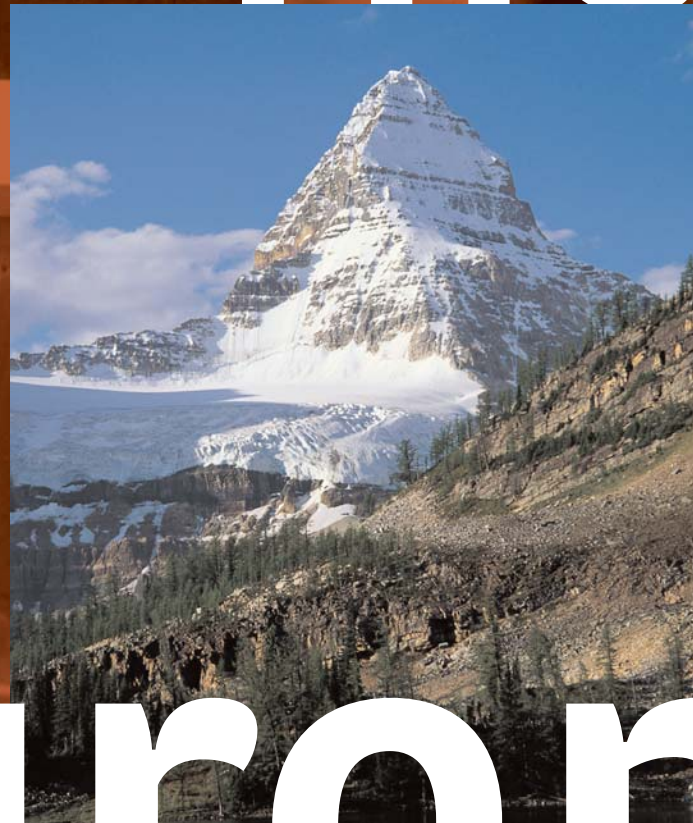


The View

From Europe



By Ruth Ellen Gruber

You don't have to be American to dream in cowboy and Indian

In their insightful introduction to the exhibition-linked book *Western Amerykański*, which accompanied the Autry Museum's 1999 exhibition on Wild West motifs in Polish poster art, Edward Buscombe and Kevin Mulroy called America's frontier saga "the most successfully marketed national epic in history." "It is everywhere," they wrote. "Though they may never visit the American West, people around the world feel at home in its mythology."

Indeed, to this day, American West images sell goods, excite artists, color language, and inspire lifestyles far beyond the borders of the United States. The cowboy, the Indian, the lonesome Western landscape; snakeskin boots, saloon doors, ten-gallon hats, the sheriff's star, the six-gun, the broken arrow, the twang of a banjo: all are instantly recognizable symbols loaded with layers of subtext and nuance. American West images serve as fashion statements and shape the political and even social vernacular. In Europe, where I have been studying the phenomenon, people on one level commonly portray America as an uncouth cowboy, a swaggering gunslinger, or an international sheriff obsessed with weaponry and imposing its will on the world. On another level, however, they love to wear boots, jeans, Stetsons, and fringed jackets and listen to—and create—country-and-western music. Some have long embraced an idealized vision of the frontier—its values, its exoticism, and, in particular, its Native people—as part of their own fantasies, desires, and aspirations. One vivid illustration of this phenomenon is the Steve Larrabee saga.

Early last year, a 58-year-old man living in the Outer Hebrides Islands off northern Scotland reached back over half a century and wrote a letter to one of his childhood heroes. The hero was an Englishman named Roy Green, who for several years in the 1950s adopted the persona of an American cowboy and toured Britain with a Wild West road show.

Known as "Steve Larrabee, the Lone Star Rider," Green had been hired by a London-based toy company to promote its "Lone Star" line of Wild West gear: cap pistols, holsters, sheriff's badges, cowboy outfits, spurs, harmonicas, and the like. Dressed top to toe in Hollywood-style cowboy garb, the tall, lanky Green rode in parades, made personal appearances at toy stores, visited children in hospitals, and performed rope tricks and other stunts in vaudeville houses and arenas all over the country. His Lone Star Road Show included singers, dancers, and a variety of animals—and by contract, he always had to speak with a "Western" American drawl.

In addition to his personal appearances, "Steve Larrabee" starred in an action-packed Lone Star Rider comic strip and magazine and was the focus of a Lone Star Rider hardback annual. There was a Lone Star Rider club, with 20,000 members, and even a Lone Star Rider song that began, "Lone Star high above the Prairie; tall grass rustlin' in the breezes . . ." Green appeared in character on radio broadcasts and TV commercials, and the Lone Star Rider also was pictured on Kellogg's Rice Krispies packets.

