



Cinestaan

90 years of In Old Arizona, the first Hollywood talkie to be filmed outdoors

The old black-and-white film, directed first by Raoul Walsh and later by Irving Cummings, was nominated for four Academy Awards. Star Warner Baxter won the second ever Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of The Cisco Kid.

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The Fox-Movietone feature film, *In Old Arizona* (1929) was advertised as the first talkie Western filmed entirely outdoors. Not only would audiences get to see an authentic setting, but also hear the natural sounds of the outdoors, the newspaper advertisements promised.

The film utilized the pioneer town of Grafton, Utah, close to the Zion National Park to film certain sequences of the film. The project first took shape in the capable hands of Raoul Walsh, who had experience herding cattle in Texas, and knew what to bring to the table. The director had previously acted in DW Griffith's *The Birth Of A Nation* (1915) as John Wilkes Booth and directed *Sadie Thompson* (1928) starring Gloria Swanson.

Based on O Henry's short story *The Caballero's Way*, *In Old Arizona* was expanded for the big screen by Tom Barry. Walsh was resolute to take on the task of making the first on-location talkie. He told the head of Fox's production, "I want a good newsreel truck and a Western script. Let me have the sound truck and I'll give you a sound and the old action. We'll knock the public dead."

Author Jeremy Agnew wrote in *The Creation of the Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film and Fact* that "Hollywood believed that lavish outdoor Westerns could not succeed because of the technical difficulties of recording sound on location outside, away from an interior studio set."

In less than a week though, Walsh was off to the location in Utah to shoot a few scenes. The first rushes impressed the top brass at Fox Studios who ordered more footage. But bad luck struck the crew when they were returning to Los Angeles to shoot on the Fox backlot. Walsh, sitting on the passenger's seat, was badly injured in a car accident, losing his eye.

Director Irving Cummings took over from Walsh, finishing up what he started. Walsh was also supposed to star as *The Cisco Kid* in the film, now, Warner Baxter finished it up. The final film mixed sequences shot in the studio along with those shot outdoors in California and Utah.

In Old Arizona starred Baxter as *The Cisco Kid*, a fictional character first introduced by Henry, that gained popularity in comics and the big screen. In the original story, the character is heartless and even cruel. Baxter's portrayal shows him as a charming man about town who is double-crossed by his sweetheart Tonia Maria (Dorothy Burgess) who hasn't exactly been faithful to him, and Sergeant Mickey Dunn (Edmund Lowe) assigned to bring him, dead or alive.

UCLA professor Chon Noriega said on a television introduction of the film, "He's technically not the first *Cisco Kid*. There's a silent version, but it models the O Henry story very faithfully where *Cisco*'s actually an Anglo character who's a cold-blooded killer."

Baxter also incorporates an ambiguous accent that's supposed to be Hispanic; he claims to have run away from home in Portugal when he was small to make his life in the Americas. Noriega believes Baxter's performance set the stereotype of how Mexicans were portrayed in cinema. Nevertheless, Baxter won the second ever Best Actor Academy Award for the film. He would go on to play The Cisco Kid in four other films as well.

The outdoor locations gave audiences the proper landscape and vastness of the unconquered American west, complete with horses, cattle and the ubiquitous cowboy dispensing with western justice.

Author Scott L Baugh writes in *Latino American Cinema: An Encyclopedia of Movies, Stars, Concepts, and Trends*: "Baxter's Cisco Kid from *In Old Arizona* borrows some cowboy-hero traits and paves the way for a more charismatic and sympathetic legendary figure that meets modern mass market and mainstream audience expectations. And the fact that *In Old Arizona* ushered in all-talkie features with exterior scenes reflects commercial-mainstream production values meeting up with significant demonstrations of Latino characters and themes."

The sound gamble paid off in large dividends for its makers. The film was made for \$3,04,588 and ended up making more than a million dollars in 1929. *In Old Arizona* premiered on Christmas Day in 1928 and opened for general release on 20 January 1929.

Besides Baxter's win, director Cummings, screenwriter Tom Barry and cinematographer Arthur Edson also received Academy Award nominations. The film also received a Best Picture nomination, but MGM's *The Broadway Melody* won the award.