

“All Stories TRUE!”: The Nonfiction Western Magazine Collection at Boise State University

Alessandro Meregaglia and Gwyn Hervochon, Albertsons Library, Boise State University

Author Note:

Alessandro Meregaglia and Gwyn Hervochon are Archivists in Albertsons Library at Boise State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

Alessandro Meregaglia and Gwyn Hervochon
Special Collections and Archives
Albertsons Library
Boise State University
1865 W Cesar Chavez LN
Boise, ID 83725
Contact: ameregaglia@boisestate.edu and gwynhervochon@boisestate.edu

Abstract

This article describes the genre of specialized magazines known as “nonfiction western magazines.” These magazines focused on telling stories about the “Old West”—the nineteenth-century western United States. Joe Small founded the genre’s first magazine, *True West*, in 1953. Over the next thirty years, the magazine’s popularity increased and dozens of imitators were published. This article discusses the rise and decline of these magazines and also explores the magazines’ usefulness both as a source of western American history and as cultural artifacts themselves to study how the “Old West” was perceived during the period in which they were published.

Keywords: western American history, western Americana, magazines, print culture, publishing history

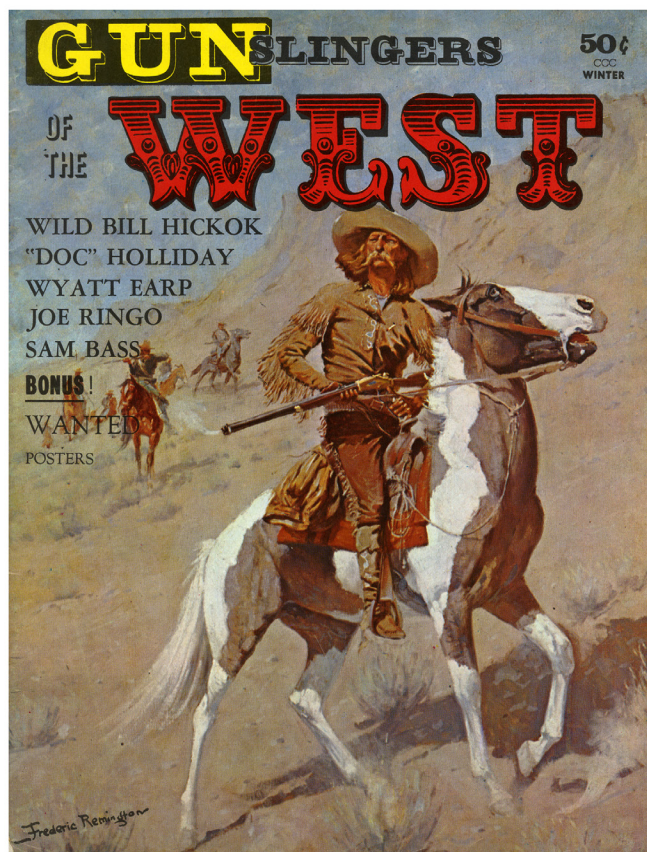
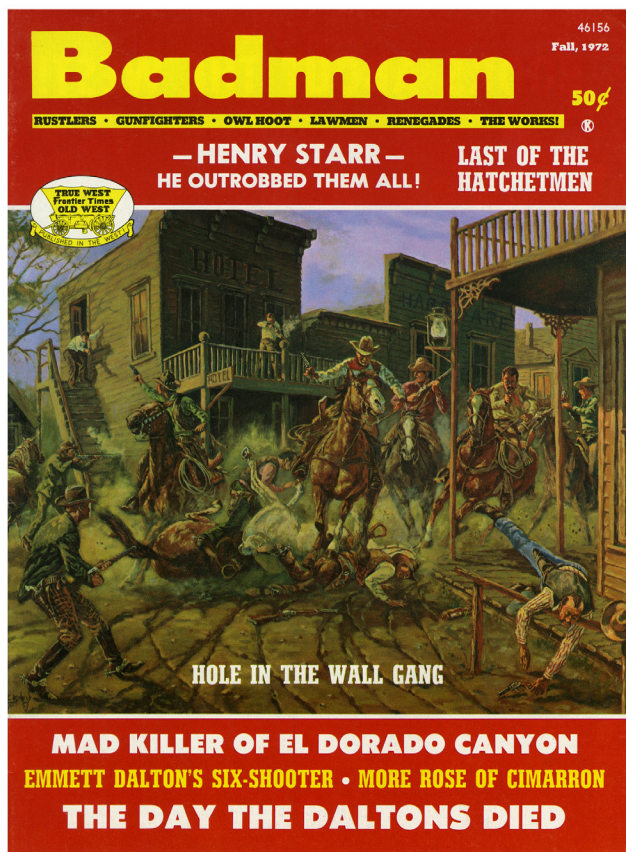
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Introduction

