

Saluting Big Jake

By Andrew Patrick Nelson, PhD

As 2019 draws to a close, it's worth noting one last time that this year marked the 50th anniversary of one of the greatest years in Western movie history. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Support Your Local Sheriff!*, and *Paint Your Wagon* are just four of the remarkable range of Western releases from 1969. Anyone reading this newsletter, though, is likely to hold one '69 Western above the rest: *True Grit*, the movie that won John Wayne his well deserved Oscar.

Amidst the past year's celebration of *True Grit*, it's been easy to forget that the movie wasn't the end of the trail for the Duke. Wayne made eleven more films between 1969 and 1976. Right up to his death in 1979, he remained one of Hollywood's most popular stars, and his Westerns consistently out-earned those of filmmakers like Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman, and even Clint Eastwood.

I wrote a book about Westerns of the 1970s, so I'm often asked what my favorite film from the period is. My answer is always *Big Jake*. Filmed in Durango, Mexico between October and December of 1970 and released in May 1971, the movie stars Wayne as Jacob "Big Jake" McCandles, a Texas rancher who is summoned back from the wilderness by his estranged wife (Maureen O'Hara) to rescue his kidnapped grandson "Little" Jake. Jacob sets out with two of his estranged sons and an Indian scout to deliver a \$1,000,000 ransom to the kidnappers, tracking them to Mexico. The script was written by Julian and R.M. Fink, creators of *Dirty Harry*, and directed by George Sherman (although we now know that Wayne, himself, directed most of the film).

Big Jake was a modest success in 1971, earning \$7.5 million in rentals at the box office and turning a healthy profit. Today, the film is considered a minor, neglected classic. Wayne biographer Gary Wills considers *Big Jake* to be the best of Wayne's post-*True Grit* pictures, while Paul Simpson, in *The Rough Guide to Westerns*, enthusiastically writes, "It's hard to believe a Western this good can be so neglected." Science fiction fans will also recognize *Big Jake* as the inspiration for elements of John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*.



Moviemaking was often a family affair for Wayne, and *Big Jake* was no exception. Michael, his eldest son, produced the movie. Second son Patrick co-starred, and youngest son Ethan got in on the act for the first time, playing Jacob's grandson "Little" Jake. Family is also central to the movie's story, but, unlike earlier Wayne-O'Hara pairings *Rio Grande* and *McClintock!*, the focus isn't the reconciliation of man and wife, but the growing bond between father and sons. Rather than using the Western to comment on contemporary politics or "deconstruct" the legend of the frontier hero—both common at the time—*Big Jake* makes the case that the hero's values are still needed, but if those values are to survive they must be passed on to the next generation.

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Big Jake...A legend of a man.
A man who fought his way through hell
to save a grandson he had never seen!



John Wayne • Richard Boone

"Big Jake"

A CINEMA CENTER FILMS PRESENTATION
Starring Patrick Wayne • Christopher Mitchum
Bobby Vinton • Bruce Cabot • Glenn Corbett • John Doucette

Maureen O'Hara

Story by HARRY JELMAN. Screenplay by RICHARD WIPPLE. Directed by GEORGE SHERMAN. GULLY-OTT BROTHERS
TECHNICOLOR/PANASCOPY. A PUBLIC PRODUCTION. A NATIONAL GENERAL PICTURES RELEASE

