for whom they work, men who do murder while they laugh at those for whom they do it.

*This speech, written by Miss Hellman, lifts the film to a thrilling peak. The performance of Mr. Huston is excellent, combining gentleness, dignity and rugged strength, and Mr. von Stroheim is caustic and arrogant in a role that fits him like a monocle. Walter Brennan brings humour and homely gravity to the part of an old farmer, while Anne Baxter, Dana Andrews, Jane Withers and Farley Granger are conventionally spirited as young folks. The North Star has so much in it that is moving and triumphant that its sometime departures from reality may be generally overlooked.*

Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times*, 5 November 1943

Producer Samuel Goldwyn made *The North Star* at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, yet, ironically, several members of the film's creative team later found their motivations for making it called into question by the House Un-American Activities Committee, who dismissed *The North Star* as "Communist propaganda."

\* \* \* \* \*

## TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT (1944)



Adapted for the screen by William Faulkner and relocated in the process from Cuba to Martinique, Hemingway's *To Have And Have Not* in set in the summer of 1940, just after the fall of France, and concerns the intrigues of French expats opposed to the Vichy government. Bogart (above) plays a fisherman who gets involved against his better judgement and Brennan the rummy he looks out for. Making her screen debut, 19 year old Lauren Bacall falls for fellow New Yorker Bogie (44 and married) both fictionally and really. They will subsequently marry and co-star in three further films together - all probably better than this tame affair. With Hoagy Carmichael. 96 minutes.

IMDb: The cast is great, the story less so / A poor man's *Casablanca* / An enjoyable film, but not a good one / Though the plot is not mind-blowing, the chemistry between Bogart and Bacall is electric / It is entertaining to see Brennan squirm and tick as a hopeless alkie who can't seem to remember a conversation that took place five minutes prior / A good movie with weird and wonderful touches. Though not quite as good as its best scenes, it has a quirky sense of humour, as when Bacall calls Bogart "Steve" throughout the movie or Hoagy Carmichael's odd musical numbers or the casting of Brennan opposite Bogart - two more different styles of acting you will never find. What makes it all work is the white-hot chemistry between the two leads / An ordinary film about nothing / *To Have And Have Not* has no artistic pretensions and is all the better for it. It's a wonderful way to spend 90 minutes or so, with a storyline that's compelling but not over-complicated, played by actors (Bogart, Bacall, Brennan) who make their characters so believable and real that it feels as if you're watching good friends at work / Yet another mediocre movie from a mediocre Hemingway novel.

## MY DARLING CLEMENTINE (1946)



John Ford's first post-war Western is a loose, languid and occasionally noir-tinged retelling of the shoot-out at the OK Corral, in which the Earp brothers plus Doc Holliday face off against the Clantons, led by Brennan in one of his strongest screen roles. Lots to enjoy. 93 minutes.

IMDb: John Ford directed two great Westerns: *The Searchers* and this film about the famous gunfight between the Earps and the Clantons. A classic! / Understated Henry Fonda and volcanic Victor Mature work well against each other. The script is low-key and naturalistic, allowing the action to stand out. The cinematography is spectacular, both in the wide open panoramas and in the more intimate personal scenes. Interior lighting, in particular, is very skilfully used. Seeing Walter Brennan play against type makes one appreciate how much better an actor he was than his more usual doddering bumpkin roles allowed him to show / A joy to behold / Simply awful: clichéd dialogue, stereotyped personalities, scenery quite unlike that around Tombstone and historically very inaccurate. The climax of the film - the actual shoot-out - is so far removed from what really happened as to be patently absurd / An allegory through and through. Yes, Fonda as Wyatt Earp, Victor Mature as Doc Holliday, Linda Darnell as Clementine and Walter Brennan as Old Man Clanton bring life to their characters and the story, though familiar, is very well re-told by John Ford. But *My Darling Clementine* works best as an allegory - as a story of the eternal battle of good against evil, of civilisation against anarchy, of thugishness against the rule of law. So different from the approach of the films of the 1970s, '80s and '90s. Don't miss this movie / The best Western by the best director of Westerns in the history of motion pictures / Filmed in gloriously rich black and white, *My Darling Clementine* is an archetypal Western mood piece, full of nostalgia for times gone by and crackling with memorable scenes and characterisations / For much of *My Darling Clementine*, I was a little disappointed. This was supposed to be one of the best works from a director whom I have come to love quite dearly, and I was growing a bit bored. But as the film progressed, it drew me further and further in, until it was almost as if I was experiencing the events and emotions of

the film myself, rather than watching on a TV screen. How often does that happen? Only a handful of films have that power. A beautifully subtle masterwork.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"What kind of town is this?" Wyatt Earp asks on his first night in Tombstone. "A man can't get a shave without gettin' his head blowed off." He gets up out of the newfangled barber's chair at the Bon Ton Tonsorial Parlour and climbs through the second-story window of a saloon, his face still half lathered, to konk a gun-toting drunk on the head and drag him out by the heels.*

*Earp (Henry Fonda) already knows what kind of town it is. In the opening scenes of John Ford's greatest Western, My Darling Clementine, he and his brothers are driving cattle east to Kansas. Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan leave their kid brother James in charge of the herd and go into town for a shave and a beer. As they ride down the main street of Tombstone, under a vast and lowering evening sky, gunshots and raucous laughter are heard in the saloons, and we don't have to ask why the town has the biggest graveyard west of the Rockies.*

*Ford's story re-enacts the central morality play of the Western. Wyatt Earp becomes the town's new marshal, there's a showdown between law and anarchy, the law wins and the last shot features the new schoolmarm, who represents the arrival of civilisation. Most Westerns put the emphasis on the showdown. My Darling Clementine builds up to the legendary gunfight at the OK Corral, but it is more about everyday things - haircuts, romance, friendship, poker and illness.*