Founded in 1973, Special Collections and Archives (SCA) in Boise State University's Albertsons Library holds nearly 9,000 linear feet of manuscript collections, university records, rare books, and periodicals. Materials relate primarily to the Boise metropolitan area, Idaho, or the Pacific Northwest. The creation of the Warren E. McCain Collection for Western Life endowment in the early 1990s supported a period of rapid active development for the library's general collection, and for SCA as appropriate for rare and fragile materials. Named after a local benefactor and focused explicitly on collecting materials related to the Western United States, the endowment allowed the library's Acquisitions and Collections unit to purchase books, journals, maps, government documents and other media. Dealers contacted the Acquisitions unit frequently, and through these connections the library began building a collection of vintage western magazines. Purchased in multiple orders throughout the decade, the scarcity of many of these titles dictated housing them in SCA, and by 1999 most of our current collection was acquired. Now comprising 60 boxes, the collection continues to grow when more difficult to find issues are located or are offered to SCA.

When current SCA staff (comprised of three archivists) joined Albertsons Library after 2012, our curiosity was piqued by these colorful magazines with titles like *Gunslingers of the West* and *Badman* (see Figure 1). We noted researcher interest in the magazines including approximately a half-dozen interlibrary loan requests per year for articles, as well as a visit from a local chapter of the Wild West History Association, specifically to view the magazines. Further investigation revealed that the magazines offer more than the attention-grabbing covers might initially



suggest. Indeed, we discovered that within our western magazine collection are 30 titles that form a genre of their own as defined by Larry J. Walker in 1990—a collection of “nonfiction western magazines.”

Walker, a magazine collector living in Oregon, published a definitive guide to the genre in his *Catalog of Western Magazines Based on Years Since 1950* (abbreviated COWBOYS) in 1990. Five years later he updated and re-titled the catalog *Western Magazine Price Guide and Collector's Handbook*. In addition to Walker's price guide, there is only one other book published about this genre: James A. Browning's *The Western Reader's Guide: A Selected Bibliography of Nonfiction Magazines, 1953-1991* (1992), an index of names to these nonfiction western magazines.

Since the 1990s Walker has promoted these 30 nonfiction western magazines to readers of his collectors' newsletter as valuable historical resources. An exploration of the genre in the scholarly literature while promoting awareness of their usefulness as historical resources is a next step for bringing the magazines to the attention of additional researchers.

Figure 1. Covers of *Badman*, Fall 1972 and *Gunslingers of the West*, Fall 1966. Image courtesy of Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.

Definition of Nonfiction Western Magazines

The magazines Walker describes were all published in the second half of the 20th century, and deal solely with topics of the Old West and cowboy culture. Titles span from the established and well-known (*True West*) to the obscure and short-lived (*Man's Western*). Walker defines the genre using seven criteria that all the titles possess: a focus on general western history; nonfiction; written in a popular style; published after World War II (this excluded “pulp” magazines published on low quality paper); published in a magazine format (versus newspaper or larger format); exclusively about the American West; and national circulation (via newsstand or subscription).

