

Tom Mix, a cowboy hero of the motion picture industry during the first half of this century, was born on January 6, 1880, in a frame house in Pennsylvania, halfway between the Pennsylvania Railroad Line and Bennett's Branch of the Susquehanna River.

Tom's parents were old family Pennsylvanians, and Tom worked and trained horses since boyhood days. In 1902, when Tom Mix was twenty-two years, he got his first big break. He was hired as cowboy performer for the Miller Brother's 101 Real Wild West Ranch near Bliss, Oklahoma. Colonel Joe Miller hired Mix as a full-time cowboy for \$15 per month, including room and board.

Tom Mix was a rough and ready cowboy. There was no challenge too great for him. He rode bucking horses, bulldogged steers, and made spectacular jumps with horses. Mix could jump a horse into a railroad boxcar, easily jump a five-foot gate or jump from a moving railroad flat car. One of the most spectacular jumps Mix made was jumping his horse over the old wagon road cut at Newhall, California.

Mix had many ties to Arizona and the Superstition Mountain area. He had once worked as a cowboy in the Prescott area. He moved to the Prescott area in 1909 from his home in Oklahoma. According to the story Mix arrived in Phoenix in 1911 on horseback leading a heavily laden burro. He stopped and rested at Hotel Adams. He said he was headed westward to California looking for a better job. Mix had heard they were paying cowboy extras \$5 a day in the motion picture business.

Tom Mix had performed in many of Arizona's rodeos including Prescott, Payson, Tucson, Willcox, and Phoenix. Mix was a top performer in rodeos and his ability with horses gre legendary.

Fourteen years later, on December 26, 1925, Tom Mix returned to the Hotel Adams and Phoenix as a famous western motion picture star. He came to Phoenix in route to Fish Creek Canyon on the Apache Trail. The area had been chosen for a film location. Mix made the film "Tony Runs Wild" at the site. Fifty members of the film cast stayed at the Apache Hotel located at Hotel Point on Roosevelt Lake.

According to Mix, the real star of his films was his horse, which was billed as "Tony, The Wonder Horse." Mix said his horse was worth \$75 as horseflesh, but he was insured for \$50,000. Mix also claimed he would sell him for a million dollars. Indeed the horse was valuable to him.

During his years in Hollywood, Mix always claimed Arizona as his home. During the filming of "Tony Runs Wild," Mix meet the Clemans family. William J. Clemans owned and operated the old Fraser Ranch in the Reavis Valley. Mix spent time relaxing on the old ranch and riding with Clemans' cowboys. Mix came back to Tucson and Florence to visit friends all the time. He had many memories of the state and the area we now call the Superstition Wilderness Area.

On Saturday, October 12, 1940, death intervened in Tom Mix's life on a lonely stretch of U.S. Highway 80-89, between Florence and Oracle Junction. He was headed for Phoenix by way of Florence when the

accident occurred. In Florence he had planned to visit an old rodeo friend of his, Harry Knight. Knight was married to Mis's oldest daughter.

Mix was alone driving his green custom-built Cord roadster when he came upon a crew of highway workers. He avoided hitting the workers, but lost control of his Cord. The automobile plunged across a wash and rolled over, killing Mix instantly. It is believed a piece of flying luggage broke his neck. According to witnesses, his cream-colored western suit remained virtually unwrinkled from the impact.

Tom Mix died wearing his boots, diamond-studded belt buckle, and white 10-gallon Stetson hat. Mix had died as a true cowboy, "with his boots on", as some westerners would say. On October 12, 1942, Tom's horse "Tony" followed him in death.

The Pinal County Historical Society erected a seven-foot monument of a riderless horse in December of 1947 to mark the spot where Tom Mix had his fatal automobile accident. This site is some ten miles south of Florence. Pinal County Historical Society president, A.W. Gressinger, wrote the inscription on the monument. The inscription reads as follows:

January 6, 1880-October 12, 1940

In Memory of Tom Mix

Whose spirit left his body on this spot

And whose characterizations and portrayals

In life served to better fix memories of

The old west in the minds of living men.

The Pinal County Historical Society, under the guidance of Mrs. Billie Early, rededicated the monument on October 21, 1989. Another rededication of a replica monument in the yard of the Pinal County Museum occurred on February 19, 1994. Mrs. Billie Early and other volunteers worked diligently to restore the vandalized monument south of Florence in the 1980's.

Tom Mix lived the life many people dream of living. He was a national hero at one time, he was loved by many, and he was an astounding horseman. His horsemanship accomplishments have never been duplicated. He was certainly national and international silver screen hero to children worldwide. His films instill honesty, integrity, loyalty, and hope among his many admirers and viewers. Real cowboys respected Tom Mix's exploits, because they knew Mix was one of them.

A visit to the Pinal County Historical Museum ais a rewarding experience to anyone interested in Central Arizona history. The museum opens it doors again on September 2, 2003, after a brief summer vacation. The hours are 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Tues. through Sat. and from noon until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. The museum is located at 715 South Main in Florence. The phone number is 520-868-4382.

If you have time, drive ten miles south of Florence and visit the Tom Mix Monument on Highway 80-89.



Tom Mix, circa 1935. Photo courtesy of Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

