

Cattle Drive

US : 1951 : dir. Kurt Neumann : Universal International : 78 min
 prod: Aaron Rosenberg : scr: Jack Natteford & Lillie Hayward : dir.ph.: Maury Gertsman
[Dean Stockwell](#)
 Joel McCrea; Chill Wills; Leon Ames; Henry Brandon; Howard Petrie; Griff Barnett;
 Bob Steele

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ♀ Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Joel McCrea makes a human being out of Dean Stockwell – and doesn't even need to paddle his britches to work this wonder.
 Source: *The Universal Story*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Stockwell does well in role of bratty teen-ager who learns a sense of values from veteran cowhand McCrea on arduous cow drive. **½"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"In this good family Western Stockwell, spoilt through and through, is accidentally left behind by his filthy rich father, Ames. If he wants to get back to the inhabited world he must go along with cattle driver McCrea and his men. En route the boy undergoes a complete character change and turns from a horror into a

likeable normal boy. The relationship between Stockwell and McCrea is exceptionally well captured by Neumann, who thereby does justice to the good script by Jack Natteford and Lillie Hayward. Producer Aaron Rosenberg would deliver many good Westerns for Universal in the fifties. Regular music man was Joseph Gershenson and Maury Gertsman was one of Universal's stock camera people. *** "

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"The spoiled teenager son of a magnate finds humanity and friendship with a cowhand during a cattle drive. "CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS" out west, not badly done."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Interesting Western with good performances by McCrea and Stockwell as a saddle worn cowhand and a young upstart, respectively, who team up on a cattle drive and become fast friends. **½ "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Kid, Dean Stockwell, learns what life is really all about (perhaps) during big drive from veteran Joel McCrea. 3 "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Photographed in beautiful colour, this pleasing Western has a vigorous performance from the young Dean Stockwell - as a spoiled teenager along on a huge cattle drive - whose enthusiasm spurs Joel McCrea to one of the best of his latter-day performances as the old hand who teaches him about life and the tricks of the trail. ** "

The Universal Story comment:

"Just as spoilt rich-kid Freddie Bartholomew was, with the help of Spencer Tracy, regenerated on a fishing vessel in MGM's memorable tearjerker **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"** (1937), so young Dean Stockwell, whose disposition at the start of **"CATTLE DRIVE"** was similar to Master Bartholomew's, underwent a complete change of personality after being inadvertently left in the care of cowpoke Joel McCrae after the train his railroad magnate father (Leon Ames) is travelling in, leaves without him. Pleasant family entertainment, in Technicolor, and with a cast that also included Chill Wills, Henry Brandon, Howard Petrie and Bob Steele, it made no indelible impression on the imagination of the movie-going public, but was a well produced (by Aaron Rosenberg), nicely written (by Jack Natteford and Lillie Hayward) and competently directed (by Kurt Neumann) family Western."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

As catchy titles go, you'd have to say that **"CATTLE DRIVE"**, if expository, is certainly uninspired. Joel McCrea's function in his herder outfit was called a "ramrod", so how about **"THE BOY AND THE RAMROD"**? At least, it would have laid bare one of the film's cloyer subtexts, you'll grant me that much.

It takes less than a minute to become abundantly plain which classic story is being plagiarised in **"CATTLE DRIVE"**. Chester Graham (Stockwell) is a conceited rich kid bullying the servants, his father is a railroad tycoon, and they're at sea on the endless prairies in one of his father's trains. Chester gets into a scuffle with another boy passenger (unidentified) and when a guard breaks it up, he tries to trick his father (Leon Ames) into sacking the man. "The boy's getting out of hand," his exasperated father protests to an underling, "What he needs is discipline, a good strict school!" (Hear hear! we concur silently) "Confound that boy! What he *really* needs is a good old-fashioned spanking!" (Yes yes! He does indeed! We agree with mounting hopes). "I'm afraid that's a little out of my line sir" the underling demurs. "Yes, mine too.." father concedes.

No spanking for Stockwell then (*Shame!*), but instead he contrives to strand himself when he wanders off from the train at a water-stop. Shortly afterwards he's plucked, as it were, from the sage by the Manoel character, Daniel (Joel McCrea), who's on the point of roping a wild black stallion he's had his sights on for months. The stallion gets away, and Dan returns to the other cattle drivers with this glowering, imperious rich boy instead. And so the plot proceeds, translating Kipling's seafaring tale and characters into a Western setting. There's nothing really at fault with this device - it translates fairly exactly - and it was fourteen years

since the same studio had made its Spencer Tracy/Freddie Bartholomew version. Yet somehow this seems a much lesser tale, and while the script and acting are acceptable, and Maury Gertsman's Technicolor photography clean, crisp and colourful, it is devoid of genuine drama, whether on the personal or spectacle level.