Green and his Larrabee act may have been an advertising ploy to sell cowboy hats and cap guns—according to a PR brochure, some 3 million "Lone Star Rider six-guns" were sold by 1955—but, as the letter from the man in Scotland reveals, he also touched the hearts of post-war, cowboy-mad kids in much less mercenary ways.

"In my childhood days you gave me a lot of pleasure in comic strips, toys, radio, and being a member of your club," the man, a retired gamekeeper and forestry worker named Blue Armstrong, wrote, asking his childhood hero to send him an autographed picture. "I never saw you live, but I guess we don't get everything that's going. Anyway, thank you for being Steve Larrabee."

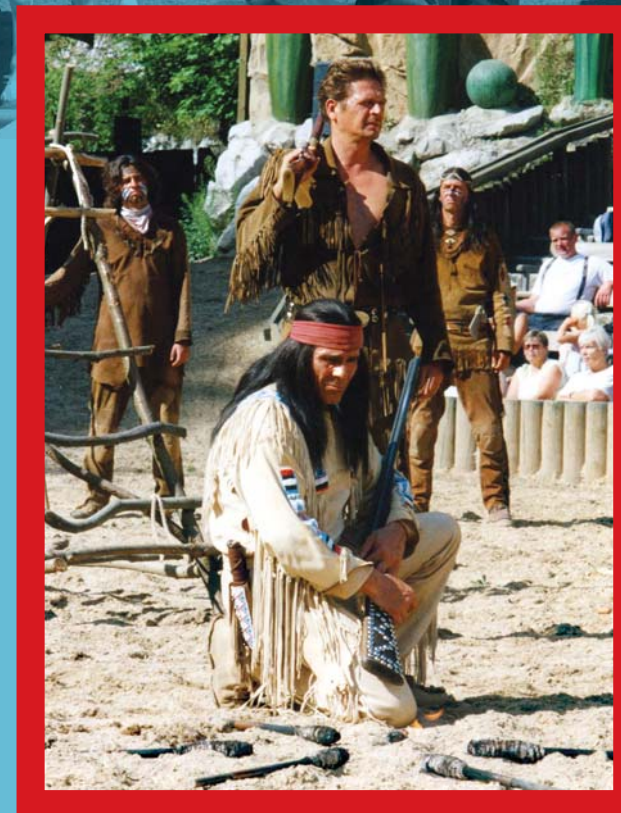
During nearly a month as a Visiting Scholar at the Autry National Center last December, I explored the creation and marketing of the Western myth as an essential underpinning for my work in Europe, where I am, so to speak, exploring the "end-user product." As Larry McMurtry once put it, "The lies about the West are more powerful than the truth about the West—so much more powerful that, in a sense, lies about the West are the truths about the West—the West, at least, of the imagination."

Over the years, a wealth of books and other publications have examined the impact of the West, the Frontier, and the various myths—or lies—derived from them on the cultural, political, and emotional identity of America and Americans, even those living east of the Mississippi. Some "lies" were deliberate efforts to obtain or influence political goals. Others were the product of romance, discovery, advertising, and entertainment. Like Americans, Europeans also embraced and embellished the Western myth. But they approached it (or were approached by it) from afar, from a different, and in a way more disinterested, direction. However much they turned to Western trappings to enhance or inform their personal dreams and identities, Europeans viewed the West from within societies, nations, and cultures whose own core identity did not depend on America's creation saga.

"No other nation has taken a time and a place from its past and produced a construct of the imagination equal to America's creation of the West," wrote Englishman David Hamilton Murdoch in his 2000 book, *The American West: Creation of a Myth*. "And having created it, America promptly and successfully exported it, so that it became the property of much of the world, which is my excuse as an outsider for having the temerity to write about it."

Europeans, he wrote, "are outsiders looking in—at an image of a world they never had—and for them, the mythical West has been the best kind of escapism. The trappings of the myth for Americans are its essence for others—a world of open spaces, simple choices, and problems solved by direct action."

