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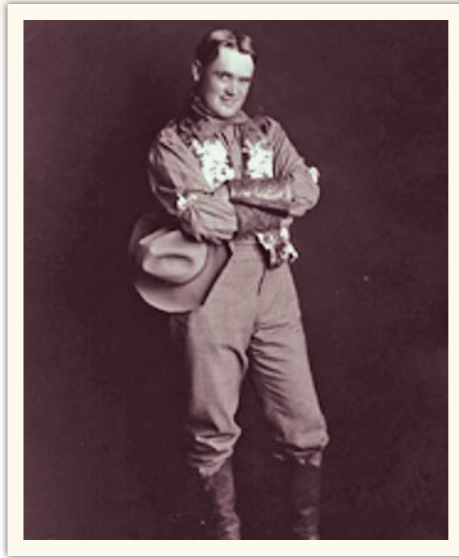
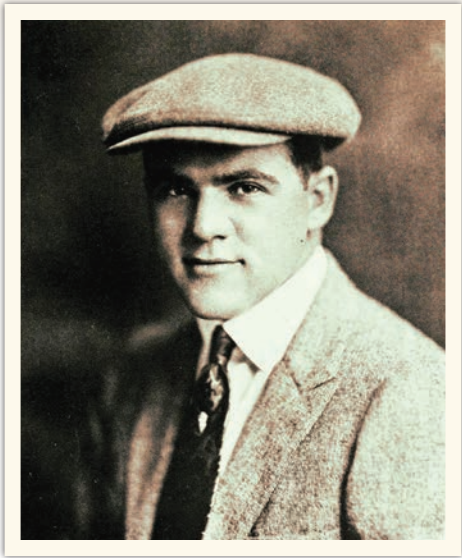
MORGANS IN EARLY WESTERN FILMS AND SHOWS, PART II

Rex, King of the Wild Horses

By Brenda L. Tippin

Morgans continued to dominate the early movies. One of the most fascinating horses of the early Western movies was a magnificent black stallion known as Rex, King of the Wild Horses. A registered Morgan, his real name was Casey Jones #6255, bred by the famous Texas rancher Richard Sellman, and foaled at his Mountain Vale Ranch. Rex was unique in that rather than gaining fame as the horse of a popular cowboy actor, he was a star in his own right, and often billed equally or even above his human co-stars. Although not linked to a particular cowboy, his story is intertwined with several remarkable people who helped shape his career.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Poster from the 1933 Columbia Picture remake, *King of the Wild Horses*, starring Rex (Casey Jones); Rex, still picture; Rex, as pictured on a lobby card for *The King of Wild Horses* (all items public domain). This is the second in a series of articles by Brenda Tippin about Morgans in early Western movies. The first article, "Tom Mix and his Horse Tony," appeared in June/July 2020.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Harry Eugene "Hal" Roach, 1920 (Wikimedia commons, public domain); Charles Pacific "Chick" Morrison (public domain, courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Society); Enos Edward "Yakima" Canutt, Hollywood's premier stuntman (scvhistory.com, Photograph from the collection of Leon Worden).

RICHARD SELLMAN

Born in Maryland in 1855, Richard "Dick" Sellman originally intended to follow his older brothers to Texas, planning to go into business and get away from the life of farming he had grown up with. His focus changed abruptly when his brother Thomas, who had established a sheep ranch in Rochelle, Texas, was murdered in 1886. Dick took over the ranch and changed from sheep to breeding cattle and Morgan horses. He became the largest breeder of Angus cattle in Texas, and for almost 40 years, until his death in 1925, the largest breeder of Morgan horses in the world. Casey Jones represented several generations of dedicated Sellman breeding.

