

## Bobby Copeland – World’s No. 1 writer of books on western films (As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on February 11, 2013)

I often dismay that we have people in Oak Ridge who are famous on the national or international stage, but totally taken for granted and most often unrecognized by local media or even given credit for their achievements in any way in their hometown of Oak Ridge. Shame on us!

Many Oak Ridge scientists are world renowned. Many dedicated servant leaders occupy prestigious positions on technical society boards (occasionally these folks will get a small amount of recognition when they are elected to office). Many inventors are granted patents (we should have a directory of patent holders!). Many national and international award winners get only sparse recognition and even less lasting appreciation for their hard work.

Still, we do better at recognizing technical achievements than we do some others. And that is understandable, given Oak Ridge’s high percentage of highly qualified and successful scientists and engineers. Occasionally we should raise up one of our own who has done something unique and made a contribution to the world that is highly unusual. Such a person is Bobby Copeland.

Remember, *if it is to be, it is up to me!* So, I have found an example of someone who has carved out a niche for himself on the world stage of a particular special interest group...western film stars. I dare say only a handful of Oak Ridgers know about his collection of western film paraphernalia or his authorship of 22 books, and over 200 article for various publications.

Not many cities can boast of having the No. 1 person in the world in any specialty. I am sure that we have several individuals who qualify as world leaders in technical specialties or scientific achievements. If you know of such individuals, let it be known...comment this article or send me an email at [draysmith@comcast.net](mailto:draysmith@comcast.net) or call me at 865-482-4224. Maybe I can use *Historically Speaking* to give that person some deserved recognition as well.

Now let’s celebrate Bobby Copeland’s dedication to his chosen work and his resultant achievements in a most unusual field – “B-western” films and performers.

A little background on Bobby, his family came to Oak Ridge in 1945 when he was 10 years old. His family lived in Happy Valley. He readily recalls the theater there called “Playtime.” His family soon moved to other locations in Oak Ridge where he always visited the local community theater regularly. He has watched cowboy movies at the Middletown, Jefferson, Wayne and Center theaters.

I don’t know about you, but I had never heard of a theater called “Wayne.” So, I asked Bobby about that. He said, “The Wayne Theatre opened in the same structure shortly after the Jefferson Theatre went out of business. It was much like the Jefferson, showing older movies, double-feature, and low-budget films. The Wayne was only open for a short period of time.”

I also asked him about the name “Middletown” for the theater located in what I had thought of as “Midtown,” like the “Midtown Community Center.” His response was that the name of the theater located in what was known as “Midtown” was actually named “Middletown.”

Bobby is one of the few (perhaps the only person) to attend the Wheat and Gamble Valley grammar schools, the old Jefferson Junior High (when it was at the Robertsville Middle School location), the high school when it was at Jackson Square, and the present high school located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike. To have Bobby confirm that he attended school at Wheat of course means there was an elementary school there in 1945.

So, what about these “B-western” movies? Do you recall them? If you do, then you realize the formula. Bobby says, “B-westerns were important to me because of good moral values taught by the movies. The cowboy hero gave me someone to look up to. He set an example by always doing what was right.” Do you remember that? Sure you do...

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Bobby is a collector of western movie paraphilia, but his main interest is in writing about the western film performers. He began writing in 1984 and that came about after years of dedicated interest in western movies.

He said, “My first collectible was a string-tie worn by singing cowboy Eddie Dean. Other collectibles include: shirts owned by Wild Bill Elliott, Crash Corrigan, Lash LaRue, and Monte Hale; bandannas from Bob Baker, Monte Hale, Eddie Dean, Harry Lauter, Harry Carey, Jr., and Sunset Carson; belts from Monte Hale and Pierce Lyden (and also an autographed photo cup from Lyden); cowboy hat and tie clasp from Rex Allen; badge worn by Johnny Mack Brown to one of Ronald Reagan’s functions and western pants worn by Johnny; Ken Maynard cigar band and stock certificate; duplicate of a John Wayne holster and belt made by Bob Brown, who made the original for Wayne.”