Using this criteria, Walker finds the following titles qualify for inclusion, which are organized in chronological order of their founding:

Magazine Title	First Year of Publication	Last Year of Publication	Original Publication Location	Total Issues
<i>True West</i>	1953	on-going	Texas	602+
<i>Frontier Times</i>	1957	1985	Texas	138
<i>Real West</i>	1957	1988	Connecticut	266
<i>True Western Adventures</i>	1957	1961	Connecticut	21
<i>Man's Western</i>	1959	1960	New York	2
<i>Western Action</i>	1960	1960	New York	2
<i>Western Tales</i>	1960	1960	New York	2
<i>Golden West</i>	1964	1974	New York	76
<i>Old West</i>	1964	1999	Texas	141
<i>The West</i>	1964	1974	New York	135
<i>Gunslingers of the West</i>	1966	1966	Connecticut	1
<i>America's Frontier West</i>	1967	1967	New York	1
<i>Big West</i>	1967	1970	California	12
<i>Great West</i>	1967	1974	Missouri	36
<i>Pioneer West</i>	1967	1980	California	57
<i>True Frontier</i>	1967	1978	Illinois	76
<i>Western Digest</i>	1969	1969	Connecticut	5
<i>Westerner</i>	1969	1976	California	45
<i>Wild West</i>	1969	1972	California	17
<i>Real Frontier</i>	1970	1971	Illinois	11
<i>Western Round-Up</i>	1970	1970	California	3
<i>Badman</i>	1971	1972	Texas	3
<i>Frontier West</i>	1971	1976	New York	28
<i>Western True Story</i>	1971	1971	Arizona	1
<i>Oldtimers Wild West</i>	1973	1980	Arizona	33
<i>Western Frontier</i>	1976	1986	New York	73
<i>Old Trails</i>	1977	1978	California	3
<i>Authentic West</i>	1981	1981	New Jersey	3
<i>Great West</i>	1981	1981	New Jersey	3
<i>Wild West</i>	1988	on-going	Virginia	175+

Birth of a Genre: Joe Small and *True West*

The earliest publication date on Walker's nonfiction western magazine list is 1953, and all but six of the 30 titles on the list were out of print by 1985. The proliferation of the genre in the decades in between these years can be traced back to the inaugural issue of *True West* in 1953, and the vision and business savvy of the magazine's founder, Joe Small.

Born in Texas in 1914, Small aspired to be a writer by the age of 12 and began collecting magazines as a teenager (see Figure 2). After briefly studying journalism at the University of Texas, he dropped out to start his own magazine, *Southern Sportsman*. This \$67 start-up venture didn't last, but by 1946 Small purchased the struggling Denver-based *Western Sportsman* magazine and revived its publication.

Although *Western Sportsman* was a fishing and gaming magazine, Joe wrote a regular column featuring factual stories of the Old West. He recognized the popularity of his column at the same time as he was becoming increasingly frustrated with the sensationalized stories of the West that Hollywood and pulp magazines were circulating at the time. From conversations with friends and associates, he knew he wasn't alone in his complaint against these fictional accounts. In reaction, and "to bring back 'dignity' to what was called the 'typical western'" (Small, 1963), Small began publishing *True West* magazine in 1953. The foundational concept of the publication was based in his belief that "the truth does not necessarily have to be dull" and that magazines featuring stories of the Old West "could be educational, respected, and enjoyed by not only our country but the world as a whole" (Small, 1963).

Small distinguished his publication from the beginning, stating on the cover of the first issue that *True West* was, "Something new in Western Magazines—All stories TRUE!" (see Figure 3). A similar concept of historical accuracy guided an earlier effort by J. Marvin Hunter in his Hunter's *Frontier Times*, originally published from 1923 to 1954. Larry Walker, however, does not count this among his 30 nonfiction western magazine titles because of its format—low quality pulp paper. While inspired by Hunter's work, Small built upon that mission with an emphasis on popular appeal. In an attempt to make nonfiction western magazines as commercially viable as their fictionalized counterparts, Small encouraged engaging writing styles with ample illustrations and colorful covers, making *True West* the "only slick paper, true western magazine in the world" (1953).

Utilizing a grassroots strategy on a limited budget, Small gathered support to ensure his magazine's success. Professional associates and friends such as Fred Gipson (author of *Old Yeller*) and J. Frank Dobie (folklorist and newspaper columnist) wrote for the magazine. University



Figure 2. Joe Small founded *True West*, the first nonfiction western magazine title, in Austin, Texas, in 1953. Image courtesy of *True West* Magazine.



