

## Ridgway's Western Movie Heritage

The rugged mountains, steep canyons, rustic mines buildings and ghost towns of the San Juan Mountains make you feel as though you are still in the Old West of the American frontier. Hollywood filmmakers thought so too, and Ridgway and the surrounding area have served as settings for several classic western movies. Westerns filmed in the Ridgway area include *Tribute to a Bad Man* (1956), the epic *How the West Was Won* (1962), and most famously the original *True Grit* (1969), in which John Wayne won the Academy Award for Best actor for his portrayal of cantankerous Marshall Rooster Cogburn.

Other classic filmed in the San Juans include *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956), *Night Passage* (1957), and *Ticket to Tomahawk* (1950). In addition, another John Wayne classic, *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965) was based on the lives of George and Charley Marlow, who lived in the Ridgway area for many years and served as deputy sheriffs and town marshals.

Several of the classic locations used in these films are accessible by passenger car, and make a great day trip for western movie fans. Although several are on private land, they can be seen from the road — please respect the rights of private property owners.



### Ridgway steals the scene...

Spectacular scenery around our charming Colorado town, at the foot of the San Juan Mountains, caught the attention of the director of the film *True Grit*, starring John Wayne as the one-eyed U.S. Marshal Rooster Cogburn. In 6 weeks in 1969, the film crew turned 5 blocks of the center of this old railroad town into 1880's Fort Smith, Arkansas.



Hanging Judge Parker's 3 man gallows were erected in the town's beautiful park, where trees were planted by school children more than a hundred years ago, and the park was the location for the triple hanging scene.



On the western edge of the park, the firehouse, which was the original town hall, got an added cupola and new coat of red paint for the occasion. It now survives as an artist studio. Next door to the firehouse, the film company built a beautiful courthouse but this was just a shell: the interior courtroom scenes were filmed in the Ouray County Courthouse, in Ouray, 10 miles to the south.

Be sure to visit the John Wayne themed True Grit Cafe, also on the West side of the Park. Don't miss the actor and movie memorabilia and a sign painted for the film, which reads "Chamber's Staple & Fancy Groceries – Fruits & vegetables". This was an exterior wall that was preserved when the restaurant was built around it!

A short walk up Clinton Street, past the Sherbino Theater, leads you past the building where Rooster Cogburn lived with the Chinaman and his cat.

On the North side of the park, the post office now sits in place of the movie livery stable. The Paddy Wagon, used by Rooster to bring his prisoners for trial, is displayed in Heritage Park on the southwest corner of Hwy 550 and 62.

This location is adjacent to the Ridgway railroad museum, which is an excellent source of information on



the world-famous narrow-gauge railroad heritage of the San Juans. The Old Rio Grande Southern Railroad depot is now a private residence located on Railroad Street across from the tennis courts. It starred as the Independence Hotel in *How the West Was Won*.



### Scenic Drives to Movie Sites

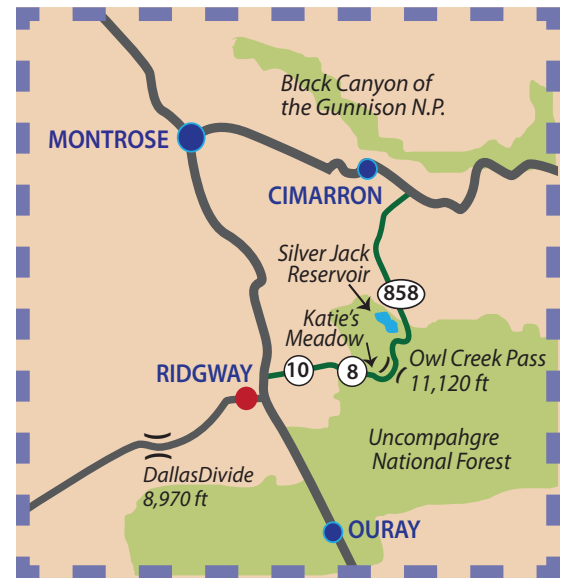
For a super day trip, head on out of town to see more famous movie sites as well as some of the state's most photographed mountain scenery.

#### Katie's Meadow (True Grit)

Katie's Meadow (sometimes called Debbie's Meadow or Deb's Meadow), with Chimney Rock in the background, is the site of one of the most memorable scenes from *True Grit*.