*At the centre is Henry Fonda's performance as Wyatt Earp. He's usually shown as a man of action, but Fonda makes him the new-style Westerner, who stands up when a woman comes into the room and knows how to carve a chicken and dance a reel. Like a teenager, he sits in a chair on the veranda of his office, tilts back to balance on the back legs and pushes off against a post with one boot and then the other. He's thinking of Clementine, and Fonda shows his happiness with body language.*

*Earp has accepted the marshal's badge because when he and his brothers returned to their herd, they found the cattle rustled and James dead. There is every reason to believe the crime was committed by Old Man Clanton and his "boys" (grown, bearded and mean). An early scene ends with Clanton baring his teeth like an animal showing its fangs. Earp buries James in a touching scene. ("You didn't get much of a chance, did you, James?") Then, instead of riding into town and shooting the Clantons, he tells the mayor he'll become the new marshal. He wants revenge, but legally.*

*The most important relationship is between Earp and Doc Holliday (Victor Mature), the gambler who runs Tombstone but is dying of tuberculosis. They are natural enemies, but a quiet, unspoken regard grows up between the two men, maybe because Earp senses the sadness at Holliday's core. Holliday's rented room has his medical diploma on the wall and his doctor's bag beneath it, but he doesn't practice anymore. Something went wrong back East, and now he gambles for a living, and drinks himself into oblivion. His lover is a prostitute, Chihuahua (Linda Darnell), and he talks about leaving for Mexico with her. But as he coughs up blood, he knows what his prognosis is.*

*The marshal's first showdown with Holliday is a classic Ford scene. The saloon grows quiet when Doc walks in, and the bar clears when he walks up to it. He tells Earp, "Draw!" Earp says he can't - doesn't have a gun. Doc calls for a gun, and a man down the bar slides him one. Earp looks at the gun, and says, "Brother Morg's gun. The other one, the good-lookin' fellow - that's my brother, Virge." Doc registers this information and returns his own gun to its holster. He realises Earp's brothers have the drop on him. "Howdy," says Doc. "Have a drink."*

*Twice Doc tells someone to get out of town, and twice Earp reminds him that's the marshal's job. Although the Clantons are the first order of business, Doc and Earp seem headed for a showdown. Yet they have a scene together that is one of the strangest and most beautiful in all of John Ford's work. A British actor (Alan Mowbray) has come to town to put on a play, and when he doesn't show up at the theatre, Earp and Holliday find him in the saloon, on top of a table, being tormented by the Clantons. The actor begins Hamlet's famous soliloquy, but is too drunk and frightened to continue. Doc Holliday, from memory, completes the speech, and could be speaking of himself: "... but that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns, puzzles the will ... ."*

*The gentlest moments in the movie involve Earp's feelings for Clementine (Cathy Downs), who arrives on the stage from the East, looking for "Dr. John Holliday." She is the girl Doc left behind. Earp, sitting outside the hotel, rises quickly to his feet as she gets out of the stage, and his movements show that he's in awe of this graceful vision. Clementine has been seeking Doc all over the West, we learn, and wants to bring him home. Doc tells her to get out of town. And Chihuahua monitors the situation jealously.*

*Clementine is packed to go the next morning when the marshal, awkward and shy, asks her to join him at the church service and dance. They walk in stately procession down the covered boardwalk, while Ford's favourite hymn plays: "Shall We Gather at the River?" When the fiddler strikes up, Wyatt and Clementine dance - he clumsy but enthusiastic, and with great joy. This dance*

*is the turning point of the movie, and marks the end of the Old West. There are still shots to be fired, but civilisation has arrived.*

*The legendary gunfight at the OK Corral has been the subject of many films, including Frontier Marshal (1939), Gunfight At The O.K. Corral (1957), Tombstone (1993, with Val Kilmer's brilliant performance as Doc) and Wyatt Earp (1994). Usually the gunfight is the centrepiece of the film. Here it plays more like the dispatch of unfinished business; Ford doesn't linger over the violence.*

*There is the quiet tenseness in the marshal's office as Earp prepares to face the Clantons, who've shouted their challenge that they'd be waiting for him at the corral. Earp's brothers are with him, because this is "family business." Earp turns down other volunteers, but when Doc turns up, he lets him take part, because Doc has family business, too (one of the Clanton boys has killed Chihuahua). Under the merciless clear sky of a desert dawn, in silence except for far-off horse whinnies and dog barks, the men walk down the street and take care of business.*

*John Ford (1895-1973) was, many believe, the greatest of all American directors. Certainly he did more than any other to document the passages of American history. For him, a Western was not quite such a "period film" as it would be for later directors. He shot on location in the desert and prairie, his cast and crew living as if they were on a cattle drive, eating out of the chuck wagon, sleeping in tents. He filmed My Darling Clementine in his beloved Monument Valley, on the Arizona-Utah border.*

*He made dozens of silent Westerns, met the real Wyatt Earp on the set of a movie and heard the story of the OK Corral directly from him (even so, history tells a story much different from this film). Ford worked repeatedly with the same actors (his "stock company") and it is interesting that he chose Fonda rather than John Wayne, his other favourite, for Wyatt Earp. Maybe he saw Wayne as the embodiment of the Old West, and the gentler Fonda as one of the new men who would tame the wilderness.*

*My Darling Clementine must be one of the sweetest and most good-hearted of all Westerns. The giveaway is the title, which is not about Wyatt or Doc or the gunfight, but about Clementine, certainly the most important thing to happen to Marshal Earp during the story. There is a moment, soon after she arrives, when Earp gets a haircut and a quick spray of perfume at the Bon Ton Tonsorial Parlour. Clem stands close to him and says she loves "the scent of the desert flowers." "That's me," says Earp. "Barber."*

Roger Ebert, 26 October 1997

## RED RIVER (1948)



Leonard Maltin rates *Red River* as a four-star "absolute must" and, provided you like Westerns, his assessment is pretty much on the money, for they don't come much better. Directed by Howard Hawks and running 128 minutes, the film stars John Wayne (above left) playing against type - not the rugged all-American hero for once, but an embittered and intransigent lunk - and Monty Clift (above, second left, in just his second screen role) as his more rational adopted son. Brennan makes a typically colourful and narratively significant contribution as Wayne's long-time partner Groot. With Harry Carey.