Part of the problem is over-familiarity. Westerns were not in short supply, and nor were so-called "family Westerns" – **"MY FRIEND FLICKA"** (43), **"THE YEARLING"** (46) – so that this submerged quickly into a crowd of buddy-buddy trail movies. But also, Stockwell at 15 was just a tad too old for the key role of Harvey/Chester. At 13 he would have been better, and the "family Western" credentials more secure. Those one or two years add up to a large difference in a boy's emotional/physical development. What's more, his transformation from conceited wretch to fallible brave-hearted city boy (with a crush on McCrea) happens literally overnight, so that the dramatic pacing of the story misses a beat. If we don't believe the "road to Damascus" conversion of the central character, the story falls apart.

Stockwell had already played with McCrae the year before in **"STARS IN MY CROWN"** (as McCrae's adopted son) and the chemistry between the two is pleasing enough. McCrea makes a likeable "strong wise man of the saddle" figure, and yet equally it must be said that he hasn't the screen charisma to carry the film alone. He was no Clark Gable.

So then, Dan is coaching Chester on **Life**. The boy's a prizewinning Long Island equestrian, but his dressage riding technique looks a bit prissy beside a chuckwagon. Dan takes a wager with Curry, the orneriest member of the crew, over whose horse is the faster. Next morning Dan wins their head-to-head race, but when Chester confides how he rode Curry's horse into the ground all night to wear it down, Dan hands back his winnings. Chester eats crow, and they mosey off together to snag Dan's dream horse "Midnight", with which he hopes to start his own stud ranch. After it's caught and safely penned up near the wagons, however, Chester takes it on himself to help break the horse in, the horse gets loose and stampedes the whole cattle herd. Still no spanking in store for Stockwell however (gnash gnash), and the cattle drive just moves on, a few wagons the poorer, but "no real harm done". When they reach Santa Fe, Chester's father is there to meet them, is duly amazed at his son's transformation and, after a broad hint or two from trail cook Dallas (Chill Wills), signs up with Dan and Chester to go ride down that elusive stallion. In a hilarious final shot, father, son and.. well.. son's intimate friend, ride off together into the sunset, an all-male *ménage-a-trois*.

Faint heart never won fair laddie. Around this period Dean Stockwell practically cornered the market on such demure man/boy romances – with Dana Andrews in **"DEEP WATER"** (Fox 48), with Richard Widmark in **"DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS"** (Fox 48), and with Errol Flynn in **"KIM"** (MGM 51) - indeed, with Paul Lukas in **"KIM"** for good measure. Call it "male bonding", if you feel that alters anything, but Stockwell was definitely typed as a man's boy, and the strength of his emotional attachment to the men in each case, as to McCrae in this one, exceeded mere "buddies" on that particular Richter Scale. As we move inexorably from patriarchy to matriarchy, these celluloid odes to masculine reservations (seafaring, the open trail) seem both archaic and elegiac at once, even if they merely answered some post-war hankering for escapism.

Deconstructions aside, **"CATTLE DRIVE"** is an adequate but unremarkable afternoon filler, very thin on authentic detail of the life it portrays, compared for example with **"THE CULPEPPER CATTLE COMPANY"** (72), or even **"THE COWBOYS"** (72), both of which introduced greenhorn boys to the rigours of cattle-driving. Kipling was a romantic, and so is the film, but in this case the central precept only seems wet – that you can convert a mean

kid into an upright kid by sheer forbearance and human warmth. One almost grows as exasperated with McCrea and Wills, constantly excusing Chester's insufferable behaviour, as with the lad himself. Their superhuman restraint leads ultimately to the stampeding of their herd, and it's only by divine providence that no-one is killed in the process. Perhaps a good dusting of Stockwell's britches behind the chuckwagon would have speeded up the process, and spared all concerned a deal of grief. It's worth observing, too, that in none of these reworkings of **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"** does any shred of blame attach to the boy's father, whose selfishness and neglect are deemed to have created the problem to start with. He is always played by a sympathetic actor (Melvyn Douglas in the 1937 film), and his own sudden conversion from bad parent to good one is even more implausible than the boy's.

One can't help but note in passing that, in this film alone, the producer, director, principal cameraman and scorer were all Jewish. It would be of historical interest to know *why*, exactly, this particular ethnic community became so over-represented in Hollywood film production (as, to a lesser extent, they still are today). Talent is where talent tells (Spielberg would probably have made it to where he is now, Jewish or not), but it does raise the suspicion, at least, of a certain cliquiness or undue privilege. And why should that concern anyone at all? Simply because Hollywood is still the world's most efficient propaganda factory, and it is as well to know whose agendas are at work in selecting which productions are made, and which are not. If Hollywood had been dominated since the 1920s by wealthy Muslims or Mormons, the same argument would apply.

See the three filmed versions of **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"**, and subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT CHILDREN, HORSES & PONIES, SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** and **WESTERNS**.