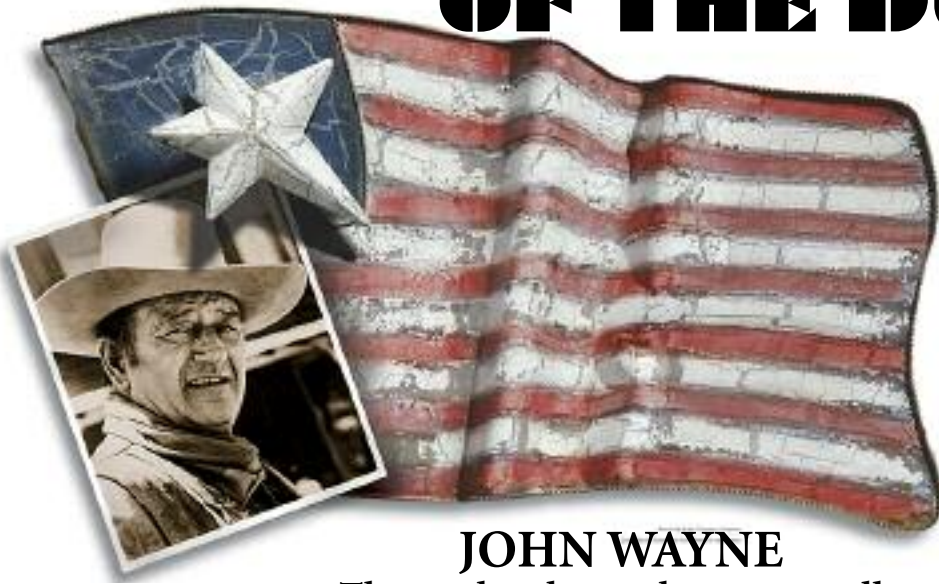


A CENTURY OF THE DUKE



JOHN WAYNE The cowboy hero who never really rode off into the sunset.

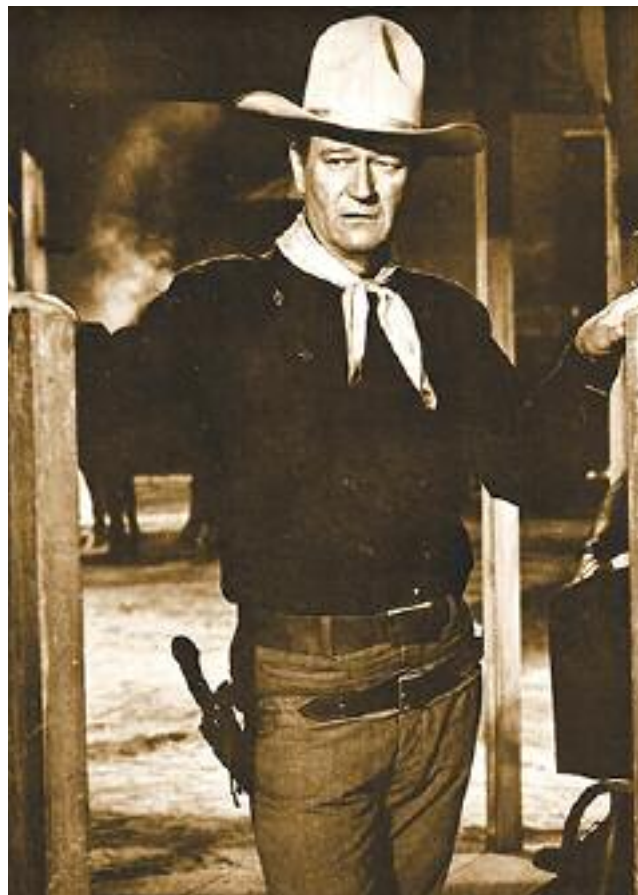
By Michael Martin Murphey

John Wayne was born May 26, 1907, in Winterset, Iowa. One hundred years from the day of his birth, America still loves the man who came to be known as “the Duke.” The big heart of John Wayne never gave up on the defense of the basic ideas of individual rights, private property, democracy, liberty and justice for all. These themes still resonate in the American heart. The Duke once said: “We may have our disagreements, but just let anyone step on America’s tail and they’ll regret it.”

Wayne took his choice of roles seriously, though there was little calculation of an effete “acting career” in him. He just didn’t have it in him to take on any role other than that of the courageous real men he admired. His steadfast commitment to such roles, though ridiculed as jingoism and cornball patriotism by many elitists of the arts, ultimately made John Wayne an American hero in his own right. By standing as a patriotic American, he hurt his career in Hollywood. He wasn’t making the big money toward the end of his career that other more conformist Hollywood stars commanded. Yet he really was, politically

and spiritually, one tough hombre.

