

A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

AN AMERICAN TALE



TOM VANDYKE

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Praise for *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*

“It’s good and it moves! Tom Van Dyke tells a rousing tale of a young man learning how to cowboy and finding the girl of his dreams. I’ve written a good 40 western stories and learned a lot from Tom’s book.”

—ELMORE LEONARD
Novelist

“INSPIRING. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* reveals the true American West but goes even further. A man and woman who refuse to let a soaring relationship disappear is a sign of life on earth at its best.”

—MICHAEL BLAKE
Author of *Dances With Wolves*

“A GREAT RIDE!”

—BOB BOZE BELL
True West Magazine

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a heartfelt tale of a cowboy's roam. A magical story and delightful read for all seasons.”

—THOMAS COBB
Author of *Crazy Heart*

“I’m a narrative painter, so as I read this book, the words drew pictures in my mind. These images are vivid and the story feels real. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*, is a welcome addition to my library.”

—HOWARD TERPNING
Western Artist

“The stuff of novels – A masterpiece. A compelling unforgettable journey. Insightful. Uplifting. Heartfelt. A creative narrative with joyful language captivating my imagination.”

–RUSS GIBB
Concert Promoter/Educator

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a warm, well-written tale of a young man discovering himself and the new world during an engaging adventure in the American West. The book took me back in time and sparked memories of when I was working on Western films with my friend John Wayne.”

–DON COLLIER
Western Film and TV Actor

“*A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* is a beautiful story for all ages. Not since the work of James Dickey have I read such poetry in a novel. A wonderful remembrance for what the Old West once was. Don’t wait for the film—buy the book now.”

–KEN ROTCOP
Studio Creative Head of: Embassy
Pictures, Hanna-Barbera Productions

“Tom Van Dyke has crafted an inspired story of the Old West, Arizona and New Mexico Territories—1876. A well-researched tale of an adventuresome young man carving out a life that most men can only dream about. Hold on tight. It’s a fast ride. This magical tale fits like a vintage Stetson and good pair of boots.”

–MARSHALL TRIMBLE
Official Arizona State Historian

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A Novel

TOM VAN DYKE

PAGE BRANCH PUBLISHING
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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Tom Van Dyke

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A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale

is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters and events are products of the author's imagination. All characters, events, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead are coincidental.

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For
Mary, who has inspired and shared every trail
of a creative life

And
Adam, Mark, Grant, Jocelyn, and Walker
Who made it a joy

P R E F A C E

I have a long trail of praise for the American cowboy. Leafing through tattered pages of handwritten journals and dust-covered books; and wandering museums admiring masterworks of western artists, I looked beyond their golden frames as windows into America's past, and imagined what the restless spirit of the West was like one hundred fifty years ago for cowboys and the sunbonnets on the American frontier—a land once thought to be as far away as the moon.

Inspired, I felt challenged to create a magical tale that crisscrosses the expansion of the far West and collides with destiny—a tale that paints a vivid portrait of a bygone era. A story about cowboys and angels who dared to burn themselves like candles for experiences worth living and values that created strength and revealed character—a story as enduring as the romance of the West.

Embracing a cowboy's flavorful soup of words and expressions, WB tells his story with cowboy wit and humor. Just off the boat, not yet sixteen, his tale begins in 1876, when dreams were chased with reckless abandon, when the pursuit of freedom was a driving force, when life was raw and unforgiving, yet brimming with opportunity. He crosses the Mississippi, and without fear, leaves the muddy shores of civilization behind. With empty pockets, a spark for life, and a wild sense of freedom, he follows his heart searching for adventure and fortune, and discovers the romance.

WB's roam is filled with all the good stuff: encounters and action, adventure and drama that transcend the boundaries of ordinary existence, inviting us to embrace the magic that dwells within the human spirit. . . .

Well into the magic of his tale, with his body scared and his eyes wide open, when staying alive was a daily battle he encounters the Spirit of the West; sparking a *magical* connection that defies explanation and will forever shape his destiny as he fearlessly ventures into a frontier of untamed majesty, bigger and more beautiful than any dream.

A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale is a tale that reminds us that even in the face of adversity, the human spirit can soar to great heights, overcoming the greatest of challenges in a world where nature's beauty intertwines with the souls of those who dare to chase their dreams and find their place in the grand tapestry of the American West.

