

SILVERADO

Directed by Lawrence Kasdan
Produced by Lawrence Kasdan
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1985

Friendship is precious. We all need to belong, to be served and be of service, to aid, entertain, and encourage. But few people have friends tested by fire, friends who share something beyond common interests, similar beliefs, and propinquity.

The four *Silverado* buddies aren't ideal friends. They come together with the common enemy of the collective town of Turley, achieve peak camaraderie with the rescue of the settlers' cash box, drift apart, then reunite for a spectacular finish, only to part for good. Paden is the last one to get fed up with the sheriff. He's mad that "they took the boy," but he's just planning to quit. He's not going rogue. Then Cobb threatens Stella. Paden is frozen. What to do? Stella says she's willing to face the consequences: so just kill Cobb. Paden didn't think it would get this far. But when he sees Ray, shot and gasping for breath, he decides he's had enough. Jake, Emmett, and Mal had long ago drawn the same conclusion.

So the friends are tested in a trial by fire. They decide to take the hard road, stay true to each other, and risk their lives. As for common interests, each man is serving someone outside this Posse of Smiles, but no man serves another man in the posse.

Because the camaraderie shared by the four men is infectious, the first half of the movie is more appealing. The second half isn't good enough. The plot mechanics of corrupt law enforcement, sobbusters, and greedy ranchers has been seen over and over. It doesn't matter whether this film is a 'revisionist Western' or homage—it still must stand on its own. All the characters have a purpose, and everything makes perfect sense, but it gets a bit mechanical.

Still, all along the dusty trail leading to the inevitable finish there are inventive touches. One is Paden's unusual affection for Stella, which is refreshing and intriguing. Just as with the dog, Paden cares for despised and abused creatures. Stella's philosophy is that bullies can only be tyrants, and "push you 'round" if you let them. The irony of the comment is that she needs Paden to stop Cobb. It's not a matter of *letting* a bully have his way. The bully's force must be met with force. So, while Stella may not submit to the oppression of bullies, she's powerless to stop it.

Cobb represents the law, but he abuses it. Paden opposes the law, at least as it is executed by Cobb. Thus, the four leads are like mirror images of Cobb, McKendrick, and the rest. Paden, Emmett, Mal, and Jake are just as violent, but in a good cause.

Yet, if one were ignorant of these men's motivations they would appear to be a pretty truculent bunch. So what must everyone else be thinking? From the perspective of the townsfolk, it seems Paden is in the wrong. After all, sheriffs have to go to great lengths to preserve order, and Cobb does have a certain roguish charm. Why he always confabs with McKendrick is anyone's guess, but McKendrick seems like a stolid, respectable man.

The only insight we have into what the denizens of Silverado make of the percolating conflict is the fire (they help out, but don't seem to question how the house caught fire or

whether it is a big deal that the boy was kidnapped) and just before the final showdown a storekeeper is ignorant as to the purpose of the fight, and the townsfolk run and hide when they see the deputy climb up with a rifle. So they're pretty oblivious. It's not surprising considering they made Cobb sheriff in the first place. They show better judgment by giving Paden the job later. It could be that they reward the strongest man with the job, and disregard the niceties of trustworthiness. Maybe Silveradoans just don't want trouble and they'll give the badge to the last man standing, so he won't start gunning *them* down, too.

But the townsfolk aren't the only ones behaving strangely. Consider Rosanna Arquette's Hannah. She's a glacial widow who is fitfully courted by Paden and a somnambulant Emmett. It's the most undramatic love triangle imaginable. She has one good scene, the one where she explains to Paden why it's better to sacrifice to make something grow than to submit to a man and do what he wants. After all, the land won't turn against her when she's no longer pretty. Thus she discourages Paden and Emmett; is passed back and forth between them; and ends up standing beside Paden, looking like she's trying to convince herself to melt. Emmett, a little chagrined that he's (apparently) lost, says, "You might make a farmer yet," implying that Paden will get along with Hannah just fine, since it would be fair to presume that Paden will take up farming, and farming's what she cares about most. He replies, "I got a job," and flashes his badge. That means he won't farm. And if he won't farm, will he be with Hannah?

She's pretty, and pretty short-sighted. Sure, the land won't reject you, but it can't love you back either. And how satisfying can it be, thirty years on, when all her fellow settlers are grandparents, and she's got nothing? What good is the land if people aren't using it? For the 1860s, Hannah is quite the Feminist. She's determined to have things her way, but that wasn't an option for women then.

Hannah seems smart enough that she should know her limitations, even if they are artificially imposed.

Silverado isn't all story. It's beautifully shot, boasts a meticulous production design, and moves briskly. Apart from a stupendous cast, the best thing about this movie is its score. Bruce Broughton, who never made it into the upper ranks of Hollywood composers, delivers an Oscar-nominated gem. Sure, it may channel Aaron Copland, especially in the settler scenes, but film composers aren't supposed to be original. They're supposed to provide functional music that instills a feeling. Where a composer needs to be original is his themes. And the *Silverado* anthem is one of the best ever written for a movie. It conveys honor and determination, and, as used in conjunction with the beautiful vistas highlighted in the film's opening titles, sets up expectations for adventure that are fulfilled in spades. *Silverado* is fun, clean, and inspiring, a movie that not only honors the Western but improves upon it.

Why did these boys win? Was it because they were righteous, because their cause was just? Hardly. They won because they were just a little bit faster and a little bit smarter. They got lucky. The same is true today.

So where's the hope in *Silverado*? Again, it's the friendships that resonate. There's no telling if we will win or lose. And as far as this life goes there seems to be little point in doing right. But it sure would be nice to have a good friend along for the ride.