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[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)

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Seeing the Past: Jesse James and American History in Motion Pictures

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[Clinton S. Loftin](#)

Date of Award

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Open-Access Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Arts (MA)

Department

History

Advisor

Nathan Godfried

Abstract

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts (in History) May, 2000 Historically-based films often reveal more about the time in which they were made than about their historical subjects. Three motion pictures about Jesse James made in three very different eras reveal more about contemporary history than they do about the facts surrounding the legendary outlaw's life. While each film, in some way, purports to tell the "true" story of Jesse James' life, each offers a different history of that life. In order to understand the reasons for this it is necessary to examine the events that surrounded the making of each picture. More specifically, there are four major forces that must be examined in order to understand Jesse James' transformation in the three pictures: the socio-political environment at the time each film was made, the state of the motion picture industry, developments within the genre to which the films belong (the Western), and the unique contributions of individual filmmakers. These four forces best explain why Jesse James changed so dramatically from 1939 to 1957 to 1972; furthermore, they lend credibility to the claim that motion pictures are as much a cultural artifact as literature, poetry, theatre, and other artforms.

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"Jesse James" moves back East and forward in time, to Missouri and Kentucky — with a narratively superfluous, cinematically essential detour into the Rocky Mountains — in 1882. ("Yuma," with louder gunplay and flashier publicity, was a modest hit at the box office, while the elegiac "Jesse James" languished in art-house limbo, attracting fervent critical support in some quarters but not much in the way of public ardor.) The films also share a notable detail. In each, a young man is obsessed with the principal outlaw — Pitt's Jesse James and Crowe's Ben Wade — whose notoriety has made him the subject of dime novels and mass-produced engravings. The young admirer diligently collects these and pores over them with proto-fanboy zeal, fantasizing about growing up to be just like his idol. Picture purporting to show Jesse James and his killer Robert Ford given to Sandy Mills after it was handed down through generations of her family. She claims her family helped harbor James while he was on the run from the law in the 1870s, and he gave her ancestors the photograph. Police forensics expert analysed dozens of other images of the notorious outlaws and says the picture is genuine. Family believe it was taken not long before Ford killed James by shooting him in the back of the head as the gunslinger dusted a picture. Photograph could be worth millions of dollars - but Ms Mills is ye