

"DER COWBOY":
A LOOK AT THE GERMAN FASCINATION WITH THE WILD WEST

by

Meredith McClain
Texas Tech University

My purpose in this paper is to examine the roots of the German fascination with our Wild West and to suggest why this interest is more intense in Germany today than ever before. The beginnings of this study are personal ones that reach back to my first visits to Europe. As a music student at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, it did not take me long to discover that the Austrians were much more interested in talking with me after they learned that I was not just another "Amerikanerin", but was rather a "Texanerin". That, however, was not so different from my experience as an undergraduate in Oberlin, Ohio, where people had also seemed to remember me as a Texan, so I just modestly assumed that Texas was a concept which intrigued most everyone everywhere. But when the first snow storm blanketed Zalzburg and I dug out my new green felt, high-heeled, pointed-toed, round-topped cowboy boots and started for the conservatory, I discovered that there was a real difference in the Texas interest of the Austrians. People literally stopped me on the street to ask in German where I had bought my green boots and were both amazed and dismayed when I answered: "Austin, Texas." I had more than one opportunity during that winter to sell those boots at a handsome profit.

Two years later, driving through a crowded residential area of Berlin looking for the address of my assigned guest family, I was astonished to round a corner and see crouched next to the apartment building a small German child in full Indian regalia and another peeking out of the next doorway who had on boots, chaps, and a cowboy hat. I, like others before me, accepted this evidence of German fascination with our Wild West without immediately exploring its history.

My next trip to Germany in 1979 produced yet another scene in this general pattern, but one appropriately raised to a higher level of sophistication. This time I was attending a Fulbright seminar for American German teachers in Bonn and in talking with some of the distinguished lecturers of that program I was politely asked to explain where I live. Lubbock, Texas, was not known to the group, although my reference to the "Pffannestiel von Texas" (the Panhandle of Texas) aroused definite interest. As an afterthought I threw in the addendum that the vicinity was known to some Southwesterners as the area through which Coronado had trekked looking for gold and was still sometimes referred to as the Llano Estacado, Spanish for Staked Plains. "Wie, bitte? Sie wohnen auf dem berühmten Llano Estacado?" (What? You live on the famous Llano Estacado?) Several of the Germans were now all ears and bombarded me with questions concerning the flora and fauna of the vast plains where my University is situated. I have always been impressed with the exact knowledge of geography which Germans

frequently display and so it did not occur to me to ask in this conversation how and why these Germans knew so much about the Llano Estacado. Today, several years and some research later, I am confident that had I asked about their source of information and the reason for their keen interest they would have admitted with a sly smile the name Karl May. These dignitaries might even have remembered some nights from their childhood when they read under the covers May's gripping story of the Wild West titled Der Geist des Llano Estacado (The Spirit of the Llano Estacado).

Who was this Karl May who started all this? The briefest biography of the man reads as follows:

May, Karl (Ernsttal, Saxony, 1842-1912, Radebeul nr. Dresden) grew up in poverty. Through his weaver-father's determination to improve the boy's lot, he became a school-master. He was almost immediately convicted of the theft of a watch, which, he claimed, was lent to him, and he was consequently dismissed from his employment. A psychological crisis marked by delinquencies followed, and he served prison sentences amounting in all to seven years. After writing a few sentimental village stories, he fell into the hands of an unscrupulous publisher, for whom he wrote (anonymously) a large number of trashy novelettes. . . . He then turned his attention to stories of American Indians after the manner of James Fenimore Cooper. In the last quarter of the 19th c. he was perhaps the most popular author of boys' books in Germany. He described his novels as Reiseschilderungen, and used the first person narrative in order to give the impression of actual experience. His best-known characters were the Indian Winnetou and the white man Shurehand.¹

Nothing in this brief and rather dry description indicates the amazing place in German life and letters which will have to be awarded to this writer: he has done more than any other person to create and perpetuate the image of the American Wild West in German-speaking countries. Just as all Americans know the names of Tonto and the Lone Ranger, so German speakers recognize Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. The latter is not simply a good white man; he is a visiting German without flaw, a super Teuton, who is perfectly at home on the American frontier. Statistics indicate that the grip which this Wild West image has on German speakers has grown steadily more powerful. Here are some facts which help to define May's contribution: In an article in Der Spiegel of September 12, 1962, May was recognized as the most influential German writer between Goethe and Thomas Mann.² In the same year an article appeared in the Saturday Review by Joseph Wechsberg ("Winnetou of der Wild West") in which May was called "still one of the best-selling authors of all times."³ The figures to back up this claim are that even then, in 1962, May's seventy books

had sold over fifteen million copies in German editions alone. A more recent estimate made in 1981 was that ". . . Germany's Karl May had written some seventy books during the late nineteenth century that had sold thirty million copies in twenty languages and been read by as many as three hundred million people. Here was an image-maker who deserved a niche in history."⁴ All this underlines the unquestionable fact that Karl May's novels occupy a place among the "top ten on the all-time best-seller list of world fiction."⁵ In Germany May has the distinction of being the "Bestseller-Author Nr. 1."⁶