Murdoch, who was born in 1937, wrote that like most people of his generation, he came to the West through the movies: "In Britain of the late 1940s and 1950s we knew there was a world better than the one we were obliged to inhabit, and Hollywood kept giving us glimpses of it." Westerns were popular worldwide, and the power of their pull was seen vividly just two years after Murdoch's birth when ►



Above: St. Agreve, France: The "cowboy prayer" is recited ahead of the rodeo at the Equiblues Country Music Festival and Rodeo, August 2004. Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

Left: Bad Segeberg, Germany: Actors Gojko Mitic (Winnetou) and Joshy Peters (Old Shatterhand) portray Karl May's famous characters at the annual Karl May Festival, July 2003. Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber.

Previous spread: Interlaken, Switzerland: Western-style dancers at the Interlaken Country and Trucker Festival, August 2004. Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber.



Roy Green, performing as Steve Larrabee, mid-1900s, gelatin silver print. Donated by Mr. Roy Green. Autry Library Collection; 2001.25.10.11

Gene Autry, then one of the top box office stars in Hollywood, toured Britain and Ireland to promote his 1939 film *Colorado Sunset*. Mob scenes greeted Autry at every stop of his tour; it was estimated that as many as 500,000 turned out when he paraded through Dublin. One newspaper reported that "in Britain alone since 1936 twenty-four of [Autry's] pictures have been seen by more than 172,000,000 people."

In fact, the first Western movies in the early years of the 20th century more or less coincided with two other pop culture developments that strongly influenced the passion for Things Western in Europe. In one form or another, they have maintained a powerful influence to this day.

One was the series of European tours by Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West, from 1887 to 1906. The other was the work of the German writer Karl May, who, years before he ever set foot in the United States, published a series of wildly popular tales set in the American West. Buffalo Bill's tours took a potent archetype of frontier America—and, indeed, of the American national experience—all over Europe, as far east as what is now Ukraine. Drawing huge audiences and high-profile publicity from visits by politicians and royalty, his shows helped codify signifiers of the West and make them familiar. For audiences in Europe, wrote historian Joy S. Kasson, "the Wild West existed nowhere but in the arena." The show "had to accept—and to learn to trade upon—its own exoticism and its underlying fictionality." The Wild West's task, she wrote, "was to make the memory of this entertainment spectacle become, for its audiences, the memory of the real thing."

Buffalo Bill's shows paved the way for other American Wild West show tours over the ensuing decades. They also spawned a legacy of homegrown Wild West performers, touring shows, and pageants. Among them, Iowa-born Samuel Franklin Cody toured Europe in the 1890s and early 1900s with a Wild West act. On horseback and in full Western regalia, he would compete in races against bicycle riders. Cody dressed and coifed himself like Buffalo Bill, and apparently changed his name for artistic reasons—his original surname was Cowdery. He eventually settled in England, where he became a pioneer of balloon flight. In Yorkshire, meanwhile, Buffalo Bill had a direct impact on a knife-thrower and sharpshooter named William Benjamin Shufflebottom, who took the name Texas Bill Shufflebottom and embarked on a Wild West performance career that involved three generations of his family over three decades of activity.

Steve Larrabee's Lone Star Road Show and a number of other British touring cowboy acts of the 1950s were a later part of this continuing "Wild West" legacy—as are the sometimes elaborate shows performed today at country-western festivals, Wild West theme parks, and other venues in Germany, France, Austria, and elsewhere around Europe. The Wild West show at the Disneyland resort near Paris is even called Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, as is the one at the German Wild West theme park, Pullman City II. Countless Western fans, meanwhile, still cultivate a "Buffalo Bill" look, with flowing hair, cowboy hat, and pointed Van dyke beard. One such person, the proprietor of a Wild West-style saloon near Dresden in Germany, told me that Buffalo Bill was one of his heroes. The man himself could not speak English and had never visited the United States. But, he told me proudly, his grandfather had performed in the Dresden-based Sarrasani circus, which, influenced by Buffalo Bill when his Wild

Happy Birthday, Autry Library!

Marva Felchlin Director, Autry Library
Institute for the Study of the American West

Gene Autry participated in many grand openings during his long public career, but, given his great interest in preserving the history of the American West, one of his proudest moments may have been cutting the ribbon to the Autry Library in May 1995. The ceremony marked our public opening and invited the research community to explore both library and museum resources. Building a well-respected collection, encouraging scholarship, and providing worldwide access to the holdings of the Autry National Center remains the Autry Library's primary mission.

Established in 1990 to support the mission and interpretive activities of what is now the Museum of the American West, the Autry Library staff devoted itself to planning for the opening of the library to the research community. The research collection was built by working with dealers, publishers, scholars, librarians, and donors. Important book collections acquired during the first years include the Foundation for American Indian Tribal History library (FAITH), the Security Pacific Bank book collection (strong in California history), and the Fred Rosenstock Collection, a significant collection of Western Americana. During this time, an extensive cataloging project was launched to make library resources available to staff, docents, and visiting patrons. A computerized catalog system was installed on-site.

