

The Covered Wagon

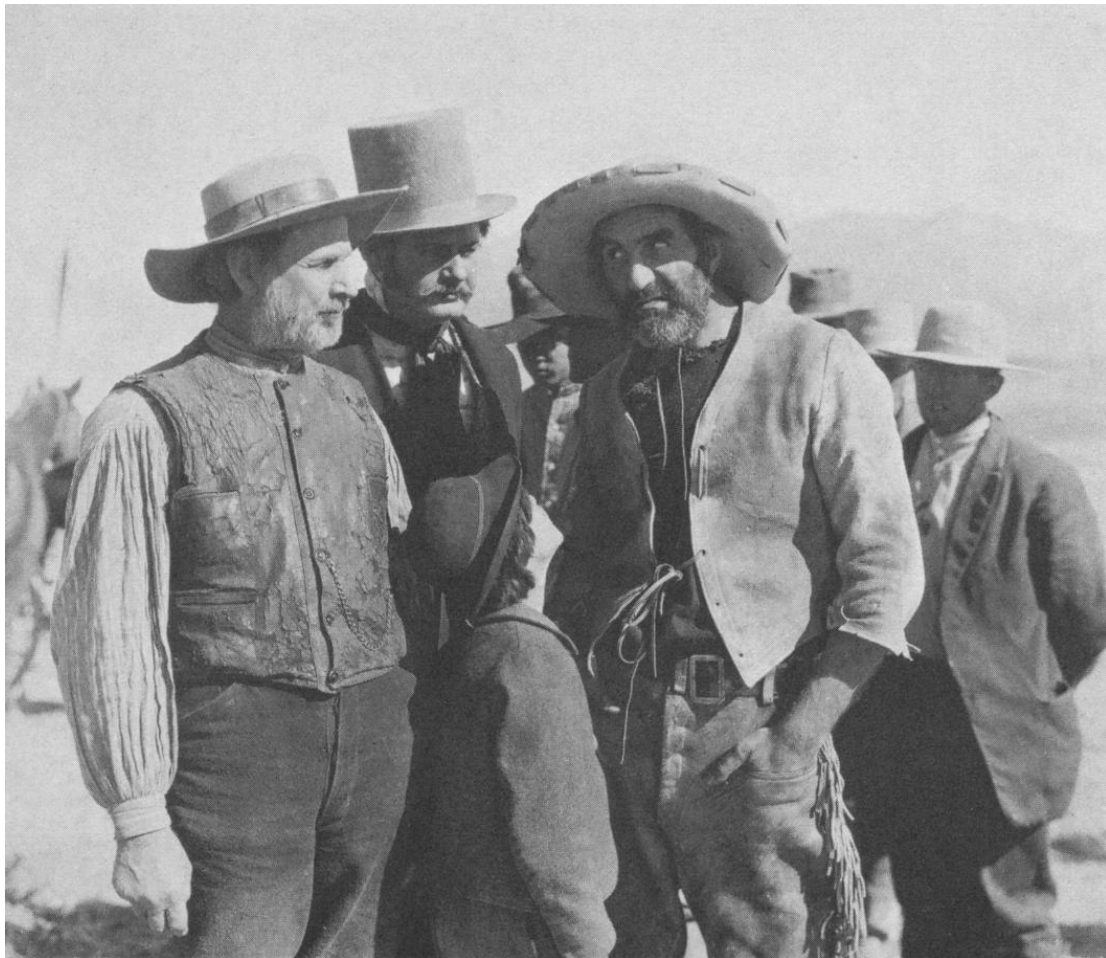
US : 1923 : dir. James Cruze : Paramount
 prod: : scr: Jack Cunningham : dir.ph.: Karl Brown

Silent : 103 min†

[Johnny Fox](#)
 Lois Wilson; J. Warren Kerrigan; Ernest Torrence; Charles Ogle; Ethel Wales; Alan Hale Jr;
 Tully Marshall; Guy Oliver; Tim McCoy

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	€	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2339a	3½	10	2	1,667	-	-	-	-	-	No	unseen

[† calculated at sound rate - 24 frames per second]



Johnny Fox, centre, squares up to ornery Ernest Torrence. Charles Ogle and Alan Hale look on.