Figure 3. The cover of the inaugural issue of *True West*, 1953. Image courtesy of Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.

of Texas History Professor Dr. Walter Prescott Webb served as Historical Consultant to help maintain *True West's* historical integrity. Initially Small was his own editor, advertising manager, and distributor (*Real West*, 1964). He used his editorial notes to establish a connection with his readers asking for help with fact-checking, content contributions, and spreading the word. Western writers and fans willingly worked for little pay to be a part of the effort; some were regular contributors while others provided a single story (*Tells Tall Tales but True*, 1973).

As Hart Stilwell noted in an article reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, Joe Small grew *True West* “while such giants in the magazine field as *Collier's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, and the American magazine were fading out of the picture” (1959, p. A2763). Small bucked this trend not only by tapping into the widespread interest in the Old West at the time, but by cultivating a sense of personal investment for his readers. In a direct appeal in the first issue of *True West*, he encouraged readers to participate in the fate of the publication, telling them that “...what TRUE WEST is going to be depends on YOU” (1953, p. 47). He later described his magazines as “primarily ‘reader’ publications,” prioritizing his readership because, “if we can't make it on subscriptions and newsstands sales, then we just don't make it” (Small, 1964, p. 1).

Within months of the first print run of *True West*, Joe Small was praised in *Newsweek* for selling nearly all 50,000 copies of the issue (*True West*, 1953). The follow-up was distributed throughout the West with double the print run. In 1959 *True West* became the first magazine published in Texas with a national circulation when its distribution increased to include states east of the Mississippi. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson brought this accomplishment to the attention of Congress and President Eisenhower. On the Senate floor, Johnson stated, “. . . there has never been anything like *True West*. . . . [The magazine] is successful even in the East. . . . A friend has remarked that while many publishers start with a million dollars, and go broke, Joe Small started broke, and hopes to wind up with a million dollars” (Johnson, 1959, p. A2763).

True West's national circulation required an expanded print run of 240,000 and featured 16 additional pages and a four-color cover (*Austenite Brain Child*, 1959). The magazine was published bi-monthly, and although there was demand for more frequent publication, Small decided to retain the publication schedule while focusing on expanding his magazine empire more broadly throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1972, Joe Small's publishing company, Western Publications, had eight titles and a circulation of over one million (*It's a Small World*, 1972). Four of Small's Western Publications titles are included in Walker's guide to the genre: *True West*, *Old West*, *Badman*, and *Frontier Times*. Small

purchased Hunter's *Frontier Times* in 1954 and changed its pulp format to be similar in design and scope to his other publications. Initially, Small's *Old West* simply reprinted articles from early issues of *True West*, though they eventually started publishing completely new material. (Riley & Selnow, 1991). The remaining four magazines: *Relics*, *Wanderlust*, *Gold!*, and *Horse Tales* do not meet Walker's criteria for inclusion due to an emphasis on specialized topics.

Growth and Decline of Nonfiction Western Magazines

Although Joe Small was reacting against western pulp magazines and Hollywood sensationalism when he started *True West*, the popularity of these forms of entertainment in the decades following World War II helped spark and sustain the success of nonfiction western magazines (Browning & McCravy, 2000). Small's successful niche within the broader cultural phenomenon caught the attention of publishers from coast to coast. These publishers then brought out their own versions of magazines featuring true stories of the West, some of which only lasted two or three issues. The publications varied in the quality of their material, but all copied Small's formula of a magazine format with glossy color covers that prominently advertised the authenticity of their content (see Figure 4).

Analysis of the publications on Walker's list reveals a distinct growth of the genre following Joe Small's initial success in 1953. In 1957 three new nonfiction western magazines entered the scene—one of which was Small's own *Frontier Times*, but the other two were published by companies based in Connecticut. *Man's Western* began publication in New York in 1959 and was soon followed by the introduction of 22 new titles throughout the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 5). Twelve of these were published east of the Mississippi. Of the remaining three magazines on Walker's list, two began production in New Jersey in 1981, and *Wild West's* appearance in 1988 marked the last new title of the genre.