IMDb: In most of the near 200 films that Wayne appeared in, he simply played himself, or a part that closely resembled his own outlook and persona. But in two films, *The Searchers* and *Red River*, he was called on to act - and act he did / Astonishing. The definitive Western / A tough-as-nails Western classic in which The Duke gives one of his greatest performances / Be prepared for a long sojourn. This isn't brain candy but an allegorical treatise on the impetuosity of youth vs. the inflexible values of pioneer stock. In the end, both are told to cut themselves some slack by gun-totin' Joanne Dru. In summary, a great Western / I can't believe that such a good movie could have such an anti-climactic and insulting ending. A ruined masterpiece! / To those who find the ending too soft or anti-climactic, I would point in Hawks' defence to his repeated tendency to place women in his films (see *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Man Friday* etc) in a superior, more knowing position than the men. Bolder and more mature, they subvert the narrow, macho, egocentric male universe before recognising the two sexes' mutual need. The brilliant ending of *Red River* is a perfect example of this view / A benchmark Western, not to be missed / Brennan is great. Then again, I like almost everything he's done. The ongoing joke about losing his teeth in a poker game is fantastic / Wayne is more than convincing, Brennan characteristically funny and Clift terrific / 10 out of 10.

## THE GREEN PROMISE (1949)



In *The Green Promise*, part entertainment, part Public Service Broadcast and not much of either, Brennan plays an unsympathetic character - an old farmer whose pig-headed refusal to listen to advice leads his family to near ruin. Natalie Wood as the youngest child is good. Not much else is. 94 minutes.

IMDb: Not the best movie ever made, but good enough to enjoy. No murders, no sex and Walter Brennan / It reminded me of those 16mm films we were shown in grade school - this one on the benefits of land conservation and 4H Clubs. Actually, it was sort of disturbing. Brennan plays an overbearing, out-of-date father of four who goes out of his way to alienate those who would help him. Unfortunately, the arc of his character is more like a straight line with a sharp hook at the end, as he sees the error of his ways in the last sixty seconds of the film / A far from classic time capsule / One of those 'family on a farm' B-movies so common in the forties and fifties, about a little girl (or boy) with a horse, a dog, or in this case, baby lambs. It starts off like a 4H promotional film but gets better towards the end. Notable for a star turn from ten year old Natalie Wood and the ecological disaster at its climax / Like Solomon before him, Christ was a close observer of the world of sunlight and meadow. He used each flower and each blade of grass to draw the eye of man from earth to Heaven, towards the doctrines of His kingdom. If an idea was remote and obscure, He would show His listeners a picture from their daily lives. Galilee being both a garden spot and a place of many farms, He illustrated His deepest teachings with scenes of wheat fields, vineyards and threshing floors. And sometimes He used paradoxes. How does a man gain his life if he loses it? How does a seed live only if it falls to the ground and dies? Thus it is that *The Green Promise*, a simple tale about life on a farm, raises the deepest questions about life. The movie tells the story of a stubborn old farmer, played by Walter Brennan, who moves from the Dust Bowl to a farm bursting with potential. But he disregards sensible advice on how to work the land. All his efforts come to naught, and

his farm is ruined. As he ploughs and sows and gathers in his hay, his youngest daughter seeks self-expression through her love of God's creation. Her loving young heart desires two newborn lambs she saw in a livestock catalogue. But no matter how much she pleads, her stingy father keeps the lambs out of reach until the very end. There is another source of trouble, and that is sin. On Sunday, the family hears the preacher condemn a new kind of sin - the sin of those who stubbornly cling to outmoded ways of farming. Such men, the preacher says, will be denied the Green Promise, the joy of entering into the Land of Milk and Honey. And, true to the preacher's prediction, the farm is destroyed. A tide of angry water rolls down off the mountain like Noah's flood, and all is swept away in a raging torrent. If the story ended there, we would have a compelling tale about the power of sin to destroy the land and the power of love to heal it. But then the movie broadens into a meditation on destiny and divine providence. The character of the youngest daughter, the keeper of the lambs, is played by Natalie Wood (with Brennan below). In her effort to save the poor creatures, she rushes home through a brutal lightning storm. Halfway across a stream, a footbridge collapses, plunging her into the water. The scene is harrowingly realistic, and painful to watch, because it is real. The prop men who built the tiny, creaking footbridge, designed it to collapse after young Natalie crossed over. But the churning water weakened the structure, snapped the wood, and tossed the terrified young girl into the water. She held on bravely to the broken bridge while the director kept filming. For the remainder of her life, Natalie Wood would have a fear of drowning. At the age of 43, after a drinking binge, she fell off her boat near Santa Catalina Island. Just as in the movie, she held on for many minutes. Then, exhausted, she slipped beneath the rolling waves and drowned. How strange, then, that *The Green Promise* was also entitled *Raging Waters*. The movie raises many unsettling questions. Does God know our ultimate end? Was divine providence at work in the life of Natalie Wood? If we disobey God's laws, will God withhold "The Green Promise?" This apparently simple movie about life on a farm contains a fascinating and somewhat uncanny message. *The Green Promise* is a profound and mysterious film.



## TASK FORCE (1949)



*Task Force* traces the development of, and pays tribute to US naval aviation by documenting the career of Jonathan L. Scott (Cooper, above) who began as a rookie pilot on the first US aircraft carrier in the early twenties and retired, after the war, as a Rear Admiral. In their last film together (of six), Brennan plays his superior and mentor Pete Richard. *Task Force* is in black and white for its first 93 minutes then Technicolor through to the end. Good of its kind. 112 minutes.