Still today, when any man stands up for what he believes in against all odds and criticism, his admirers will say: “He thinks he’s John Wayne!” And his detractors will say: “Who does he think he is—John Wayne?” As

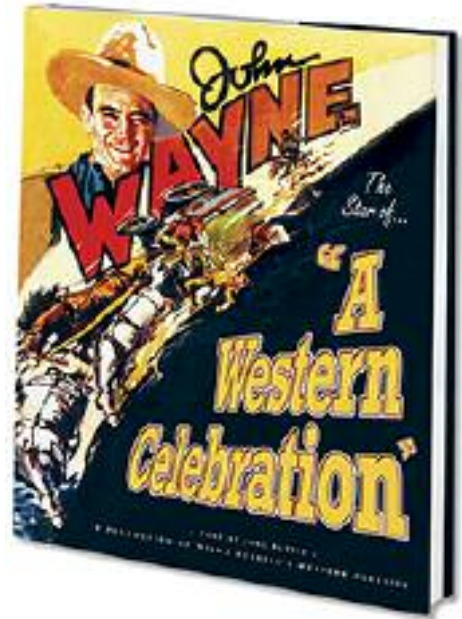


the Duke once said: “Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway.”

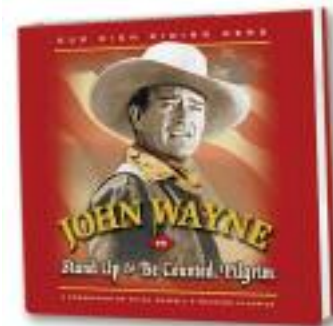
By the time he was in his 20s, Wayne’s inherited Midwestern strongman-of-few-words mannerisms had made him a perfect choice for film producers in Hollywood’s golden era who were searching for actors to play the strongmen Americans wanted to see on the screen: independent cowboys, intrepid frontiersmen, courageous soldiers, risk-taking adventurers, and crime-busting cops.

Common sense—definitely one of the Duke’s strengths—suggested that his real name, Marion Michael Morrison, be changed to John Wayne. The Duke’s savvy instincts knew that when movie ads broadcast how well an actor fit a role, it would not have worked to say: “Marion Morrison *is* Rooster Cogburn!” Yet when Wayne made mistakes, he was tough enough to admit them. He suffered from lung disease in later life and he encouraged people to stop smoking. The appropriate Wayne quote here is: “Life is tough. It’s tougher if you’re stupid!”

The heroic characters Wayne



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chose to play were not fantastic superheroes. They were flawed, often haunted by past mistakes and real shortcomings. Their strengths were not the result of some kind of freakish accident or bizarre twists of fate. John Ford and the other directors Wayne liked to work with didn't fool with films about mutation by atomic radiation or falling to earth in that ever-present lost spaceship of science fiction. Wayne's characters were ordinary men who did extraordinary things by bucking up their courage and choosing to fight for survival.

John Ford, Wayne's mentor and favorite director, understood that America found something deeply inspiring and satisfying in the symbolic image of the American cowboy. Wayne played many variations on the tough hombre in his career, but his image for all

time will be that of an American cowboy. When he made a recording in the 1960s called "America, Why I Love Her," he appeared as a cowboy smiling proudly in front of the Stars and Stripes. The subjects to which the selections on the album keep returning are the breathtaking beauty of the American landscape, pride in the exercise of freedom and individual rights, and the courage and determination to fight tyranny.

The American cowboy the Duke chose to portray defends his land and his honor, is loyal to friends and family, makes a commitment to a mission and carries it out. Historians will argue forever about what the real cowboy was like. But they won't argue about the way John Wayne chose to portray the cowboy. And his choice has shaped the think-

ing and behavior of a lot of real cowboys.

Happy Birthday, John Wayne! You rode off into the sunset at the end of many a western movie. But the light your shining western star casts on the truth is brighter than the 100 candles on your birthday cake. Your star will never fade in the night that comes after sunset, and you will never ride out of our hearts. ■

Michael Martin Murphey is a horse and cattle rancher, rambling cowboy singer, writer and actor. He lives and works out of ranches and cabins in Texas, New Mexico and Wisconsin. He gratefully acknowledges the influence of Wilma Russell's books on John Wayne and heartily recommends them to all who wish to understand his legacy. He can be reached at www.michaelmartinmurphey.com.