The horses in “Jesse James” were wearing movie blinkers with eyes painted on them. Unable to see, the horses had no idea they were running off a 75-foot cliff over white water until it was too late.

In late September 1938, Darryl Zanuck wrote to director Henry King that he regretted the decision to film the movie on location in Missouri. He stated that he felt the movie could easily have been filmed at Fox studio on their own "western street". He ordered King to return with the first unit as soon as possible and leave behind the second unit to finish up with the necessary location shots.

Animals, harmed

American Humane Association

Director, Henry King, had a late career F. Scott Fitzgerald obsession
Carousel
An avid pilot, King scouted for shooting locations from the air
King, one of Fox’s best contract directors, specialized in films that idealized America

Henry King directed his first film in 1915 and was one of the founding members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. When George reached him in '76, King too had long since folded his director's chair, but was happy to hear from a fan. "I am delighted to send you a photograph," King wrote to George, "however, the only one I have is one that was made on a fishing trip to Baja California a couple of years ago." … "It might interest you to know," he went on, "that the photographer was Bing Crosby." Six years after sending the letter, King passed away.

A horse died on the set of **Jesse James** when it was ridden off a cliff into a river -- a stunt that remains in the film. (Even though the movie shows two horses and riders falling off the cliff, one after the other, the "second" is actually just a closer camera angle of the first.) The death of the horse led to such outrage and protests by the American Humane Association that the organization opened a Hollywood office and in 1940 began officially monitoring the treatment of animals in films. For years it was aligned with the Hays Office, which established a code of animal welfare standards for the industry.

In particular, the use of trip wires (to tangle horses and show them dropping as if shot by guns or arrows) was protested. However, while there were films where more than a dozen horses were killed by this technique (the filming of the 1939 Erroll Flynn film *The Charge of the Light Brigade* saw more than *two* dozen horses killed by trip wires),

Perspective was used to make a 70-foot drop seem higher, and then a stunt man jumped off of cliff along with a horse that\ was forced off using a slide mechanism. A different angle of the first shot was then replayed right after to make it appear as if

the other James brother also jumped off with *his* horse. Then we cut to the brothers and their horses in the river getting away.

the first true western to be shot in three-color Technicolor.

How everyone is complicit in the deaths
contraption

they are trying to show that the west is unpredictable and deadly

tilt chute

Tyrone Power

Horse

Director

In reviews no one even mentions the horse stunts

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Further research/notes/ephemera:

Twentieth Century Fox contract director Henry King never planned to fling a horse off a cliff, but that's what he ended up doing. When storyboarding the main equine stunt sequence for *Jesse James* (1939) with screenwriter Nunnally Johnson, he sketched the animal in mid-leap, rampant, ears front as it flew, like one of those Atlantic City horses. King envisioned Jesse James (Tyrone Power) remaining mounted for the duration of the descent, like a diving girl—a real hero shot.

Instead, in the third act of Henry King's final cut of *Jesse James* (1939), we see Frank James strapping his already wounded brother to his horse's saddle, murmuring "Hold tight, Jesse, 'cause there's only one way out of here." He smacks the horse's rump, then we see Jesse (here, stuntman Cliff Lyons) flopping around in the saddle as the horse leaps nimbly over a log in a wooded area, the sound of hoofbeats loud and wild. Abrupt cut to an extreme long shot of a gray limestone bluff topped with hardscrabble shrubs, the rest of the screen dominated by blue Technicolor sky. Right away Jesse's horse slides off the cliff back first, his buckskin body bunched into fetal position, legs clenched against his belly, black-tipped ears pinned in fear. Cliff Lyons-as-Jesse also falls after launching himself expertly from his trick saddle. Their descent is silent save the inexplicable sound of rushing water. The camera cuts away just after we see Jesse James's horse land on its spine with a colossal splash in the manmade Lake of the Ozarks, killed on location in Miller County, Missouri.

Henry King uses the footage twice, immediately replaying the stunt from a different angle. We see the same cowboy, horse, fall, and splash, but this time Cliff Lyons is meant to be Frank James (Henry Fonda), following his little brother over the precipice to escape the posse. In a darkened 1930s movie palace, unable to rewind, one can suspend disbelief about this switcheroo, especially when the camera cuts to two horses paddling across the screen, Jesse's mount trawling a wide V in the murky blue water as Frank clings to his horse's tail, letting it drag him toward shore. "Jesse? Jesse?" pleas Henry Fonda, surfacing. The posse comes running on foot to the edge of the ridge to fire down at the churning lake, but give up on Frank as he reaches the pebbled bank with both horses, swinging up onto one to make a clean getaway. Determined to find Jesse, the posse creeps under a rocky overhang. The audience is shown a mud-smeared Tyrone Power, woozy but alive, treading water under the skeletal cover of real Missouri branches.