Source: *Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book*

Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide*
 1996 review:

"Slow-paced silent forerunner of Western epics, following a wagon train as it combats indians and the elements; beautifully photographed, but rather tame today. **½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"The first great Western epic cost around \$750,000, and the profit was about four million! The Western showed its power and the genre began to be taken seriously. Jack Cunningham wrote the screenplay from the novel by Emerson Hough. The film revolves

around the trek to California by two caravans and their ordeals en route, such as Indian attacks. The relationship between Wilson and Kerrigan is also shown. Hale wants Wilson too, and tries to put Kerrigan out of the running in a dirty way. Through this Wilson sees his true nature, and Kerrigan wins her over. Oliver plays Kit Carson and Marshall plays Jim Bridges, two historical characters. McCoy scarcely appears in it, he was primarily present as co-ordinator for the Indians, but they wanted him to put in a brief appearance as well. Three years later he would become a star. Honours go to cameraman Karl Brown. The next Western epic was **"THE IRON HORSE"** by John Ford. ***½ "

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Pioneer settlers travel West by wagon train. A classic Western which now seems painfully undernourished in terms of plot and character but still retains moments of epic sweep. * "

"There wasn't a false whisker in the film"
- James Cruze

"Forthright, impressive and vigorous, it brought a breath of fresh air into the jazz-ridden film world." - Lewis Jacobs

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"This land-rush tale is probably the most celebrated of early Westerns and you'll thrill, as the trailers used to say, to the scenes of the wagons moving across the plains. Their leader (J. Warren Kerrigan) and a dastardly rival (Ernest Torrence) fight for the heroine (Lois Wilson) in the central, conventional plot. * "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"**"THE COVERED WAGON"** was months in the making with its cost said to have been in the neighbourhood of \$800,000. It is the biggest thing since Griffith made **"THE BIRTH OF A NATION"**. Like **"BIRTH.."** it is based on historic fact. Emerson Hough, who wrote **"THE COVERED WAGON"** for the Saturday Evening Post, chose for his subject those pioneers who left their farms and safe-guarded homes in the territory east of the Ohio and started in prairie schooners for the Pacific Coast in 1847, before the discovery that the

California hills contained the glittering metal that was to be a tremendous lure in 1849.

This particular wagon train, which has some 300 vehicles, starts for Oregon. Through it all a very pretty and simple love tale runs, as well as an element of intrigue, which together with the thrills that have been devised makes this production a real picture of pictures. The big thrills are three. First and foremost is the fording of the Platte by the wagons of the train. Then there is the Indian attack with a corking battle staged and finally a prairie fire."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Touted as "the biggest thing the screen has had since **"THE BIRTH OF A NATION"**", this epic pioneer saga broke audience attendance records all over the world and remained in circulation for many years. Love, adventure, humour, danger, and despair overlap each other in this somewhat dated but still exciting blockbuster. A landmark Western. Silent. ***½ "

The Cinema note:

"**"THE COVERED WAGON"** (USA 1923), directed by James Cruze for Famous-Players-Lasky. A Western shot entirely on location, it was the first outdoor epic of the American cinema."

A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen note:

"1923: **"THE COVERED WAGON"** was the first of the large-scale epic films. A great success, it was directed by James Cruze, former actor with the old Thanhouser company."

Classics of the Silent Screen review:

"Perhaps the value of **"THE COVERED WAGON"** as a film tends to be exaggerated a little today, but its importance as one of the major milestones in the history of the "western" movie can never be emphasised too much. The first real epic western, and the first American epic not directed by Griffith, it gave an enormous boost to the popularity of the western, which had begun to show signs of falling into a slump. In 1923, the year **"THE COVERED WAGON"** was made, only 50 westerns were produced. Yet its success was so



Hero J. Warren Kerrigan and heroine Lois Wilson making a doll for the unidentified pioneer girl, a strangely domestic scene in the midst of all that epic prairie grandeur.
Source: *Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book*

staggering that the following year the number had risen to 125 – and continued to rise during succeeding years.