As Browning observed, the popularity of the nonfiction western magazine genre logically declined as "the western craze of the sixties and seventies waned" (1992, p. vii). When four of Joe Small's early East Coast imitators went out of print in 1960 and 1961, he blamed the failure on the fact that they were "New Yorkers" rather than a shift in audience preference (*Real West*, 1964). Whether a sign of the times or a reflection of geographic inauthenticity, all seven of the titles that were discontinued in the 1960s were published in New York or Connecticut. Many of the magazines had short-lived runs; even as new titles were appearing, others were calling it quits. Most of the magazines that caused the genre to

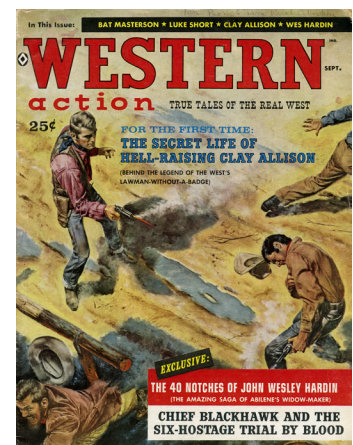
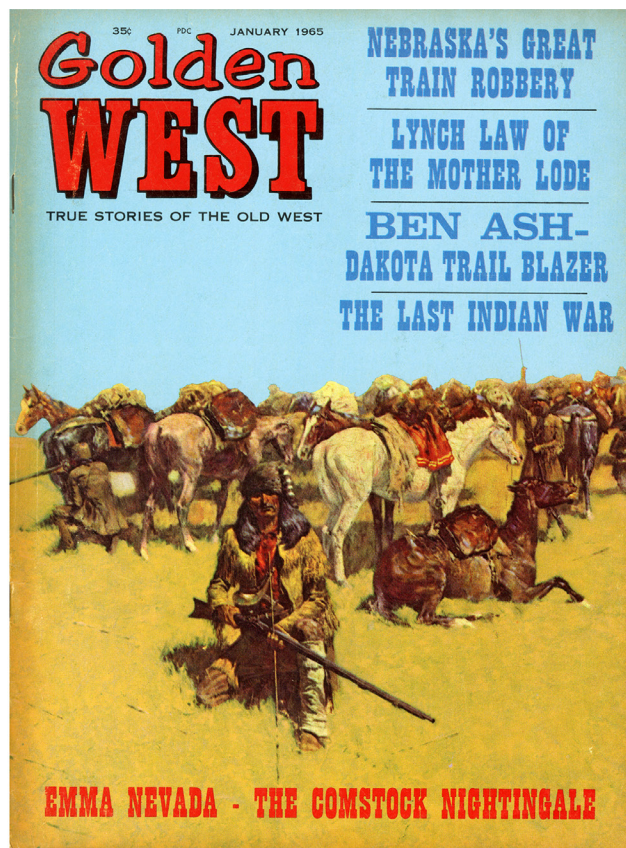


Figure 4. The first of only two issues published of *Western Action*. Image courtesy of Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.



flourish in the 1960s and 1970s, also ceased publication in the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1980, only 10 magazines on Walker's list were still in print, five of which were published on the East Coast. *Real West*, an eastern western, ceased publication in 1988. Western enthusiasts saw the magazine as the least authentic of the genre—"prone to accepting manuscripts of doubtful accuracy, and often publishing pictures of dubious pedigree" (Rickards, 1989, p. 32). The last editor explained that "falling circulation and rising paper costs" were the primary cause of ending the magazine's 31-year run (Rickards, 1989, p. 32).

As an example of the genre's decline in the 1980s, Joe Small's *Old West* had a circulation of 68,000 in 1985, but four years later circulation was down by more than half: to only 30,000. According to the editor at the time, the magazine did the best in Texas, California, and Washington (Riley & Selnow, 1991). By 1990, three titles from Walker's list were still in print—two of which were started by Joe Small, including the magazine that began it all, *True West*.

Yet by this time, Joe Small had been out of the business for 11 years. In 1979 he sold Western Publications to Krause Publications in Wisconsin. Five years later Bob Evans of Perkins, Oklahoma,

Figure 5. *Western Tales*, 1960, and *Golden West*, 1965, are two of the New York "eastern westerns." Images courtesy of Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.

bought Western Publications from Krause in 1984 and announced, “We’re bringing it back to the West” (Etter, 1984). At that time Western Publications produced three of Joe Small’s titles: *True West* (120,000 copies printed monthly); *Old West* (116,000 subscribers, quarterly publication); and *Frontier Times* (5,000 subscribers, reprints of old issues only, quarterly publication).