HAL ROACH

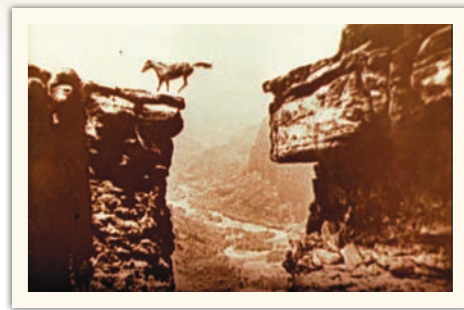
Born in 1892, Harry Eugene Roach, Sr. was the son of Charles Henry Roach and Margaret Gertrude Bally. His grandfather, James Roach, was born in Ireland, and his maternal grandfather, John Bally, was from Switzerland. He arrived in Hollywood as a young man of 20, where he began working as an extra in silent films. He was an expert horseman, wrangler, and mule skinner, with a love of adventure. By 1915 he had begun producing his own short comedies. In 1927, he was commissioned in the US Army Signal Reserve Corps, and later called back to active military duty during World War II. Hal was known as a pioneer in comedy, and remembered for such shows as *Laurel and Hardy*, *Amos and Andy*, and *Little Rascals (Our Gang)*. During the 1920s he also produced a series of action/adventure Western silent films, which were extremely popular, including four featuring Rex, King of the Wild Horses, a wild stallion or outlaw horse portrayed by the Morgan stallion Casey Jones. These included *The King of Wild Horses*, 1924; *Black Cyclone*, 1925, *Devil Horse*, 1926, and *No Man's Law*, 1927. Altogether, Hal produced more than 1,000 films and was also one of the first significant film producers to venture into television. He lived a long and productive life, dying in 1992 at the age of 100, just two months short of his 101st birthday.

CHICK MORRISON

Charles Pacific "Chick" Morrison was born in 1878 in Morrison, Colorado, and was a grandson of George Morrison, a quarryman from Canada and the founder of the town of Morrison. A genuine cowboy and rodeo star, Chick won numerous contests across the West and was known for his exceptional talent in breaking wild horses, and in training horses for trick and fancy riding. He worked for Hal Roach studios, and he and another trainer, Jack Lindell, were sent in 1923 to find a talented stallion to star as a wild horse in a Western adventure movie Hal was planning. Casey Jones was found, then eight years old, a reputed man-killer, locked and chained in a dark stall at the Reform School in Golden, Colorado, less than ten miles from the Morrison family's scenic Red Rocks Ranch. It is quite likely Chick had already heard of Casey Jones and knew exactly where to look to find a horse who could fill the role of a wild and beautiful outlaw stallion. Chick and Jack worked with the horse at the reform school for about a week, and then put on a demonstration for the wardens who were amazed to see Rex at liberty, racing back and forth, up and down main street in response to voice cues from the two trainers. Having confirmed the horse's natural talent, he was purchased for \$400 and given the stage name of Rex. Chick continued to work with Rex as his primary trainer and they were ready to start filming in about two weeks. Chick's remarkable patience and training skills, along with his unique understanding of the horse's exceptional intelligence and the violent responses he had learned to cope with continued abuse were instrumental in pointing Rex on a different path.

Initially, Rex was brought to the Morrison ranch, and by the time filming started for Rex's first movie, Chick had several broken bones and was on crutches, but he insisted he would never use a whip to correct Rex, and instead would use only kindness with the horse. The movie was filmed on location in the Red Rocks area, and even with the old black and white technology from the film released in 1924, it was spectacular. The film was directed by Fred Jackman, and the cameraman was George Stevens, who was just starting out and only

HISTORY LESSON ≈ *Rex, King of the Wild Horses*



LEFT TO RIGHT: Photo stills of Rex jumping over a chasm (public domain).

19 years old. Rex did his own stunts, including such feats as jumping across a yawning chasm, very similar to the famous leap Tom Mix had made with his horse Tony a year earlier. He also did such stunts as jumping off a vertical cliff and plunging into the river far below. These scenes are all the more remarkable in that Rex was willing to perform them alone with only the voice cues of his trainer for guidance.

Sadly, Chick was killed at the age of 46 in June 1924 when another horse in a Hal Roach film reared and fell over backwards on him.

