Review of Shot in Oklahoma: A Century of Sooner State Cinema by John Wooley

Joseph A. Kestner
University of Tulsa

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly
Part of the American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the United States History Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2749

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

John Wooley's Shot in Oklahoma is pioneering in every sense of the word. Not only is it the first book to engage the entirety of cinema in the state of Oklahoma; it will also serve as an archive for future researchers in the field. Wooley has used massive amounts of materials, including interviews with principal figures, but he has especially researched the files of the Tulsa World, the now-defunct Tulsa Tribune, and the Daily Oklahoman for newspaper reactions to all the cinematic activity in the state.

Small though the state of Oklahoma may be, its engagement with cinema began almost as soon as Oklahoma achieved statehood in 1907. In 1905, the Miller brothers—Joe, Zack, and George—created the Miller Brothers Real Wild West at their 101 Ranch, a live show that would eventually feature such future film stars as Hoot Gibson, Bill Pickett, and Tom Mix. Bennie Kent, a photographer at the ranch, began taking his own films of the area in 1908.
In the same year, the Edison Company began to shoot pictures at the ranch. Pioneer producer William N. Selig took advantage of the ranch’s props, cowboys, cowgirls, and equipment to film many one- and two-reel films at the 101 for Selig Polyscope Company. Later, the 101 joined forces with Thomas Ince to film in California.

A central figure in this early filmmaking was William “Bill” Tilghman, who had pressed for filming *The Bank Robbery* in Cache, Oklahoma, in 1908. In 1912, the town of Chandler was the locale for *Passing of the Oklahoma Outlaws*. Life imitating art, Tilghman was killed by a drunken prohibition officer in 1924. William M. Smith and his production company shot a number of films in Oklahoma, at least one using Francis Ford as director, before a disastrous fire in 1922 destroyed everything Smith owned.

Oklahoma was famous for making films for all-black audiences, since it had several all-black towns settled by freed slaves who had come on the Trail of Tears with the exiled Cherokees. Richard E. Norman (who was white) filmed in 1921 two features in Boley, Oklahoma, *The Crimson Skull* and *The Bull-Dogger*, both starring Bill Pickett, the first great African American cowboy star and a headliner at the 101 shows, famous as the inventor of bulldogging. In 1928, Norman shot *Black Gold* in the all-black town of Tatums, Oklahoma.

After the boom of the 1910s and 1920s, shooting in Oklahoma went into a decline. John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* of 1941 contained a small amount of footage shot in the state. For the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans vehicle *Home in Oklahoma* of 1946, some scenes were shot in the Arbuckle Mountains. In 1949, the film *Tulsa*, directed by Stuart Heisler, starring Susan Hayward and Robert Preston, was released, with a massive parade in Tulsa with the stars in attendance. Footage has survived of the parade, and the story of Cherokee Lansing, who takes over her dead father’s oil leases while dealing with hostile oil men and romantic entanglements, is still a rousing picture, with spectacular special effects of oil field fires, all in color. Francis Ford Coppola’s 1983 films *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*, both from novels by Tulsan S. E. Hinton and shot in Tulsa, constitute recent Oklahoma cinematic highlights. Oklahoma locations also feature in such recent films as *Rain Man* (1988), *Twister* (1996), *Eye of God* (1997), and *The Killer Inside Me* (2010).

Fairly lavish for its modest price, and copiously illustrated with black-and-white photographs, *Shot in Oklahoma* in both breadth and depth will remain the standard reference text on the film industry in the state. Wooley’s groundbreaking research should inspire future scholars. The parallels between the film industry and the oil industry (broken contracts, defecting stars, boom and bust, wasted money, shrewd investments) make an enthralling story.

JOSEPH A. KESTNER
Department of English
University of Tulsa