

Houston, Where Did the Cowboys Go?

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Like many other Americans, I was glued to my television set last month waiting to see if the crew of Apollo 13 would return home to their families or become the latest casualties of humanity's scramble for the stars. During the agonizing wait, I distracted myself by sorting through old drafts and found an unfinished profile of the late Percy Penn, better known to the American public as singing cowboy Ranger Roscoe. My editor was of the opinion that the sun had set on the public's interest in the tales of the Old West. A stranger comes to town. The law steps in. A tumbleweed raises the stakes. Rinse and repeat.

I feel a bit of regret at leaving that story unfinished. Perceval Penn, charitable, generous, and polite, always seemed out of place in Hollywood. He eschewed parties at lavish mansions for story times with foster children. He was frequently found at the library mired in books on history, poetry, and psychology. Roscoe was a different kind of cowboy. He was not a deft gunslinger like Clint Eastwood or an imposing tower of a man like John Wayne. When he did wear a revolver on his hip, he

carried it as if burdened by a cumbersome prosthetic.

His soft smile and warm countenance suggested that, unlike his peers, he saw the West not as a place to be conquered and tamed by man, but a realm that all of us are merely visiting. "It's very nice of you to want to feed the burros," he says to a child holding a fistful of grain, "but that makes it harder

for them to find food when people aren't around." His was the hand we held through the wild frontier of screens, letting us know that the world was not as scary as we thought, that we were indeed lovable.

Perhaps he'd now be considered too soft for the world of Vietnam, oil crises, and crooked presidents. America is now a teen rebel, too mature for such lily-white coddling. We're too smart to be so naive. Unfettered progress, fabricated from synthetic polymer and fueled by the engine of efficiency, will take us to new heights.

But as I sigh with relief watching the men of Apollo 13 finally climb out of the command module, the triumph is tinged with the ominous feeling that we have entered this new frontier with a dangerous entitlement. There is no Roscoe to gently explain to us that the coyote howls at night to find her friends. To remind us to stop and smell the flowers in bloom. That the moon can be enjoyed from the comfort of a sleeping bag, next to a warm fire and a happy song.

Roscoe's gone now.

And the warm fire went with him. ♦