JACK “SWEDE” LINDELL

Born in Gunnebo, Sweden, in 1898, Jakob Walford Lindell immigrated to America in 1915 when he was 17 years old. Eventually he came to California and found work as a horse wrangler in early silent movies. When Chick was suddenly killed, they were already filming *Black Cyclone*, a sequel adventure film Hal Roach planned immediately to capitalize on Rex’s immense popularity in *King of Wild Horses*. Jack was able to take over where Chick had left off and, using whip signals and voice cues, continued to develop Rex’s natural talent. Lindell was expert at carefully orchestrating scenes of Rex fighting with other stallions, particularly a flashy pinto named Marky. These scenes were very realistic, particularly as both stallions took them seriously and were fighting to win. Lindell made sure neither horse got hurt no matter how vicious the fight appeared. Their hooves were shod in soft rubber shoes and their teeth wrapped in gauze to prevent serious injury, and plenty of fake blood was used. Considered one of the most gifted horse trainers in Hollywood, Jack was later known for his work with the movies *My Friend Flicka* (1943), *Smoky* (1946), and *Sand* (1949). He died in 1952 at the age of 53.

YAKIMA CANUTT

One of the few cowboy actors bold enough to work with Rex in closeup scenes, Yakima Canutt was one of five children born to John Lemuel and Nettie Ellen Canutt on their family ranch near Colfax, Washington, in 1896. Though he had only a grade school education, the knowledge and skills he learned working and growing up on the family ranch founded by his grandfather more than sustained him. He was riding unbroken horses by the time he was 13, and became a world champion rodeo cowboy in 1917, a title he won three times. A veteran of World War I, he served in the US Navy, and later met Tom Mix who gave him parts in films. He had completed more than 20 motion pictures by 1930, and worked with Rex in the 1926 movie, *The Devil Horse*, written by Hal Roach and Stan Laurel (of Laurel and Hardy). In one

scene, Rex had to run to Canutt’s character during a fight with hostile Native Americans. Rex had performed the liberty work beautifully for several takes but Canutt noticed the stallion was getting mad and told the director he needed a break. However, the director insisted on one more take. This was too much for Rex. He went after Canutt with teeth bared, rearing, and striking even when Jack Lindell tried to call him off. Canutt finally rolled over a bank and was able to escape.

An excellent horseman, Canutt did all his own scenes without requiring a double, and in *The Devil Horse* frequently rides Rex at a full gallop without saddle or bridle, the two easily negotiating fearsome obstacles in the rugged terrain. As his voice was unsuited for sound films, he continued working as a stunt man, often doubling for such noted actors as Clark Gable and John Wayne. In the movie *Gone with the Wind*, he doubles for Clark Gable in driving the wagon through the burning city of Atlanta. He was inducted into the National Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1976 and, after a long life, passed away in 1986.

REX, KING OF THE WILD HORSES

Foaled May 1, 1915 and registered as bay with a small star, Rex was in fact very dark and appeared black and was always billed as a black stallion in his numerous movie appearances. Sellman, who often liked to name his horses after important people, named him after the American folk hero Casey Jones, a railroad engineer known for his speed, who died in 1900 when he collided with another train. He was immortalized by the folk song, “The Ballad of Casey Jones,” written by William Saunders.

Casey Jones, the horse, had a pedigree of royal lineage. He was a son of Headlight Morgan (Peter’s Ethan Allen 2d x Lady Stratton by Vermont Morgan), and out of Nannie L, a daughter of The Admiral (Jubilee De Jarnette x Morrill Queen by Winnebago Chief). Nannie L’s dam was a daughter of Major Antoine (Meteor Jr x Molly Lee by General Lee), second dam a daughter of Sellman’s foundation stallion, Major Gordon (by Young Octoroon [Octoroon x mare by Old Joe Brown]), and third dam a daughter of Octoroon # 302 (Octoroon [Comet x mare by Drennon]). Just seven generations from the original Justin Morgan on multiple lines, Casey Jones, or Rex as we shall call him, boasted such names on his five-generation pedigree as Old Gifford, Hale’s Green Mountain, Black Hawk, Ethan Allen, Daniel Lambert, and Indian Chief. He also had a strong line to the Bulrush family through The Admiral, whose dam was the exceptional mare Morrill Queen. He stood 16 hands tall, yet despite the height, his type and form were solidly classic Morgan, with an elegance of movement and charismatic presence that made him the first equine star to receive top billing, over and above his human co-stars.