“Columbus discovered America in 1492

Horses arrived in 1519

Cattle arrived in 1521

Then there were C o w b o y s”

— tom van dyke

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BLOWING IN THE WIND

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BLOWING IN THE WIND, I wasn't much more than a hayseed, fifteen years old, when I stowed away in steerage on a wooden ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean from the old country. Embracing the spirit of the unknown, I embarked on a mystical journey. I was on the trail of adventure, discovery, and fortune in the new world. It was the year I gave up my gold and silver—1876.

The smokestack of the iron horse coughed sparks and bellowed black smoke, while the engineer wolfed the whistle. The rail yard was bustling with action and thrashing with excitement. Yardmen were downloading fat cattle and spent U.S. Calvary horses into the holding pens for transfer. I climbed up the wooden rails of a horse pen to get a better view. A grisly yardman approached me. “You lookin’ to bounce around on one of these fresh loads?”

“Yes, sir I am. I’m lookin’ to ripen in the far West.”

“Well, pick out a peach—all champions, just railed back from the Indian Wars on the Western frontier.”

I looked over the champions with awe, dreaming of adventure. “Geronimo, Crazy Horse, General George Armstrong Custer.”

“Ouch! That one didn’t end well.”

“Not for Custer. Can I get a closer look?”

“You got coin? —gold, silver? I don’t take paper.”

“Yes sir.”

“Ok then.”

There was a lone paint horse off on the opposite side of the pen. As I jumped down into the pen the paint raised his head and perked his ears watching me land. I slowly approached the horses; they eased away as a group. I looked closely at their tired eyes and round teeth.

Without me realizing the paint had quietly nosed up behind me. I placed my hand on the back of one of the horses. The horse shuttered with a vacant eye. The spooky paint moved his head in over my shoulder just short of touching my hand and snorted full out. Startled, I took a quick step back. The paint winked. I couldn't help but smile, “Hello, friend.”

Walking back over to the yardman, he was looking over a manifest on a clipboard. I asked, “What will you take for the paint?”

“The Indian hoss—ain’t on the manifest. Musta' got mixed up with the cavalries, somehow

somewhere in Montana.” The yardman glanced over my shoulder at the paint behind me, now limping about in pain favoring his front leg. “Excellent choice!” When I turned to admire the paint, his eyes were fixed on me in a gallant stance. The yardman immediately realized something is better than nothing for a lame horse and answered, “Make me an offer.”

“A gold sovereign.”

“Let’s see it . . . OK”

“And a saddle—with tack.”

“I got a nice high-horn Mexican saddle I’ll throw in.”

I pulled a gold coin from my inside vest pocket, revealing my father’s silver pocket watch and chain. “You’re not gonna need a pocket watch where you’re goin’ peaches.” The yardman glanced around to see if anyone was within earshot. “I’ll trade you a modified 1873 Springfield rifle for it—and, you didn’t get it from me.”

“And a box of cartridges.”

“Deal!”

I was saddled up, about to ride out when the paint stumbled awkwardly taking a few lame steps. “Oh no! —I just bought a lame horse!” The smug yardman smiled feeling he got one over on me. “Say hello to Geronimo for—” and before he could finish his snappy retort, the spooky paint leaped forward almost leaving me behind.

Out-foxed, left in the dust, the grizzly yardman was furious he had been bamboozled by a horse.

Chasing the rainbow, I started my roam. I crossed

the Mississippi and left the muddy bank of civilization as I knew it. Rumors of free land with vast riches, and the discovery of California gold no deeper than a carrot, had set off a stampede of white-hooded wagons migrating in pandemonium for the land of the setting sun.

The further I plowed from civilization the more of it I found. Remnants left behind by those who dared to venture into the untamed wilderness. Furniture and belongings, once filled with hope and good intention too heavy for mule or ox to haul another day, now lay scattered and picked over along the trails, silent witnesses to the trials and tribulations of those who came before me.

And then with certain predictability, miles up ahead, I'd find graves marked with headboards, and the bleached bones of an ox or horse that travelers were forced to slaughter for lack of food and planning. This was common sight.

Trail-weary mules would haul to a stand-off, refusing to budge. Negotiations—a battle of wills began with a crack of the whip, followed by a barrage of verbal encouragements, blistering the ears of the mules—not fit for the lessons of Sunday school.