IMDb: The best movie ever made about the U.S. Navy in the Pacific conflict, with the coloured wartime documentary footage adding that extra gloss to a fine film. Coop took on his role perfectly and Brennan never lets you down / High marks for accuracy and atmosphere. The central event is the 1942 Battle of Midway, re-told here so much better than in the egregious 1976 film / Will hold the interest of hardcore war buffs but most others will pass on this dated film after a few minutes / A great true story told with stock footage / Some wooden acting and too much exposition / A fine, passionate and patriotic film about the advent of the aircraft carrier as the principal weapon of the U.S. Navy in World War II / Cooper and Brennan carry the movie. The chemistry Coop has with his audience and his on-screen friend and CO (Brennan) puts real blood and muscle into a film that at times gets a bit too documentarian. Add in a sweet, loving performance by Jane Wyatt as the graceful and gracious military wife and you have a really human movie that works as history lesson, war film, political essay and love story / One of the best war films ever / I did have a chuckle when they said Scottie is on the *Enterprise* / Cooper convinces as a modest man just doing a job / Brennan and Cooper were a great pair and are very good in this movie. Except for the lack of bloody wounds - so typical of forties war movies - it was impressive that the dramatic detail in this film was more accurate than usual for this genre. The shift from black and white to colour footage to denote plot transition was very effective.

## SINGING GUNS (1950)



After scoring a big hit with *Ghost Riders In The Sky*, crooner Vaughn Monroe thought he'd like to follow Roy Rogers down the Singing Cowboy trail and rake in some movie money. But, though supposed to launch his new career, *Singing Guns* (geddit?) shows only why it deservedly died a-borning. Monroe plays a stagecoach robber who, despite a \$5,000 reward on his head, is appointed sheriff so he can hunt himself down. The film, from a Max brand novel, is easy on the eye but ditchwater dull - beware especially the grim musical interludes and a resolution that makes no sense. Brennan plays the town doctor and preacher with his usual persuasive assurance, but here (unlike *The Showdown*, also from Republic) is fighting a lost cause. With Ward Bond. 91 minutes.

IMDb: If you like good old fashioned Westerns, you'll like this one / A decent horse opera / The story and actors are good but the shootouts could have been better and the bad guy less of a caricature / Curious as to what a cowboy film with crooner Vaughn Monroe might be like, I finally caught up with *Singing Guns*. Made by Republic in 1950, it features Monroe as outlaw Rhiannon, who hides out in the mountains with a stack of gold stolen à la Dick Turpin from stagecoaches. Ward Bond is the local sheriff, Ella Raines the sparky love interest and Brennan the doctor cum preacher always ready to save a soul. Despite its tiny budget and Poverty Row production values, the film looks good - thanks to Trucolor - and has a solid supporting cast. I'd recommend it as a fairly strong B feature / It's not unusual for a pop singer to transition to movies. Examples range from Crosby and Sinatra to Elvis to the more contemporary Ice Cube. Though Monroe makes a manful effort, the results are best described as uneven. Note how much more relaxed he seems when doing what he does best - sing.

## THE SHOWDOWN (1950)



Shad Jones's brother was shot in the back and robbed by someone riding for the Circle K outfit. Shad becomes trail boss of their cattle drive to Montana in order to discover whodunit. Brennan stands out among a B-list cast that also includes Harry ("Colonel Potter") Morgan and Marie (*Narrow Margin*) Windsor. More grits 'n' gravy than roast beef, but toothsome still. 86 minutes.

IMDb: This dark character play - not your typical B horse opera - makes my top-ten list of greatest Westerns / A film that deserves more credit than it gets. Photography, cast and story are all excellent. Brennan's attempt to convince Wild Bill Elliott that vengeance is wrong, that all will be taken care by divine retribution, stays in the mind long after the film is over / Once in awhile Republic Studios would release a little gem among all the mediocre B oaters they put out, and this happens to be one of 'em. The opening graveyard scene is excellent, the ending is a real shocker and what comes in between is not half bad / A surprisingly good little drama, despite its low budget induced shortcomings. The excellent script delivers a number of surprises and holds interest throughout. The three leads (Elliot, Brennan, Windsor) along with supporting players Morgan, Williams and Ching are as good as could be expected from the major studios. Only Nacho Galindo's buffoonish comic-relief suggests Republic's usual fare / When the identity of the killer is revealed, the drama is in how it happens, how the individual meets his end and Elliott's reaction to same / An urban detective whodunit transposed to a Western setting with cheap back lot production and some ridiculous Mexican stereotyping. But I liked it for its effective hard edge and both Morgan and Brennan playing against type / A great example of blended genre (Western and noir), *The Showdown* is a crackerjack sleeper likely to please people who don't generally like Westerns / A piece of junk, obvious from the start. Elliott is stiffer than the background oak trees / Eloquent and forceful / Its top notch cast makes this one a must see.

## SURRENDER (1950)



Another Republic picture, this time concerning ex-army friends John and Greg, one an upstanding newspaper editor and the other (who feels indebted after his life was saved in combat) a murdering, roguish casino owner. The pair become ensnared with Janet and Violet, two sisters newly arrived in town, one virtuous and the other a no-good tramp with a past. Inexplicably, the editor quickly marries the tramp, whose first husband soon appears, expecting to claim back his lawful wife. Brennan plays Bible-quoting Sheriff Bill Howard, who does what he can to keep the peace and lock up the wrongdoers. Perhaps he should have arrested the script editors of this ill-conceived "entertainment". (Stand by for a particularly dire song at around the twenty minute mark.) Other than Brennan, only Maria Palmer as Janet emerges with a modicum of credit. Reminiscent of Saturday mornings at The Bijou, down to the final chase and shoot-out. A relic and a curiosity - just not a very good one. 89 minutes.

