

## **Hollywood Legends Brought Local Author's Novel to Silver Screen**

Bloomington writer Harold Sinclair always looked a little out of place, whether it was standing in the middle of John Wayne and filmmaker John Ford (pictured here), or as a middle-aged man peddling his bicycle to old Withers Library wearing sandals and Bermuda shorts.

Though at times a little too idiosyncratic for staid Bloomington, Sinclair was a bona fide literary talent who—while never living up to his early promise—produced several finely crafted works of fiction.

Once such success was “Horse Soldiers,” released in 1956 to become Sinclair’s lone bestseller. Brought to the silver screen by Ford and two of the era’s biggest box office draws, John Wayne and William Holden, the film was a loose adaptation of his popular Civil War novel.

Earning a screenplay credit, Sinclair visited the Louisiana set in late 1958. He was astonished by the scale of the then-pricey \$6.5 million production. “I told ‘Duke’ Wayne that it was confusion and ‘Duke’ said it was organized confusion,” mused Sinclair.

“Horse Soldiers” was a fictional account of Grierson’s Raid, a Union cavalry advance deep into Confederate territory during Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s 1863 Vicksburg campaign.

This Civil War yarn was a perfect fit for Ford, whose legendary reputation rested in great part on his mastery of the Western, manifest in a dozens of his films, including “Stagecoach” (1939), “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,” (1949) and his magnum opus, “The Searchers” (1956). It was also no accident that John Wayne, who enjoyed a long and productive relationship with the cantankerous filmmaker, starred in these three films, as well as many others in the Ford canon.

A voracious reader who dropped out of Bloomington High School, Sinclair played the Bohemian in his twenties, with stops in Ocala, Florida and Chicago. He eventually returned to Bloomington and settled down to a life divided between workaday drudgery (including factory work during World War II) and late night writing sessions, fueled in no small part by alcohol and jazz music.

Although “Horse Soldiers” was Sinclair’s best-selling book, his most ambitious literary achievement was a semi-fictional trilogy—“American Years” (1938), “Years of Growth” (1940), and “Years of Illusion” (1941)—on early Bloomington history.

The downstate premiere of “Horse Soldiers” was held in July 1959 at the Castle Theater. Bloomington Mayor Robert McGraw signed a proclamation declaring “Harold Sinclair Day,” and the Duke himself sent a telegram of regret that he could not attend the screening.

Sinclair battled alcoholism much of his adult life, compelling his wife Ethel, the longtime librarian for *The Pantagraph*, to serve as the family's main breadwinner.

Sadly, "Horse Soldiers" was disappointment, garnering little box office buzz and nary an Academy Award nomination.

The principals involved in "The Horse Soldiers," though, found Oscar glory elsewhere. Holden received three best actor nominations, winning once. Wayne, nominated twice, finally picked up an Oscar near the end of his acting days. Ford, on the other hand, garnered four best director awards during a career that spanned six decades.

And as for Sinclair, his follow-up novel to the "The Horse Soldiers" was met with critical and popular indifference, and he turned increasingly to the bottle. Cancer then cut his life short in 1966. He was only fifty-nine.