Wow, what a collection. Do you collect anything? If so, you can appreciate the joy that comes from finding something special to you that you are seeking. Do you recall the *Historically Speaking* articles about Jack Bailey and his collection of baseball paraphilia? Now there is a collection that is so huge that it fills an entire room in his basement.

Since starting writing in 1984, Bobby is now the author of 22 books, and over 200 articles for various publications -- including the British publication *Wrangler’s Roost*. Bobby has also been a guest speaker at several film conventions. He is recognized worldwide for his knowledge and authorship.

When asked to name the favorite western film star, Bobby said, “My favorite star is Wild Bill Elliott.” Do you remember him? He made 256 movies from 1925 to 1957. Do you recall anything unusual about the way he wore his guns? Yes, two six-guns worn facing butt-forward in their holsters.

For readers who might not be as familiar with “B-westerns,” here is what Bobby Copeland thinks you might need to know to better appreciate them and their history.

“If you were fortunate enough to have lived in the 1930s and 1940s, and if you were lucky enough to obtain a dime, you could visit your local movie house to view an exciting B-Western movie. The B-Western is a true piece of Americana and reflects on a time when we believed in God, country, Mom, apple pie and Saturday matinee heroes.

“Many have asked, ‘Just what does the ‘B’ stand for in B-westerns?’ Well, it stands for budget - low budget. However, these films should not be thought of as inferior just because so little money was spent on making them.

“To a great segment of the population, these little gems are still considered very special. They made an impression on the youths of that era that is still etched in the hearts and minds of those individuals today.

“Fans of the B-Westerns now gather at Western film festivals to meet the performers whom they idolized as youths in an attempt to recapture memories from the past. At these events through the years, this group of fans have enjoyed meeting in person Roy Rogers, Lash LaRue, Buster Crabbe, Rex Allen, Don ‘Red’ Barry, Eddie Dean, Gene Autry, Charles ‘The Durango Kid’ Starrett, Monte Hale, Ben Johnson, Clayton Moore, and hundreds of others.

“The B-Westerns had simplistic and repetitive plots, and there was never a mystery about the identity of the hero or the villain. Everyone knew that there would be a rip-roaring climax, where good would triumph over evil, and that the hero would ride off into the sunset ready to fight another day.

“The cowboy hero had the fastest horse, quickest draw, fanciest clothes, sang the sweetest song, and he possessed a heart of purest gold. Even on his worst day, he could beat the daylight out of the meanest bad guy and clean up the most wicked town in the West - without even getting dirty.

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“For decades, critics have maligned the B-westerns and regarded them as nothing more than juvenile fare, or simply thought of them as a waste of film. Yet these grand old movies probably did more than any other one thing to shape our ideas and ideals.

“The films gave us action, comedy, music, and good wholesome entertainment for the entire family. They taught us faith, hope, loyalty, honesty, and gave us heroes. We knew they were not real, but we loved them just the same.

“They made no attempt to show life as it is, but rather how life should be. The B-Westerns were not a substitute for church, but they certainly complemented the message presented by the church. After watching one of these movies, you felt a tingle of goodness spread throughout your body - as if your soul had been cleansed.

“Unfortunately, the advent of television sounded the death knell for grand old films, and the heroes of the celluloid range are gone forever.

Several people in Oak Ridge know that Bobby Copeland is a western film fan, but I imagine they have no idea to what degree. **Bobby Copeland is the world's No. 1 writer of books on western film performers.**

Not many towns the size of Oak Ridge can boast of having a No. 1 in the world person in anything. Our own Bobby Copeland is internationally recognized as an expert on B-western films and performers.



Bobby Copeland

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Bobby shown with a selection of his 22 books he has authored



Bobby pictured with the famous western film stars Roy and Dale Evans