

When Movies Were Magic

Lash LaRue's Volunteer Held on to Courage by a Nose

BY THE TIME I turned 10, in 1958, I probably had seen every movie made by Western cowboy star Lash LaRue.

My family had always traveled to Des Moines for the Iowa State Fair, and that year, Lash LaRue was performing in one of the sideshows on the midway. I wasn't about to miss this golden opportunity to see "The King of the Bullwhip.

Sitting in the audience, I was in complete awe. I was in the presence of a major movie star—well, in my book anyway—and when he asked for a volunteer from the audience, my hand shot up.

He chose me, and I practically floated up to the stage. After asking my name, he put an unlit cigarette in my mouth and backed off about 20 paces.

"Gary, are you sure you want to do this?" Mr. LaRue asked. Trembling, I nodded in the affirmative. "Have you said good-bye to your parents?" he continued, getting laughter from the crowd.

Lash LaRue let loose with his bullwhip. Crack! He took about an inch off the cigarette. I stood there knowing that the applauding crowd was amazed by my courage. I had hardly flinched.

"Gary, want me to take off another half inch?" he continued. I had barely given a nervous nod of my head when, crack! Another half inch fell to the sawdust floor.

"How about it, Gary? Think I can do another inch?" he asked. I stared down my nose cross-eyed, and before I could nod "yea" or "nay," there came another crack! He had dropped another inch off.

The applause was deafening...from all 20 people.

Now a little more anxious, I was beginning to lose faith in my hero's accuracy with a potentially lethal weapon. I was quite certain that my nose was casting a shadow over the remaining stub of the cigarette.

“Gary, want to go for one more?”

I couldn't stand it. My desire to show intestinal fortitude before my adoring fans, and especially in front of Lash LaRue, was surpassed by my need for self-preservation. I weakly shook my head no and spit out the cigarette with an anguished sigh.

The crowd applauded, and Lash LaRue shook my hand and gave me an autographed picture of him with his whip and horse. I walked out standing tall, still in possession of my nose.

This single episode of fear, standing with barely a half inch of cigarette stuck in my lips, is what led me to my decision to never take up smoking. Much too dangerous!

By Gary Fisher, Hixson, Tennessee

Giant Scare

AROUND 1955, I joined my brother Gene and his wife for a movie. There were several movies being shown at the time that involved giant crawlies, and in this film, one large tarantula caused a lot of terror.

In those days, it was typical to have a beautiful blond being terrorized. In this movie, she was standing in her slip when the tarantula's feeler came through the bedroom window.

Just at that very moment, Gene grabbed me by the shoulder, and I screamed loud enough to awaken the dead. Everyone in the theater turned around to look at me, and my brother started laughing so hard that he had to go out to the lobby.

—Glenda Day

Main Street Movies

IN SUMMERS during the 1940s, the magic of movies came to my rural Indiana hometown of Fairland on Monday nights in the form of a traveling movie man.

After selling advertising to the local merchants, he'd set up a 16mm projector and hang a sheet from an electric wire over the street in front of my grandfather's grocery store.

People brought popcorn and spread blankets in the middle of the street or parked rows of automobiles in an early version of a drive-in theater.

During reel changes, the movie man played band music and showed slides with the merchants' advertising messages. My grandfather's store was the gathering place for folks to visit and drink Nehi orange pop during intermissions.

—Gordon Kelley, Fort Myers, Florida