IMDb: This delirious, over the top Western tale of *l'amour fou* features the always affable John Carroll as the jaded hero and Vera Ralston as a greedy, sociopathic woman of unsavoury character who will stop at nothing, including murder, to achieve her desires. Ms. Ralston is not quite up to carrying the film, in a role perhaps more suited to the likes of Hedy Lamar or Marlene Dietrich. It's a sort of "Madame Bovary-Scarlett O'Hara goes to Texas" tale, with elements of noir. Besides Carroll (who actually gets to sing the title song) and a good performance by Walter Brennan as a self-righteous sheriff prone to prejudgments, there is little to entertain here other than the gay sub-context of Carroll's undying affection for his friend William Ching.

## RETURN OF THE TEXAN (1952)



After his wife dies, Sam Crockett (Dale Robertson) returns to his native Texas with his two young sons and grandfather (Brennan) to resurrect the family farm. Adapted from a Fred Gipson novel, this amiable little slice of life holds no surprises but plays out with a coherent simplicity that satisfies. Good.

IMDb: It's ironic that this movie - one of those brisk, efficient products designed to be shown on a double-bill - features three future stars of TV westerns: Dale Robertson of *Wells Fargo* and *The Iron Horse*, Richard Boone of *Have Gun Will Travel* and Robert Horton of *Wagon Train*. After all, it's TV series such as these that put an end to films such as this. As an example of its genre, *Return Of The Texan* exhibits the expected strengths and weaknesses. On one hand it tells its story in an economical 84 minutes with no needless padding or slow pacing. On the other, its plot and characters, though pleasant enough, have a bland, predictable quality. And while the use of black and white photography gives a certain nostalgic tone to the film, it also limits the visual appeal of all those Texas vistas. With his usual eye-twinkling heartiness scaled down, Dale Robertson makes an appealing hero who looks mighty good with his shirt off, putting up a fence - there's such an innocent quality about early fifties "beefcake" - and Joanne Dru is one of those women who comes off even better in jeans than she does in a wedding dress / An endearing film, if only for its simplicity and for Dudley Nichols' interesting script featuring a rather dull hero and his reckless grandpa, roguishly portrayed by Brennan - the two a sort of generation gap in reverse. Each time the plot threatens to turn tragic, dramatic impact is immediately defused, with villain Boone's part underwritten to a fault / The real star is Brennan, who, while at his most cantankerous, is quite sublime. His final scene with the two boys is one of the most simple yet eloquent of his long career. Sombre and subdued, but good family entertainment.

*DRUMS ACROSS THE RIVER (1954)*



Brennan and Audie Murphy run a father and son Crown City freight outfit. Son wants to come to an arrangement with the Utes over the river to mine gold on their land, but others want only to provoke war. Get set for a stage robbery, fist, knife and gun fights, hard riding, a near hanging, the cavalry coming, a bad dude dressed in black, Indians (led by Jay "Tonto" Silverheels) prepared to talk peace and the requisite pair of winsome young ladies - one good, one not - all in 59 hectic minutes. A scenic, no-nonsense, Old School Western. Yee-hah!

IMDb: Brennan is very good in a rare turn as an upright father/authority figure. Jay Silverheels plays a sympathetic Indian leading a band of Utes who appear to be played predominantly by actual Indians rather than the usual painted-up white extras. The Technicolor film was shot partly on the Universal back lot with some fine location work at key California Western sites, including one dramatic desert spot representing the Indians' sacred burial ground / Silverheels in full war bonnet looks particularly impressive and young Murphy a bit out of his element among the heavies of the film, though he manages to prevail against every one he confronts / While *Drums Across The River* is no classic, fans of the genre will enjoy it / Enough action to satisfy any Western lover / Pour yourself a beer and savour the handsome Murphy going about his oater business with energy and a straightforward willingness to entertain. In that context *Drums Across The River* is a goodie. It also boasts some lovely photography in gorgeous Technicolor, an interesting story, stunt work of a high standard and Walter Brennan, a class act as usual / Murphy was a better actor than many give him credit for. His portrayal of the prejudiced Gary here is quite good. Brennan has a few decent moments early on, but is tied up for most of the second half. Lyle Bettger was one of the best smooth-talking villains of '50s cinema / One of the more worthwhile Murphy Westerns, with a strong supporting cast / You might almost accuse it of being art.

## THE FAR COUNTRY (1954)



Brennan reprises his well-seasoned idiosyncratic sidekick persona yet again - the beneficiary this time not Gary Cooper or John Wayne but James Stewart (second right above). Canada's rugged Jasper National Park stands in for the Yukon Territory in this gritty tale of frontier law in which men are summarily hanged or shot, claims jumped and property "confiscated" on a fairly arbitrary basis. Anthony Mann directs his fourth film (of five) with Stewart but his first with Brennan, who gives his usual good value. Harry ("Colonel Potter") Morgan once again (see *The Showdown*) plays a bad dude. 93 minutes. Good.

IMDb: Stewart plays a blatant fortune hunter who follows the trail of miners before him into the Alaskan wilderness to prospect for gold. He is joined by lifelong buddy Brennan (perhaps the Western cliché character to end them all - but enjoyable still, as always) - and no one else / Like all of the Mann-Stewarts, a traditional Western, with a difference in the elaboration of Stewart's character which, this time, is more complex / A classic Western with incredible cinematography well ahead of its time. You can tell the film was made with pride and love. The unique peek it gives into the lives of North West pioneers is very educational and entertaining. This movie is underrated because most people prefer not to acknowledge that many "lawmen" during this era were very corrupt, as in developing countries today / The landscape is gorgeous. Stewart plays his character so well, making him very human, and I ought to single out Brennan, too, who seems to have specialised in playing best friends. His relationship with Stewart is very touching. The screenplay is well written and Mann's direction impeccable. His film is a masterpiece / Another very good Mann flick thanks to the father/son combination of Brennan and Stewart. Brennan is often the comedic conscience of Stewart or John Wayne, there to see - *You're wrong, Mr. Dunston*; *Don't do it, Jeff* - that the younger man takes the right path or fork. Though Stewart gives the impression of caring only for himself, it is clear he cannot desert Brennan. Another key theme is helping people and in turn being helped. The loner who can't or won't suffers for it.