Having rested for two hours and satisfied their terms had been addressed, the victors, with another crack of a whip, would launch a momentary charge up the trail. The dust would flood over the top of the wagon wheels and through the spaces between the loops of the canvas ties into the wagon. This combined folly of tongue, temper, whip, and grunt created a sight that made the covered wagons appear to float like ships sailing forth on billowing

clouds, navigating waves of earth and sky.

The scorching sun bore down upon us relentlessly, while the relentless dust, like a sharp-edged blade, etched its presence on our faces, causing noses to bleed and skin to burn. Every man, woman, and child wore a layer of dust—inside and out, their bodies and souls transformed by the unforgiving journey.

Not everyone's wagon made it across the vast prairie. In the quiet solitude of the open prairie the landscape began to change as I rode my Indian horse along a well-worn wagon trail showing signs of distress, cluttered with discarded baggage and freshly dug gravesites.

I heard a woman's raving voice as the tall canvas of a wagon came into view. "I'm not here for the ROMANCE!" Her voice got louder and more heated as the wagon moved along slower and slower. "This is your dream. You told me to pack up, we're going West, and you sold the farm. You listened to your half-wit brother and caught his rainbow dreams of California gold. Now it's too HARD? —Too HARD for YOU! You owe me! You owe it to our two children we buried along the way! This is your nightmare and you're bound to it."

By the time I caught up to their wagon, it had come to a complete stop and a desperate man was at the back end of the wagon staring despairingly at a large beautiful wooden piece of furniture. His wife was pacing around off to the side in an agitated state.

I dismounted, "Morning, sir. Can I give you a hand with that? . . ."

". . . Our last drop—too heavy to haul one more day." I struggled with the man to lower and move the heavy rosewood sideboard down and off to the side of the trail.

His seething wife kept pacing without looking over. With a vacant stare, the man sighed "Wagon's empty. All we have left . . . is moving forward."

Sensing their turmoil, I walked over to my Indian pony. "Good luck to you both — Ma'am."

As I saddled up, I observed her graceful presence as if she was my mother, make her way over to the sideboard. She delicately traced her fingers over the dusty time-worn surface of the family heirloom revealing the fine craftsmanship and polished finish. In that fleeting moment, she smiled, the veil of time was lifted, transporting her to a world long-gone where memories danced—then with a deep breath as if she had suddenly remembered a forgotten chore, she turned quickly and returned to the wagon.

I watched in awe as she stretched her boot to climb the wooden spokes. Pulling herself up hand-over-hand, she pushed off the hub to the top of the wheel and crossed over to take her place on the wooden seat of the wagon. Gripping the reins, her hands were cracked and calloused. Her beauty once bright and obvious was fading with hardship and toil. Her lips blistered and her fair skin parched, scrubbed by the wind, sun, and alkaline water; told a story of a woman forged in the crucible of adversity.

But it was her striking eyes—the color of the ocean that held the true essence of her spirit. Like the vast expanse of the ocean, their color mirrored the depths of her soul. They glistened with an unwavering determination, a resolute resolve that echoed the indomitable spirit of the women who embarked on this treacherous frontier. In her steely gaze, I witnessed the unyielding strength and unwavering courage that would shape the destiny of this hostile land. Amidst the bravado of the six-guns and the strength of the sombreros, it was the sunbonnets—angels with their quiet resilience and fierce determination, who would leave an indelible mark upon this untamed wilderness.

In the realm where dust and dreams intertwined, I pressed onward, guided by an unwavering spirit. In the vast expanse of the Great Plains, where solitude stretched endlessly and the arid winds whispered tales of longing, I ventured forth towards the mighty Rocky Mountains.

The trail was cluttered with a motley crew of believers, sorry settlers, Yankee neighbors, Rebel brothers, men whose presence exuded an air of mischief and ill-intent—and me. In their midst, I found myself alone, seeking solace in the embrace of the untamed frontier. Overcome by thirst, I was losing my song and enthusiasm for the lore of the West.

Having endured the endless monotony of the Great Plains, I slowly approached the rugged foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Rising up in the foothills before me, stood a majestic woodland

forest, a cathedral of towering pine spears piercing the cerulean sky, guarding the blue horizon of paradise.

As I ascended into the foothills, a transformation awaited me, unveiling a sight that would stir the very depths of my weary heart. Within this sanctuary, mountain streams meandered through the verdant landscape, their crystalline waters teeming with vibrant trout, while thundering waterfalls cascaded down rugged rock faces.