This cliff dive is only real equestrian spectacle in *Jesse James* (1939), which is odd for a classical Hollywood horse opera, and stranger still for the first western shot in three-color Technicolor.

Though easily the most challenging and dangerous shot in the movie, the stunt was not impressive enough to merit mention in any period reviews. Instead they praise the "rip-roaring melodrama, thrills, and human interest," "radiant" color, and "unusual" filming locations, which presumably include the stark gray limestone ridge where Henry King became the first and last Hollywood director to fling a horse off a cliff.

Blinkers with fake eyes on

The audience (but not Frank) is shown a muddied yet alive Tyrone Power, treading water amid indigenous Missouri vegetation. Two horses leap up onto the pebbled lakeshore, shaking out damp manes. Both are darker than the one that fell in.

The Tremendous Dramatic Thrills Of the Midwest's Lawless Era will burst from our screen...

After Frank James (Henry Fonda) thwacks his rump with a switch, Jesse James's horse falls

These tend to focus on either Tyrone Power's camera presence or the historical inaccuracy of the plot, which recasts James as an antiestablishment

frontier hero out for revenge against the corrupt St. Louis Midland Railroad, which swindled the honest people of Liberty, Missouri out of their farms and homes.

All of this is to say that *Jesse James* (1939) is not a historically accurate account of the title character's life, nor is it a well-made western. It was a workaday two million dollar picture,

Henry King's staid, claustrophobic mise-en-scene betrays his silent film past. His signature shot is a medium-long composition capturing three or more characters triangulated in a visibly flimsy three-walled room. Minimal camera movement is used, as if recording a play. More than a dozen intertitles appear, dramatic impact, presenting letters, newspapers, and wanted posters as still frames for the audience's inspection, camera lingering on the text just a few seconds beyond what's necessary.

The soundtrack is rousing and Biblical. Jesse is, we are told again and again, a Robin Hood-esque frontier hero, an American of principle, determined to protect his hometown of Liberty, Missouri from the encroaching interests of the big city St. Louis Midland Railroad. A rendition of "Jesus Loves Me" swells as fate finally catches up to Jesse, and he's shot in the back while removing his wife's embroidered "Bless This Home" sampler from his living room wall.

the poor horse cannonballing twice through open blue sky, so wrong-looking, even to untrained matinee eyes.

This makes Jesse James (1939) one of the most claustropho era's most claustrophobic westerns.

A claustrophobic film, most of the "action" takes place inside parlors and jails, where director Henry King's staid *mise-en-scene* betrays his silent film past. King's signature is a medium-long shot, with three or more characters triangulated in visibly flimsy three-walled rooms, filmed with minimal camera movement, as if he is recording a play.

The film is also curiously devoid of the “actual locales of breathtaking beauty” promised in its hyperbolic trailer.

Two horses swim toward the shore, Frank clinging to the nearest one’s tail, shouting “Jesse!” because he can’t see his brother, who was injured before he tried this stunt, which we can’t call deathdefying, because the horse didn’t make it.

We see Jesse treading water,

Jesse James (1939), the first true three-color Technicolor western and Twentieth Century Fox’s top hit of that year, is not a well-made movie, nor is it an accurate representation of the James Gang’s larcenous rampage through late 19th century Missouri, despite being shot on location in rural Pineville and at the Lake of the Ozarks.

Jesse James (1939) only features two thrilling horseback set pieces, which is odd for a classical Hollywood western. Combined, these techniques succeed in making Jesse James (1939) one of the most claustrophobic westerns of all time.

Despite King’s insistence that the film be shot on location as close as possible to the real James Gang’s stomping grounds, *Jesse James* (1939) is otherwise historically inaccurate. The fourth feature film made in America about Jesse James, it was the first to recast the notorious frontier robber as a folk hero. Played by Tyrone Power, Jesse is transformed from lawless Confederate sympathizer into

. “Ask the railroad to pay you back for what we steal from you,” a bandanna-masked Jesse tells a train car of well-dressed passengers taking the railroad’s maiden journey. “It’s their fault.”