Today, **"THE COVERED WAGON"**, which was directed by James Cruze, seems a trifle slow and ordinary, due no doubt to years of repetition and improvement, but in the early 20's, its effect was startling. Its deliberate pacing and almost semi-documentary style created an impression of true authenticity, even though Cruze himself knew little of the West, and the film was in fact attacked by William S Hart as being full of boners of fact and behaviour. But that didn't worry audiences or critics of the time, who were more impressed with what the film showed than with what it said. Its wondrous photography was the work of Karl Brown, a former Griffith cameraman, and later a director himself. Vast panoramas of the huge wagon train winding across the plains, the indian attack, the prairie fire, the buffalo hunt, and the fording of the flooded river – all of these convinced audiences that the first twenty years of westerns had merely nibbled

away at the surface of the possibilities of the outdoor film, when handled with care and craftsmanship.

"THE COVERED WAGON" started out as a fairly unimportant film and grew in stature as it was made, which probably accounts for the very slight and ordinary story-line, little more than a simple triangle between hero (J Warren Kerrigan), heroine (Lois Wilson) and villain (Alan Hale). Stealing the film quite effortlessly from these stars were those grand old character actors Ernest Torrence and Tully Marshall, cast as a couple of perennially drunken old frontier scouts.

Despite its size, **"THE COVERED WAGON"** does disappoint in terms of action. Action was just a means to an end for Cruze, and never exploited it, or built it, via careful editing the way Griffith or John Ford did. He used that old western standby, the heroine's runaway horse, only as a device to further the enmity between hero and heroine, and disposed of it in a single long shot and a matter of seconds.

Even the big indian attack, though presented on a massive canvas, was sharp and concise. Once Cruze had finished with a shot of a hundred charging indians, he was through with them and would move to something else. His attack finished at about the point where Griffith (in "**AMERICA**") or Ford (in "**THE IRON HORSE**") were just hitting their stride. However, possibly this deliberate underplaying of the sensational and the concentration on the drudgery and sheer hard work of pioneer life, was what made "**THE COVERED WAGON**" such a valuable document and such an enduring classic among western movies."

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Johnny Fox:

"An unattractive freckled youth with decidedly crude manners," wrote an ungenerous reviewer in 1926. "His performance makes up in energy what it lacks in charm." A later judge, while allowing that the red-haired Fox was no oil

painting, remarked on his "alert features and look of candour". John Fox Jr, a less subtle successor to Wesley Barry, had apparently been a timid little boy, who learned confidence from acting. He made a forceful impression in "**ONE GLORIOUS DAY**" (1922) as an aggressive spirit called Ek, who enters with entertaining results into the body of a mild professor (Will Rogers); and was notable in 1923 as a banjo-strumming kid in "**THE COVERED WAGON**". His best juvenile part, though, was as the Western Union messenger hero of "**THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE**" ..."

[no listing in "Hollywood in the Twenties", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. The children pictured may only be background characters in the film, but perhaps it can be seen as the seminal "pioneer family" Western – injecting different dramatic elements into a genre best known for its testosterone content. Johnny Fox was about 14, Holmstrom estimates. His other silent films included "**WHY AMERICA WILL WIN**" (18 – because they entered the war years after everybody else perhaps?), "**PECK'S BAD BOY**" (21), "**WHEN A MAN'S A MAN**" (24) and "**LADDIE**" (26). He later became a screenwriter, penning several films in the archive, among them "**THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME**".

See subject index under **SILENT CINEMA** and **WESTERNS** – many of which were in effect "road films" with chuckwagons and sagebrush in place of automobiles and diners – such as Disney's "**WESTWARD HO THE WAGONS!**" (56) or the Kurt Russell TV series "**Travels of Jamie McPheeters**" (63-64), not to mention television's famous "**Wagon Train**" (57-63).