Lost in the mesmerizing allure of this hidden paradise, I was looking for a trail of worn passage I could follow westward. The startling “whoop-n-holler,” which I first thought was the war cry of native Indians, set me off on a swift gallop. I threw a quick glance back over my shoulder.

They were three bandits in hot pursuit, looking for loot—my horse, saddle, rifle, anything in my pockets worth a cent. If the likes of me was worth their charge, they had to be desperate.

With rebel yells and caps popping, they were gaining on us. Their bullets buzzed by my ears like angry hornets. I galloped for cover of the tall pines.

The sound of their yells and the whiz-bangs of their bullets were getting closer. I crouched down low on my Indian pony’s back consumed with our flight of life and death. I could have said anything, this painted horse was still a mystery to me, with a sharp whistle—I yelped, “Geronimo!” In that moment, my faithful companion unleashed the hidden depths of his blazing speed and agility, another talent he previously concealed. Maneuvering with the swiftness of an arrow we sought

sanctuary amidst the towering pines. We were fast approaching the fortress; a dense maze of pine boughs and massive tree trunks defended it from intruders. There was no room for us to fit or enter.

The marauders kept coming and their rounds chased us splintering and shattering the bark of the pines.

The river with its roaring rapids was just ahead. If we tried to cross, we'd be sitting ducks. At the river's edge, a narrow path used by elk, deer, and the Indian for passage over the mountain twisted up and followed the bank of the river. We slipped into the fortress of shaded cover. The low hanging pine boughs whipped past us, stinging both our hides.

Our climb slowed to a fast walk, weaving about the switchbacks up the slope, drifting through patches of light streaming down through the high branches of the cathedral pines. Rushing up behind us, I could hear the blundering bandits' grumbling the worth and effort of their campaign.

A rifle cracked lead—a branch snapped down smacking me loose from the saddle. Arrow slipped, dislodging rocks and black soil that fell splashing into the river. As he stumbled to catch his footing, I desperately clung on, looking over the sheer edge of the rocky gorge at the fierce deafening rapids of the river below.

The dense trail unraveled. Up ahead was a small clearing that glowed green. Surprised, Arrow jerked with a sudden stop, wide-eyed and snorting. Two bear cubs scampered across the trail—they were not alone! The ROAR startled every living thing and shook birds from their roosts. Mother was

ANGRY! We had just entered her home—uninvited.

I was trapped!

The awesome force of Nature lay in my path and the blazing gunfire and crime of bandits squeezed us from the rear.

Rising up to her full height of seven feet, with a reach to ten, she made a massive impression with snarling teeth. She was prepared to defend her cubs.

With glaring yellow eyes, the silver-tipped hairs on her neck and humpback shoulders were up. Moaning, swinging her head, the extended claws of her paws were ready to thrash.

Nervous and snorting, Arrow pitched and danced around. I turned, hearing the voices of the bandits rustling up the trail from below. I saw the flash of a rifle. The shot echoed, booming and bouncing off the surrounding cliffs and high peaks.

Momma moaned and glanced around looking to see the whereabouts of her two cubs.

The trap was sprung—the moment was now!

The paint reared up to challenge her size and bolted straight at the grizzly. I lunged forward with all I was worth and let out the ‘rebel yell’ I had just become acquainted with.

The grizzly was struck by the surprise of our charge and momentarily faltered as we pushed past her. With snapping teeth and a whirling swat, momma flicked me up high off the saddle—a returning volley of pine boughs flung me back down—I was headed for the rocks.

Grasping for the saddle horn with my bloody throbbing arm, I dangled over the high-cut cliff of the raging river below. Righting myself, we bolted

up the trail with momma bounding on our heels.

With leaping strides, the nine-hundred-pound grizzly raced, covering ground—thirty yards, twenty, ten—closing faster than my heart beat. In five she'd be pulling us down. With Arrow's last burst of strength, in a leap of faith, we dashed up and over the high-cut bank and vaulted down into the deep waters of the river below.

The echoing roar of the grizzly standing on the high bank of the river's edge greeted us as I surfaced the water. Arrow was already swimming to the far edge. Red rivulets of blood streamed from the claw marks of my wound. The cold, clear water relieved the pain.