## *FOUR GUNS TO THE BORDER (1954)*



Father and daughter Brennan and Colleen Miller (above) are traversing Injun country when their trail crosses that of four inept bank robbers. After taking down the Cholla Bank, the gang spurn the chance to get away in favour of riding to the rescue of the now sorely beset couple. Death, redemption, justice and love ensue in formulaic fashion. Miller takes every opportunity of getting wet (including once in her shimmy) so as to show off her attributes and also does suggestive things with a candy cane and sarsaparilla. Former gunslinger Brennan (though "teeth in") is his usual crotchety self. With Jay Silverheels (*aka* Tonto) and Rory Calhoun. 83 minutes of unexceptional B movie fare.

IMDb: A run-of-the-mill, cowboys 'n' Indians, robbers vs. posse, shoot-'em-up oater / A neglected film that deserves to be seen / Though its theme (of good women civilising their menfolk) will not be universally popular, this is a superior B Western, pleasant and competently produced in all departments. Don't miss it / Surprisingly steamy for its time / An unusually strong cast (for a B movie) and outstanding direction deliver a well-acted, tight story that is smoothly executed and brought to life. This was not uncommon in those days. There are many such hidden Western treasures to be mined. They will never grow old / Unexpectedly entertaining / A little ole devil of an oater in which the outlaw machinations and manoeuvres of Rory Calhoun's gang of robbers are kind of secondary to the sex angle of the plotting. A theme of awakenings or "growing up" permeates. Thoroughly enjoyable and not without some intelligence and racy merit as well / A decent no frills Western, with some of its plot taken from *Three Godfathers*, in which the outlaws (though actually there are no out and out bad guys) prove to have more character than they realise / In 1954, this kind of adults at play stuff was not available on the tube so, to get folks off the couch, movies had to offer something a bit different / Underrated and worth a look / Watch out for Paul Brinegar as the town barber who five years later would find TV fame as Wishbone the cook in *Rawhide*.

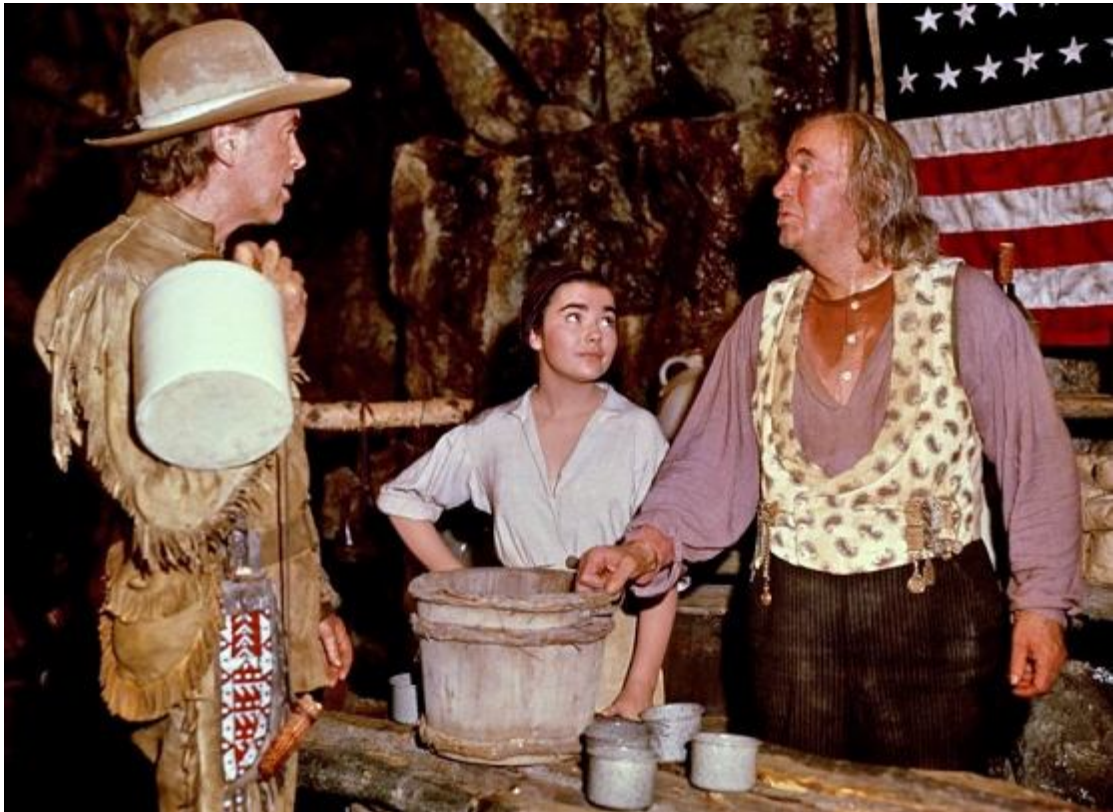
## RIO BRAVO (1959)



The *Red River* team of Hawks, Wayne and Brennan reunite to knock out another solid if formulaic Western. The Duke (above left) plays a small-town sheriff who has the local big shot's no good brother banged up on a murder charge. He's assisted by two deputies: shaky Dean Martin (above right) just coming off a two year drunk and crotchety cripple Brennan, who does enough with his ripe part to steal the film. A third gun is recruited - a fresh-faced young hopeful with attitude named Colorado and played by Ricky Nelson. With such a cast, a twilit singsong was inevitable - but there's only one and it's pleasant enough. Angie Dickinson is Big John's all too obviously token love interest. Fists and bullets fly. The black hats tumble. You know how it goes. At 135 minutes, a little long.