This is the location of the climactic showdown between Rooster Cogburn and the outlaws, where Robert Duvall taunts John Wayne by shouting "I call that big talk for a one-eyed fat man!". Wayne replies, "Fill your hand you son-of-a-bitch!", takes the reins in his teeth and charges across the meadow with both guns blazing.



To reach this meadow, take Hwy 550 North out of Ridgway and turn right 1.7 miles out of town, on unpaved County Rd. 10, towards Owl Creek pass. From this point, stay on the main gravel roads (County Rd. 10 and later County Rd. 8) for 14.7 miles, up to Katie's Meadow, which will be on your left but is no longer marked by a sign.

The top of Owl Creek Pass (10,114 ft.) is less than another mile further and the road continues down to the other side of the pass, with stunning views of the Cimarron Range, Silver Jack Reservoir, and eventually comes out at Cimarron, and loops to the East of Montrose in about 40 miles. This road is passable by passenger cars for most of the summer and early fall. Allow an hour to reach the top of the pass.



**Last Dollar Road**  
**(True Grit and How the West Was Won)**

**True Grit** begins and ends at the family ranch of young Mattie Ross (Kim Darby). In the final scene, John Wayne jumps his horse over a fence and rides off into the distance. The ranch house is very run down but the scenery around it hasn't changed much and is as gorgeous as it was then. Please respect the boundaries of this private property but by all means, pull over and snap a few photos!



To reach the Ranch, leave Ridgway going West on Hwy 62, and drive over Dallas Divide, which is one of the most photographed locations in Colorado! The left turn on Last Dollar Road (58P), approximately 11 miles from Ridgway, is clearly marked. Stay on this good gravel road for 2.5 miles from the turn off and the ranch will be on the right side of the road. In the winter, the road is not maintained beyond this point.



Some scenes from How The West Was Won were also shot in this area.

In the summer, you can continue driving on Last Dollar Road, to reach a fork at 4.9 miles.

The right hand fork is a good and scenic gravel road for 7 more miles across ranch land and will join with CO Route 145 at Sawpit after a few narrow hairpin turns. From there you can go left on 145 to Telluride or turn right to go toward Placerville and right again after the bridge to return to Ridgway on Hwy 62.

Taking the left-hand fork on Last Dollar Road will take you to Last Dollar Pass, through dense forest and rocky slopes and will eventually reach Telluride above the airport. It is not suited to passenger cars and requires a high clearance vehicle. It can be very treacherous in wet weather or in early snow.

**Miller Mesa (Tribute to a Bad Man)**

While not well known, **Tribute to a Bad Man** was a significant western. It was written by Jack Schaefer, who also wrote **Shane and Monte Walsh** and was directed by Robert Wise, who also directed **The Sound of Music, West Side Story, The Andromeda Strain** and **The Day the Earth Stood Still**. James Cagney replaced leading man Spencer Tracy who was fired from the set and it was Cagney's last western.

**Tribute to a Bad Man** was filmed on Miller Mesa at the historic Walther Ranch, which was homestead by George and Charles Marlow (of **Katie Elder** fame). The private ranch still features the Marlow's original cabin.

To reach this area, go south on County Rd. 5 for 5 full miles from Amelia St. in Ridgway. Along the way you will pass the gate entrance of the Walther Ranch and at the end of the 5 miles, you will reach a large open area with stunning views of the Sneffels range: this is the general area where the ranch scenes were shot.



If you have a high clearance vehicle, you can access even more stunning scenery further ahead on County Rd. 5, particularly in late September when the aspen are turning.

Do not turn left on County Rd. 5A (which passes mailboxes and dead ends into Elk Meadows subdivision) but follow the main road through private land for several miles into the Uncompahgre National Forest.

Information compiled by local author Jim Pettengill and mostly taken from **Ridgway, the Town that refused to die**, by another local author and historian, Dr. Doris Gregory. This history book also describes other local movie lore and is available in many local bookstores.

Local photography: Christine Wilson-McGrady (CW design) and Marta Alfred (martaalfredphotography.com). Cover photo: Tom Wilson. Brochure design courtesy of CW design.

Please visit [ridgwaycolorado.com](http://ridgwaycolorado.com)

**Ridgway's**  
**Western Movie Heritage**



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