The grizzly swaggered along the steep bank, looking up and down for access. Rising up to her full magnificent height, she let out a shrilling ROAR! . . .

My trail-wise pony made his way up the other side of the steep-winding terrain of a pristine mountain wilderness, yet undefiled by the presence of man.

The scent of pine—Christmas, juniper and wild-flowers of every color—columbine, forget-me-not, and brittlebush filled my head.

With steady determination, his hooves found secure footholds on the rocky path. I could feel the connection between us growing stronger with each step.

In that moment, I understood that my own journey was just beginning. The hardships and challenges I had faced were mere stepping stones on the path to my destiny.

The river's beautiful but violent rhythm roared with splash and rapid crashes of thundering waterfalls echoing harmony in Nature's symphony, intermingling with the caws of eagles and the whirling winds. Crystal-clear water cascaded down moss-covered rocks, creating miniature waterfalls that sparkled like diamonds in the mist of sunlight.

As we climbed higher, the air thinned and became cooler. With each breath, I could feel the raw power and mystique of an untamed wilderness coursing through my veins.

A fragrant breeze whispered through the towering pines, carrying with it a sense of ancient wisdom. I felt the spirits of the land and sky speaking to me, their voices carried on the wind. It was a land where the boundaries of imagination and reality blurred.

Above the high shadows of late afternoon, the tips of the tall pines shimmered in the warm rays of the sun. I slowly approached the crest of the mountain at twilight. I sat there spellbound—gazing at the luminous light glazing the distant western landscape as if it were the *dawn of creation* itself.

In that magical moment, I realized that the West was not just a destination on a map. It was a realm of dreams and possibilities, where the wild and the mystical intertwined. It was a land where one could find redemption and forge a new path, guided by the spirits of the land and the courage within oneself. In the embrace of this pristine wilderness, I felt a sense of belonging and purpose.

The wild and free vision before me rekindled my enthusiasm and spirit. Raw, heavy vapors rose

in harmony from the fertile valley floor up into the glowing atmosphere of boiling red clouds. The beauty of it all was overwhelming, filling my heart with a sense of awe and gratitude.

I watched the shimmering afterglow mesmerized as the theater of light slowly faded into a starlight encore that twinkled and glowed with brilliant constellations and blazing shooting stars.

As the night deepened, the stars above became brighter, creating a celestial tapestry that seemed to dance with the unseen forces of the universe.

I could almost hear the echo of ancient chants and stories, carried by the night breeze. The Native Americans believed that every star held a story, a connection to the past and a guide for the future. I wondered what tales those stars held for me, what destiny awaited me in this vast and untamed land.

A THIN LINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I awoke to a new day rising. Glorious! . . . A new day in a new world . . . The air was crisp and alive with fragrance—a potpourri of pine and wild flowers blooming with wonderment and tranquility in this mountain paradise.

In the distance, perched high on the western slope, stood a frontiersman's dugout shelter, nestled amidst the towering pines. Its weathered logs, hewn with rough hands by a mountain man who must have had a hide as thick as bark; with rugged determination, stood as a testament to the resilience of those who had sought refuge in the wild. Withstanding the relentless onslaught of howling winds and heavy snows that blanketed the mountain top in winter; this humble abode had become a sanctuary in the heart of an untamed wilderness.

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(To Continue . . .)

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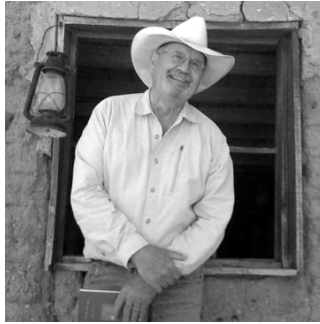


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Van Dyke lives with his wife, Mary on their ranch in the foothills of Tonto National Forest, Cave Creek, Arizona. Tom is a nationally recognized film producer/director, award-winning screenwriter and best-selling author. One of his motion pictures was considered for nomination of an Academy Award®.

Tom created and wrote the 1976 American Bicentennial television public service announcements, *Stand Up and Be Counted*, featuring John Denver, the most widely viewed national and international PSAs in the history of television.

His creative expression of writing and film production is shared with his creation of fine art. Tom's photography, sculptures, and paintings have been exhibited or are in the permanent collections of the NY Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie Art Institute, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Henry Ford Museum, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the Heard Museum, and the Butler Institute of American Art.

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