IMDb: Excellent, though short of superb. Angie Dickinson may be a fine actress but her whole romance thing with Wayne was dull and dragged out the movie / The perfect Western, the perfect romantic, the perfect epic and the perfect film about human frailties. So many images in perfect harmony / A fine film let down in part by Dickinson, who, while a competent actress, doesn't seem to click with Wayne and more so by Nelson. A major singing star at the time, it's obvious that he was cast to draw in the teenagers. He's so laid-back he's almost comatose, he mumbles his lines and when you can understand him it sounds as if he's talking in his sleep. You don't believe for a second that he's a tough Texas gunfighter. He looks more like a schoolboy playing hooky and hanging out with the older guys / Brennan is the glue that holds the whole thing together. His constant griping under his breath, his goading of Wayne, his dialogue with the prisoner and his all-round comic relief puts *Rio Bravo* in a class of its own / The real stars are Martin as the love-spurned deputy who has crawled into a bottle and Brennan as the crippled rancher cheated out of his land by the bad guys. A must-see for Western fans or those who like Good v. Evil films / Wayne could never act, the story is simple and the pacing a grind, with every turn predictable. There aren't even any shots of the West. The whole thing was filmed on a back lot. Just plain bad.

*HOW THE WEST WAS WON (1962)*



This long (164 minutes) and episodic saga based around three generations of the Prescott family takes more or less superficial glimpses at the early pioneers, the Gold Rush, the Civil War, the laying of the transcontinental railroad with its associated Indian problems and a late era train robbery. A large cast of big names looks more impressive than it proves, for all have parts either middling (Stewart - above left - Peck, Debbie Reynolds), modest (Brennan - above right - Malden, Fonda, Widmark, Wallach, Cobb) or bit (Wayne, Morgan, Devine). Spencer Tracy narrates. Lengthy music-only passages at start, middle and end irritate. The film, in its day, was a major event, nominated for eight Oscars and winning three. Regrettably, its main selling point, the eye-popping three cam Cinerama system it was shot in, no longer works in its favour. What 21st century viewers can expect to see is grandiose intentions imperfectly realised - in other words, an overblown, big budget, incongruous misfire.

IMDb: The ultimate example of what might be called capitalist realism. It's basically 164 minutes of "why Americans should be proud": the good Christian white people forged ahead and made the country what it is today. Needless to say, it portrays the Indians as bloodthirsty savages. Not even the cast (Tracy, Stewart and Peck to name a few) can save this movie. The very concept is pathetic. It's essentially two and a half hours of propaganda / Four directors and a great ensemble cast make this a must-see / Cinematically beautiful but torpedoed by dreadful acting, a leaden script, over-dramatic narration, weak characterisation and clunky plot-lines / A rare piece of movie gold / So typical of MGM epics - badly cast, badly written and overbearing / So much more than a conventional Western. This film is what movies are all about / Reynolds is superb.

*THE OVER THE HILL GANG* (TV, 1969)



Round up a passel of the screen's favourite character actors and turn 'em loose in a 70 minute Western TV special custom made to showcase their talents. Sounds like a sure-fire winner - and *The Over The Hill Gang*, starring Brennan, Pat O'Brien, Chill Wills (above left), Edgar Buchanan (centre), Jack Elam, Andy Devine, Gypsy Rose Lee (in her final film) and more, *is* good fun, too. The story concerns four old Texas Rangers who re-group to see fair play in the Boulder, Nevada mayoral election - a promising premise. But it's let down by its uneasy mix of the serious (several men are killed) and the silly. Is this comedy or drama? By failing to commit wholeheartedly to either one, it falls short on both fronts, which is a shame. Followed by a tepid sequel (see below).

IMDb: Interesting if only for its cast of veteran performers. Unfortunately they were saddled with a B movie script that doesn't know whether to be serious or funny / A cast of grizzled veterans make this film a joy to watch, if you can get over the weak script / A good idea well cast but poorly executed. It is not a comedy and not a drama, but somewhere in between. This could have been as funny as Laurel and Hardy or The Three Stooges or a Western as good as *Ride The High Country* (which also featured Buchanan) / Not much substance, but for a good old fashioned story you could do worse. There's a good balance of humour and skulduggery and old time Western fans will get a kick out of seeing all the Rangers in one place at one time / Decent but forgettable / I love both *Over The Hill Gang* movies mainly because you will never get a chance to see so many scene-stealing character actors in one film no matter how hard you look. This first one is a film to be savoured by lovers of Westerns and those who admire great character actors / A not very good geezer Western with a clichéd and often ridiculous script - but a cast for classic Hollywood fans to die for.

*THE OVER THE HILL GANG RIDES AGAIN (TV, 1970)*



The first outing of the Over The Hill Gang proved so popular that a sequel was commissioned, in which Brennan, Buchanan, Wills and Devine all reprise their roles, assisted this time by Fred Astaire, badly miscast as The Baltimore Kid. But while the first film at least hinted at an unrealised potential, this lukewarm follow up never feels like anything other than a humdrum, cash-in dud, which is what it proves to be. After years of playing characters much older than his real self, the 76 year old Brennan (above) finally acts "young". 74 minutes.

IMDb: A no-surprise, cheap-but-fun Western parody / A typical Aaron Spelling film factory production. All the actors are real pros and deliver solid performances. The unspectacular script, typical of TV movie scripts that were cranked out in the '70s, is filled with tired clichés and predictable plot lines, complete with the hero wearing a white hat and the villain a black hat / If you liked the first Over The Hill Gang movie, there's no reason not to like this one too / Fred Astaire's first forays into the Western genre, the TV medium and moustache-sporting all came via this modest "old men's movie" about a trio of retired Texas Rangers out to help a former superior wrongly jailed for robbery and murder. The Hollywood veterans provide the only pleasure to be had from this meagre production because whenever they are off-screen things get dull indeed / Marginally better than the first film, this still seems too much like a long TV series episode. Still, the cast of veteran actors and old Western stars are entertaining, especially Astaire in his first and only oater / Apart from offering a second chance to see four of the original oldsters plus one new one (Astaire), this dull, uninteresting and limply scripted film cannot be recommended / A good sequel in which Astaire steals the show / Brennan and his old pals confirm that they can still pull viewers and, in a rare appearance, Astaire proves he's not ready yet for the old folks home.