A fan of *True West* as a child in the 1950s, Bob “Boze” Bell bought the magazine in 1999 with two friends and moved its headquarters to their home state of Arizona. As the current CEO and editor of *True West*, Bell reported in 2007 that although *Old West* and *Frontier Times* were out of print, *True West* was being published 11 times a year and was available at bookstores for \$5.99 per issue. He acknowledged increasing pressure on his magazine stating, “My biggest challenge is circulation, because we have a tsunami on our hands here with the internet. Magazines across the board are suffering. Newsstand [sales] decline because people are spending more and more time online” (Black, 2009. p. 98-99). *True West* joined the online world when its website went live in 2007, and according to the site, print issues of *True West* continue to be published monthly.

While *True West* is still in demand and has loyal followers, its current circulation of 23,540 (2016) pales in comparison to its circulation at its height. To understand the popularity of these magazines during their prime, it is most useful to look at this representative sample of subscription statistics, all of which were taken from *N. W. Ayers & Son’s Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* for the respective years:

Magazine Title	1957	1964	1974	1984	1994
<i>True West</i>	79,841	167,925	164,200	100,100	24,735
<i>Frontier Times</i>	n/a	156,532	145,100	n/a	n/a
<i>Old West</i>	n/a	n/a	126,150	90,000	26,935
<i>Real West</i>	n/a	unknown	117,196	130,162	n/a

Despite diminishing subscription numbers, collectors like Larry Walker have helped the genre survive. From the outset, Joe Small designed his magazines to be collectors’ items that would be sought after by his readership. He was aware of the value of the magazines, and acknowledged in the first issue of *Old West* in 1964: “If we were to reprint the old issues of *True West* exactly like they were, it would de-value the old copies and we’d get lynched before nightfall.” Although he did not reprint facsimiles of original issues of *True West*, he did reuse articles and printed them again



Figure 6. The first issue *Old West* with the words “FIRST EDITION!” prominently appearing on the cover shows that Small was aware of the value of his magazines while also using it as a marketing tool. Image courtesy of Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.

under a different magazine name. For example, the second issue of *Old West* (1964) consisted of the entirety of the first issue of *True West*, which he promotes on the cover as “that valuable first edition” (see Figure 6). He justified the reprinting by noting that there are a “great number of new readers who want to read those stories and are unable to buy the original copies, or . . . cannot afford, to pay what is being asked for them” (Small, 1964, p. 49). Small’s actions proved prescient given that 50 years later the magazines are still being collected. In 1995 Walker noted that the collectability of the magazines and the “eye-catching appeal of these colorful publications undoubtedly saved many back issues from the trash can” (Walker, 1995, p. vii). This fact has helped preserve these titles, not just by private collectors, but in public collections, which allows ongoing wide access.

Continuing Research Relevance

Beginning with the first editorial note in *True West*, Joe Small promoted the value of his publications as both collector's items and as educational resources (Small, 1953). Sixty-five years after that first issue, nonfiction western magazines continue to offer valuable informational content and provide historical evidence of the rise of special interest magazines in the 20th century.

As Larry Walker has argued for the past 20 years, nonfiction western magazines, despite their underutilization, are a source of quality content about western history (1994). Though featuring glossy covers and having for-profit status, most of the magazines had historical consultants to ensure accuracy. Free-lanced articles included personal recollections and journalistic pieces, often written by historians (Riley & Selnow, 1991). *True West* frequently published articles by Walter Prescott Webb, a leading American historian who served as president of the Texas State Historical Association as well as the American Historical Association. Newspaper columnist J. Frank Dobie also frequently appeared in the magazine's pages. Some publications benefitted from the support of professional historical organizations: *American West*, was initially sponsored by the Western History Association (WHA), but came to be considered a "lightweight publication" after the WHA dropped sponsorship in the late 1980s (Slatta, 1994, p. 419).