The Autry Library was also charged with acquiring other kinds of materials. Correspondence, business records, dime novels, trade catalogs, photographs, maps, film and television scripts, and sound recordings are just a few of the types of resources added to the collection. Of particular interest were examples of mass-produced popular Western imagery. This unique collection of printed ephemera, including travel brochures, advertisements, and postcards, provides important insights into the needs, desires, and prejudices of their creators and consumers, and is of continuing interest to the research community. As the research role of the library expanded, the responsibility for acquir-

ing these artifacts shifted to the curators in the Museum of the American West.

When the library doors opened 10 years ago, we knew it was important to take advantage of new technologies for global access via the Internet. Our online library catalog, which now includes the Braun Research Library collection, has the potential for reaching millions of patrons. The Autry Library web pages contain detailed information about research privileges, services, and collections (www.autrynationalcenter.org/institute).

Collections Online, the Autry National Center's digital database, includes images of items from the collection as well as library records, further enhancing the experience of the off-site user. These new technologies enable us to provide a valuable introduction to the depth and breadth of our resources.

Building a reputation as a serious research facility and providing excellent service were essential in reaching the goal of encouraging scholarship. Filling the information needs of both remote and visiting patrons continued to be a high priority. Questions come from all over the world via e-mail, telephone, and letter. Visiting researchers, including academics and students, professionals in the entertainment industry, collectors of art and material culture, and authors of fiction, travel from as far away as Australia, Europe, and Asia to use our resources. Annual research fellowships are awarded to scholars and graduate students for focused study. The library staff, employing their considerable knowledge of the collection, works closely with the researchers before, during, and after their visits. The most common subject areas for research are Western history and popular culture, two of the strongest collection areas in both the Autry Library and Museum of the American West.



Left to right: Mrs. Joanne Hale, Gene Autry, and Kevin Mulroy, former director, Research Center, celebrate the opening of the Autry Library, May 1995. Autry National Center Institutional Archives.

The next decade holds great promise for the Autry Library. Research and scholarship will continue to be at the heart of the Autry National Center. As part of the Autry's Institute for the Study of the American West, the library remains dedicated to access and service. We will cut the ribbon to a newly designed Institute building where both the Autry Library and the Braun Research Library will reside. Some who visit will work in specialized reading rooms with rare and fragile materials; others will work with librarians in a technically advanced public space to find the best tools for teaching and learning about the West. Exhibition spaces will feature artifacts and archival materials that are not often on view. Additional fellowships focused on specific collections within the Autry's museums and libraries will give scholars access to materials not yet fully described or available, while preparing the items for cataloging and digitizing.

Significantly, over the next 10 years, research conducted here will become the new scholarship about the American West. As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of our opening, we look forward to playing a crucial role in the development of the Autry National Center as a prominent national institution for the study of the American West. ■



Above: Boskovice, Czech Republic: Czech cowboys after a rodeo/trick riding exhibition at Wild West City, a Western theme park outside Boskovice, July 2004. Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber.

Right: St. Agreve, France: A totem pole set up in the concessions area of the Equiblues Country Music Festival and Rodeo, August 2004. Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber.



West played in Dresden in 1890, presented a group of Sioux Indians as part of what was billed as "Sarrasani's Wild-West-Schau." Buffalo Bill brought a physical reality to dreams of the Wild West that had already been created and fueled by paintings, photographs, ethnographic (and other) tours of Native Americans, and written accounts ranging from letters and travelers' tales to memoirs, literature, and dime novel adventures (called "penny dreadfuls" in England).

Karl May (1842-1912) was by far the most successful of a number of European writers who produced novels and stories set in Frontier America. May never visited the American West and is practically unknown in the United States, but his fantasies have been essential in cementing an image and understanding of the American West in much of Europe. Generations of Europeans have grown up with May's central characters, a young Teutonic adventurer nicknamed "Old Shatterhand," and his "blood brother," the Apache chief Winnetou. May's three dozen Western novels were written mainly in the 1880s and 1890s; they thus coincided with Buffalo Bill's tours and whetted the appetites of Europeans for the Western movies that soon came out of both Hollywood and European studios. May's books have sold more than 100 million copies in German and 30 other languages and have led to hugely popular films and other spin-offs, festivals, and memorabilia that are popular to this day. Each summer, for example, there are at least 10 Karl May festivals in Germany, and three in Austria. The biggest, founded in 1952 in the northern German spa town of Bad Segeberg, still draws a quarter of a million spectators each season.