A well-meaning fellow transformed into a “wild animal” by his crimes, audiences are meant to root for Jesse throughout the film, and gasp along with Tyrone Power as he’s shot in the back while admiring the “God Bless This Home” embroidery sampler his wife made earlier in the film. King’s camera adores him, consistently placing the key light on Power, not Nancy Kelly’s Zerelda James.

Despite outdated cinematography and a melodramatic plot, *Jesse James* (1939) was Twentieth Century Fox’s number one hit at the box office that year, but that is not how it made film history.

Despite the outdated cinematography and melodramatic plot, Jesse James (1939) is

None of the horses featured in *Jesse James* (1939), the first true three-color Technicolor western and Twentieth Century Fox's top hit of the year, are at all happy to appear in this movie. All of them—whether being made to gallop pell-mell in pursuit of the James Gang, or parked outside a pretend saloon—each and every horse in this movie keeps its ears pinned flat back against its skull in the universal sign of equine rage.

Jesse James (1939) is an unremarkable movie in terms of cinematography and plot,

The plot

Then transition back into the reason for the story

There are several reasons for his zeal. First, King was determined to find an original 19th century courthouse for the exteriors. Second, the third act of *Jesse James* (1939) features the most notorious equine stunt ever caught on film, a few scant seconds of celluloid that made cinematic history, saving the lives of countless screen animals to come. Exactly zero period reviews of the movie mention it, even though it is the only reason Jesse James (1939) is remembered, if at all, today.

In other words, this shouldn't have been the film that

Though shot on location in southwestern Missouri at the insistence of director Henry King, the film is also curiously devoid of the "actual locales of breathtaking beauty" promised in its hyperbolic trailer. Much of the action takes place inside parlors and jails, and King's mise-en-scene (a holdover from his silent film beginnings) favors medium-long shots of characters standing in visibly flimsy three-walled rooms. He uses minimal camera movement, like a filmed play. He also relies on intertitles, which were more common in the silent era—his camera cuts to an inert shot of handwritten or typeset text each and every time a character receives a letter, or hangs a new wanted poster, or reads about the James Gang in the newspaper. King has the annoying habit of lingering just a few seconds too long on each of the dozen total such shots that appear in the final cut of Jesse James (1939), which is an odd directorial choice for a "talkie."

Despite being shot on location in southwestern Missouri, Jesse James (1939) is also devoid of the “actual locales of breathtaking beauty” promised by the film’s hyperbolic trailer.

A vehicle for up-and-coming leading man Tyrone Power, who smolders in the title role, the film

Horses and mules appear throughout, but mostly as set dressing or transportation, not as spectacle. *Jesse James* (1939) is also devoid of the natural desert beauty the average viewer associates with the American west, thanks to the influence of more critically acclaimed pictures, such as The Searchers and Stagecoach, both directed by John Ford, a man who had an eye for a good desert horizon. This is partly because Jesse James (1939) was shot on location in southwestern Missouri at the insistence of Fox contract director Henry King.

Studio chief Darryl Zanuck was at first against King’s proposal to make a picture about known Confederate sympathizer Jesse James, believing that the film would only have box office appeal in the southern states, where the infamous outlaw was viewed as a folk hero. King’s script,

There are several good reasons for the comparative dullness of the landscape in *Jesse James* (1939), the absence of the “actual locales of breathtaking beauty“ promised by the film’s trailer. First, being a Henry King picture, *Jesse James* (1939) shows the clear influence of King’s silent film past.

Studio chief Darryl Zanuck was at first against doing **Jesse James**, believing it would only have box office appeal in the south. But director Henry King talked him into it, and Zanuck poured $2 million into the budget, a sizable sum that included expenses for shooting on location in southwestern Missouri.

When King learned that the courthouse in Liberty, Missouri -- the real home of the James brothers -- had been torn down, he flew over the Ozarks looking for a village where an old courthouse was still standing. He found a perfect one in Pineville. To make Pineville look like the proper period, King had false fronts built over the town's modern stores, covered its concrete streets with dirt, and hired dozens of its citizens as extras. The director later recalled, "The red brick courthouse in the middle of the town square, with a beautiful green lawn around it, was the most beautiful old red brick I've ever seen in my life. It had been there since the Civil War, this county courthouse, and it was just exactly what we wanted.”