Today's *True West* upholds Joe Small's dedication to historically accurate articles while continuing to distinguish itself from other historical resources. In a 2007 interview, editor Bob Bell maintained Small's position on the magazine's role within the world of historical information. In response to a question about potentially indexing *True West* in library databases, Bell answered, "That was a question Joe Small wrestled with early on. But he finally made a distinction, and I agree with him. We're popular history. . . . We want this to be accessible to everyone, as many people as possible, and there are plenty of places where people can get indexing and footnoting, but we're not one of them" (Black, 2009, p. 96). While remaining independent from the "footnote crowd" (Black, 2009, p. 96), *True West* and the other nonfiction western magazines are nevertheless worthy of scholarly examination for their informational content.

Moreover, as Browning points out, nonfiction western magazines provide access to lesser known stories of the West. He argues that many details surrounding the lives of famous figures remain "available exclusively in article form" and that "thousands of lesser-known individuals whose lives for one reason or another do not merit book-length biographies appear only in magazines" (Browning & McGravy, 2000, p. viii). Similarly,

publishers of nonfiction western magazines printed stories that were controversial or ignored by glamorized versions of the West. In 1989, *Old West* published an article about the relatively unknown Mountain Meadows massacre and the alleged cover-up by leaders of the Mormon Church. Those articles anticipated growing interest in that topic; in the ensuing two decades, the massacre has been the subject of more than five new scholarly books. Articles in *True West* have also spawned books based on their topics. (See, for example, Patterson, 1985, p. v.)

In addition to the magazines' valuable historical content, these western magazines are also a useful source for revealing cultural history during the second half of the 20th century. Their popularity increased at the same time that special-interest magazines were gaining popularity generally across the country (Abrahamson, 1996). "Specialized magazines" are differentiated from "general magazines" in that they "address their articles and their ads" to a specific, specialized audience (Ford, 1969, p. 4). Nonfiction western magazines reflect how people perceived the "Old West" and its mythology. Designed to sell at newsstands and grab attention, these magazines suggest what publishers at the time thought the public wanted to know about the Old West. Indeed, the format, writing style, and photographs are a useful source to understand how the Old West was understood at that time. Studying the genre through the lens of its special interest appeal offers significant research value because this aspect was integral to the success of *True West* and the nonfiction western magazines it inspired.

Continuing Collection Use at Boise State

As a result of our investigation into the research potential of these magazines, we aim to turn that potential into reality by taking steps to increase use of the collection at Boise State. In the immediate future, we are installing an exhibit to draw attention to the collection and to highlight its broad appeal to a variety of audiences—from western enthusiasts to historical researchers and scholars of popular culture. The exhibit cases will be located on the first floor of Albertsons Library, near the entrance and circulation desk, the area which receives the most foot traffic in the library. We are also working with our cataloging department to find out how to make the magazines more visible to patrons searching our catalog records. And although we have previously featured a selection of our western magazines during the "show-and-tell" portion of instruction sessions based on their engaging visual appeal, we can now more explicitly promote the collection as a viable research topic and informational resource. Finally, we hope this open access article itself serves as an introduction to the magazines by allowing audiences, both regular readers and those who may stumble across the publication, to learn about Boise State's collection.

Conclusion

Our seemingly random assortment of western magazines with flashy covers and intriguing titles turned out to be something more historically valuable and insightful than initially assumed. Joe Small's reaction against cheap-thrill western pulps in 1953 unintentionally started a genre that Larry Walker defined 40 years later. Walker's defining criteria are consistent with the guiding principles Small used to establish his magazines. Therefore, the 30 titles Walker included in the genre adhere to a commitment to historical accuracy in popular magazine format. Featuring articles about a variety of lesser known stories of the West, these magazines fill in gaps in the more traditional scholarly literature and are evidence of trends in 20th century American culture.

Although Small saw himself as separate from the "footnote crowd" (i.e., scholarly research) and designed his magazines primarily to entertain, he believed in the rightful place of his magazines on library shelves and in classrooms (Black, 2009, p. 96). Taken as a whole, the collection of nonfiction magazines at Boise State's Special Collections and Archives offers historically valuable insight from the 20th century that turns out to be an under-collected and under-researched collection of western American history.

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