## OTHER TV WORK



As the older generation of Hollywood actors started to make way for those coming behind, the inexorable rise of television through the fifties and sixties provided many - Brennan among them - with a welcome alternative income stream. Between 1955 and 1972, though he continued to appear in feature films, TV work claimed more and more of his time. In 1964-5 he fronted a 32 episode series called *The Tycoon* and in 1967-9 50 episodes (over two seasons) of *The Guns Of Will Sonnett*. But the TV show he's best remembered for is *The Real McCoys*, which ran for 224 episodes over six seasons from October 1957 to June 1963, with each episode running around 22 minutes. Brennan plays grouchy old Grandpa Amos (not much of a stretch, then), head of the McCoy clan who move from rural West Virginia to an inherited farm in California. The highly popular series is said to have paved the way for other shows featuring rubes (such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Hooterville*, *Green Acres* etc) so liberating network situation comedy from its former urban / suburban milieu into more catholic, frontier-free, John Doe land from which there could be no return.

IMDb: Like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the comedy comes from watching the family adapt to their new environment and seeing things we take for granted from a fresh perspective. And like Granny on that series, Amos is stubborn and irascible. The beauty of the series is that it finds satirical humour in the unsophisticated way of country folk while demonstrating that their backwoods wisdom often puts them ahead of the curve / In many ways *The Real McCoys* was a survival story about a family leaving one culture and trying and succeeding in making it in a different location with different ways. Maybe that's why *The Real McCoys* was as successful as it was. Isn't that what the American Dream is all about? / I am so impressed with the acting and stamina of Brennan. In his late sixties, he had to memorise tons of dialogue and work so hard. Though it must have been a strain on him, it never showed in his performance. His wonderful love-hate friendship with George was a highlight of the show.



# Obituary

by William M. Freeman, *The New York Times*, 23 September 1974

*Oxnard, California: The veteran actor Walter Brennan, who won three Academy Awards, died Saturday night after a long battle with emphysema. He was 80 years old. Mr. Brennan died at St. John's Hospital here, a spokesman said. He had been under treatment since July 25 for respiratory problems. His wife, Ruth, and three children were with him when he died.*

## A Hard Worker

*Walter Brennan liked work, and looked forward to it. In his seventies, long after most men have given up a daily grind in favour of a porch and a rocking chair, he remarked: "I'd rather do television than movies because there aren't any long layoffs between working days. You make a movie and then wait around for another good part. Not in television. You go to work five days a week for most of the year. That's what I like. By Sunday night I can hardly wait to get started Monday morning. It's a shame most people don't feel the same way about their jobs."*

## Dawn-to-Dusk Schedule

*For years Mr. Brennan's schedule went something like this: Up and on his way (by chauffeur, a concession to his advancing years) to the studio by 7 a.m. The drive took 45 minutes from his 11-acre ranch in Ventura County, and he was not often home by 7 p.m. The 12-hour day was generally standard. He was before the cameras for more than half a century, and he had three Oscars to show for it, although to hear him tell it, he would have trouble finding which closet held the statuettes. Each award was for Best Supporting Actor, in *Come And Get It* (1936), *Kentucky* (1938) and *The Westerner* (1940). "Heck," he said once, "I never wanted anything out of this business except a good living. Never wanted to be a star, or a glamorous figure. Just wanted to be good at what I was doing."*

*Over the years Mr. Brennan made more than 100 movies, many of them Westerns - although he was from Massachusetts - 224 episodes of *The Real McCoys* for television and scores of miscellaneous television, industrial and government films. He was born in Lynn, Mass., the son of an \$18-a-week engineer who held about two dozen patents, all controlled by big companies. The elder Brennan was blind for the last four years of his life, but learned Braille at the age of 67. After high school the future actor was a lumberjack, a ditch-digger and a bank messenger, and enlisted in the Army in World War I the day after war was declared. After his return from Europe he returned to*

*the bank and became a financial reporter. Then came a job as a real-estate salesman in California. One of his colleagues liked his sales pitch and persuaded him to try the movies as \$7.50-a-day extra. His first big job was nine roles in the Paul Whiteman film The King Of Jazz, for which he got \$125 a week. Of this film, in which Bing Crosby appeared, Mr. Brennan remarked: "When I went to the preview I sneezed and missed myself." He did so well later in a small role as the station agent in The Wedding Night, a film that Samuel Goldwyn had hoped would make Anna Sten a star, that Mr. Goldwyn called for an expansion of his part after a preview. After this came the part of an old Swede in Come And Get It. He sought Scandinavians to help him with the accent and found six Swedes, each with a highly individual accent. Nevertheless, the picture brought him his first Oscar.*

*Mr. Brennan apparently did well in terms of financial reward. In addition to the "small" ranch in the San Fernando Valley he had a 12,000-acre ranch in Joseph, Ore., where he had a large cattle herd and owned a small movie house and a motel. A bit unlike Grandpa McCoy and some of the other characters he played, he also liked a martini very cold and very dry, his automobiles fast and powerful and his beef cattle plentiful and heavy. While he often expressed himself in salty language, he once remarked: "Boy, let me tell you, there's no risqué stuff in my show. No sir, I won't allow it. In a TV series, you're going right into the living room, and families are watching you. It sure burns me up to see some of the stuff they let get by on other shows."*



Walter Brennan (1894 - 1974)