"A lot of people in the audience are adults looking for their childhood, or bringing their own children to experience that emotion," Swiss-born Jean Jacques Pascal—who directed last summer's Karl May festival in the southern Austrian town of Weitensfeld—told me. "That's why I like it so much. When I was a child we all played Indians and cowboys, and deep in my mind I always had the desire that one day I would make it real."

After World War II, America's position of geopolitical dominance had a major impact on the development of Europe's Wild West subcultures, as cultural export and the export of ideals became part of U.S. foreign policy. Many Europeans, east and west, heard their first country-western music on U.S. Armed Forces Radio, and the American military also introduced competitive rodeo to Europe. Several informants have told me that the first 5-string banjo seen in communist Czechoslovakia was played by Pete Seeger during concerts in Prague and Brno in 1964—and that it touched off a musical revolution, as fans eager for the American sound built their own instruments based on blown-up photographs of Seeger's. Today, some of these Czech musicians build banjos for top American musicians, and Czech bluegrass is a thriving local idiom.

After playing Steve Larrabee for five years, Roy Green left England and has lived in Glendale, California, for nearly half a century. Not long ago, he donated his scrapbooks, photographs, and other memorabilia to the Autry National Center. They are a telling and sometimes poignant collection of clippings and images that testify to the hold the Wild West and its trappings held on the imagination of children, decades ago and a hemisphere away.

In an interview in December with me and Marva Felchlin, the director of the Autry Library, Green reminisced about his days touring

and trick-roping around England as the Lone Star Rider. Looking back, he said, it was a magical time, full of glamour and fantasy, "like Camelot. And for a brief time I was part of it."

Still, he recalled, though he probably had the biggest cowboy show in England and was hero to thousands of children, he held the American performers in awe. He watched a 1953 London performance by Gene Autry from the audience but was too shy to go back-stage and introduce himself.

"I hung around outside, but I was too embarrassed to go in," he said. Compared to these heroes, these consummate performers, he said, he did not feel like the real thing.

What, though, is real in the Imaginary West?

For Blue Armstrong, Steve Larrabee was as real as they got. "He was really something to me; he was terrific," Armstrong told me over the telephone from his home in the Isle of Harris. "You had to have a hero." And for Armstrong, the fact that the American Lone Star Rider Steve Larrabee was actually the Englishman Roy Green made him, looking back, all the more special. "I know a lot of cowboy stars in Western films had actually gone out West from the East," he told me. "Roy, he really pulled something off—he went out West from London."

Today, a surprising and remarkably multifaceted American West subculture thrives in many parts of Europe. Stoked, marketed, and even created by mass culture, it has achieved a self-perpetuating life of its own, forming a connected collection of "Imaginary Wests" and "Western Spaces."

Rodeos, country-western music festivals, Wild West theme parks, saloons, and similar attractions draw hundreds of thousands of people each year in European countries from Spain to Sweden. Specialty shops feature Western lore, Western duds, and Native American spirituality. Many European truckers model their lifestyle on the rugged individualism of the resourceful (often fictional) rider of the range and are the focus of a vivid "country and trucker" scene with its own music, rituals, and clothing. And tens of thousands of Europeans study and even live like Native Americans, mountain men, or other Frontier American archetypes as a hobby.

A German American country artist named Don Jensen summed up one facet of the European Western phenomenon in a song released in Germany a couple years ago. He sang about a German who has never been to the United States but loves country music, takes his kids to rodeos, hangs a picture of Willie Nelson on his wall, and in short creates a sort of German Wild West dream world in which he lives out his fantasies. Jensen called his song "Sauerkraut Cowboy." Runs the chorus: "He's a sauerkraut cowboy, with Georgia on his mind, livin' on Tulsa, livin' on Tulsa, livin' on Tulsa time . . ."²

1. "The Song of the Lone Star Riders," © 1952, A. Weekes & Co. Printed by kind permission of Stainer & Bell Ltd., London, England.

2. Lyrics reprinted courtesy of Don Jensen.

Ruth Ellen Gruber is an American writer, photographer, and independent scholar, long based in Europe. She is the author of several books, including *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (University of California Press, 2002). Her current project, *Sauerkraut Cowboys, Indian Dreams*, explores how Europeans embrace the mythology of the American West and transform it into their own experience.