Details of his early life are scarce but at some point, he began to be severely abused and had earned a reputation as a killer horse by the time movie producers discovered him. Some sources suggest he may have been abused by cowboys on the Sellman ranch trying to break him. If this were true, Sellman would have been very displeased as he was very particular about the training of his colts and personally oversaw the handling of all his young horses. Sellman Morgans were widely known and in demand as he advertised extensively and often sold his horses by the train carload. At any rate, Casey Jones was sold as a potential breeding stallion, when two years old, to a rancher in Colorado, and ran wild on the eastern Colorado plains for some time. He was believed to have suffered abuse from harsh practices employed when the horses were rounded up and was blamed for killing a wrangler during this process. The rancher ordered him shot. However, a boy's reform school in Golden, Colorado, wanted him for breeding, so arrangements were made to send him there instead. Sadly, it seems abuse continued here as well. One day a boy took him out riding, and Rex returned alone. The boy was later found, apparently having been dragged to death. What exactly happened was never discovered. The boy may have fallen and caught his foot in the stirrup, causing Rex to panic. Once more, the horse was blamed and put into isolation, now having the reputation of a confirmed killer. He was said to have been kept chained in a locked stall for two years, which only added to the violent habits he developed as a result of chronic abuse.

When Chick Morrison and Jack Lindell discovered him in 1923, Rex's temper had not improved with the severe confinement. Some of the boys at the school evidently amused themselves taunting the chained stallion by spitting at him. This was something Rex never forgot and the sound of someone spitting infuriated him. When Jack Lindell later discovered this idiosyncrasy, he put it to good use in scenes calling for Rex to appear as an angry and vicious wild stallion. He had only to stand just offstage and spit and Rex would immediately charge, teeth bared, ears flattened, and eyes blazing.

Rex had an uncanny intelligence and unconquerable wildness which viewers of his films instantly recognized, and which made him immensely popular. He was a magnificent animal, combining the ideal ancient Vermont Morgan type perfectly proportioned with his powerful 16 hand size, and natural grace and elegance which made him stand out from other horses. Typically cast as a wild or outlaw stallion, he seemed to understand and enjoy his role thoroughly, often striking a regal pose of his own accord and gazing far into the distance with what was often described as "the untamable stare of an eagle."

After the initial filming of *King of Wild Horses* at Morrison's Red Rocks Ranch, Rex was taken to Clarence "Fat" Jones's stables in Hollywood. Jones was the largest supplier of Hollywood movie horses for more than 51 years, and this would be Rex's home for the next several years when not filming on location. Although difficult and sometimes dangerous to work with, his incredible talent and popularity made it well worth the effort. Many actors were afraid to work closely with him, but a few brave cowboys such as Yakima Canutt did. In many of these films, Rex's role was often to get rid of the villain. In the 1927 silent film *No Man's Law*, he rescues a young girl played by Barbara Kent from a villain played by Oliver Hardy (of Laurel & Hardy), whom he pursues and administers justice with his powerful hooves. Barbara Kent, the last adult actor of the silent film era, passed away in 2011 at the age of 103.

Rex was sold to Universal Pictures in 1927 and continued to make many more movies. These included *Wild Beauty*, *Guardians of the Wild*, and *Two Outlaws* in 1928; *Wild Blood*, *Border Romance*, *Plunging Hoofs*, *The Harvest of Hate*, and *Hoofbeats of Vengeance* in 1929; *Parade of the West* in 1930; *The Vanishing Legion* in 1931; *Wild Horse Stampede* and a remake *King of the Wild Horses* in 1933; *The Law of the Wild*, a 12-chapter serial movie with the famous German Shepherd Rin-Tin-Tin, Jr. in 1934; *The Adventures of Rex and Rinty*, another series with Rin-Tin-Tin, Jr., as well as *Stormy* in 1935; *Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island* in 1936 with two other look-alike horses; and finally, *King of the Sierras*, his last film, in 1938. He also starred in 1933 in the first of three film adaptations of *Smoky*, written by Will James, this version actually narrated by Will James himself. In this movie, Rex charges an actor and knocks him to the ground as called for in the script, but then Rex began to improvise and started tearing the man's clothes with his teeth. This was so unsettling the director cut the scene, and unfortunately, the entire film was later lost. In addition to these, he had parts in countless other films.

Rex was retired to the ranch of Lee Doyle in Flagstaff, Arizona, and turned out with a band of mares. He sired a number of foals, though none were registered, and died in the early 1940s, having impressed many thousands of viewers as a truly unique and talented ambassador for the Morgan breed. ■

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