When one reads through the literature on Karl May, another aspect of May's popularity is generally stressed.⁷ It seems that May was not only loved by the vast masses, but was also valued by some very famous people. In 1929 the German newspaper Die literarische Welt sent a questionnaire to various writers asking about their favorite childhood book. Many responded laconically, "The novels of Karl May." It has been reported that two very famous Karl May fans, Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer, while in Colorado watching an Indian show, discussed the hero of their younger days, the Indian Chief character named Winnetou, created by May. The German playwright Karl Zuckmayer named his daughter Winnetou. Hermann Hesse and both Heinrich and Thomas Mann have all expressed respect for May which has been duly recorded in May's autobiography Ich.⁸

However, there was another avid fan whose great praise of May has caused some critics to take a closer look at the underlying implications in the many violent scenes to be found in each of May's western works: Adolf Hitler not only owned and read May's works, he also lifted quotations from May for his speeches, such as his description of the ideal German type as a man "with muscles of iron and sinews of steel."⁹ As early as 1940 Klaus Mann identified the influence of May on Hitler as well as on German youth in general. He wrote:

Much enthusiasm was wasted, youthful imagination was tainted and confused. A whole generation in Germany grew brutish and ran wild -- partly through the evil influence of Karl May. For he had deliberately falsified their picture of foreign countries, and, above all of America, of its landscape and people and its moral code. He had poisoned their hearts and souls with hypocritical morality and the lurid glorification of cruelty. He had entangled the simple notions of truth and falsehood. He anticipated, in a quasi-literary sphere, the catastrophic reality that is now before us: he was the grotesque prophet of a sham Messiah.

The Third Reich is Karl May's ultimate triumph, the ghastly realization of his dreams.¹⁰

A later critic, Arno Schmidt, in a study devoted to Karl May,

also criticized the self-righteous position of the hero and the unrealistic division between good and bad which runs through the May works. Schmidt suggests that May's stories thrive on a depressingly simplistic tension between the white hero and the dark devils. "Missing is even the simplest of all insights, that humanity consists of a majority of grey types, mixed with 10% colorful ones" (translation mine).¹¹ Perhaps the most succinct summary of this line of criticism is this one sentence describing May's works which is found in the Lexikon der Weltliteratur:

Frequently spiced with a certain wild romanticism and detective intrigue, the gripping stories characterized by sentimental heroic morality, an unrealistic belief in ultimate justice, and a primitive psychology have at their center firmly developed types of heroes, who morally and physically defeat the enemy, but offer generous help to the innocent victim (translation mine).¹²

An American writer surveying this same topic of hypocritical morality reported in 1973 that "Hitler even recommended May's works to his generals. From the German youth of the thirties a Nazi cultural minister demanded 'courage, initiative, energy, longing for adventure and the Karl May way of thinking'." This writer concluded that "May was undoubtedly an important contribution to the myth of Teutonic and Aryan supremacy."¹³

It cannot be denied that May's characters fall into the rigid and unrealistic categories of good or bad Indians, good Germans or bad (greedy) Yankees, but analysis of the German reception of these categories is a complex undertaking. For those of us concerned with German literature and German cultural history the problem of understanding and evaluating the influence exerted by Karl May's works is truly a fascinating one. There are other important moments in German history when an image of a people far removed in time and space fired the imagination of Germans: there were the Greeks of Winklemann and the Teutonic ancestors of Wagner. This general susceptibility to myth as "documented" by "experts" was certainly at play during May's career. When May wrote in the first person as the super-hero Old Shatterhand, his German readers began to assume that the author had indeed experienced the incredible deeds himself. And May, who quite certainly never saw the American West, did little to discourage the adoration, and in fact clouded fact and fancy. He had calling cards printed which read "Dr. Karl May, called Old Shatterhand" and had himself photographed in Western gear. No matter how questions of authenticity are probed by the scholars, the vast majority of May's readers did not, and still do not, care what the critics have to say about his writings. One reporter states flatly, "Many boys in Europe would choose to believe in Karl May's fictitious description of the American West rather than a television documentary from Pueblo, Colorado."¹⁴

May became a legend in his time, and admirers wrote to him and flocked to his Villa Shatterhand, in Radebeul, to pay their homage. Since his death in 1912 his works have continued to sell at a phenomenal rate and the fame of his mythical Wild West continues to spread. Today there are two Karl May museums which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly; there is a Karl May Society in Hamburg; there is even an active publishing house, the Karl-May-Verlag in Bamberg, devoted to the printing of May's works. Ever since the 1960s there have been a number of Karl May films, and most importantly, there are now two very successful summer Karl May festivals. Ever since the opening performance in Bad Segeberg in 1952, the festival there has entertained 100,000 visitors per season. A more recent festival in Elspe has grown in popularity due to the original gags woven into the presentation. According to Joachim Schmid of the Karl-May-Verlag, the attendance at this festival in the 1980 season alone was more than 400,000 visitors.¹⁵

Clearly Karl May was a phenomenon. There are certain historical factors which have been examined to help explain his success. May was turning out fantasy material for masses precisely at the time when technological progress in printing had brought the price of books within reach of the vast majority.¹⁶ It has also been pointed out that Buffalo Bill toured Europe in the 1890s with enormous success and the excitement generated by his tours could only enhance May's popularity. But still the content of May's stories found such rich resonance within his readers, that the vibrations which continue today with incredible frequency and intensity cannot be explained by such historical orchestration alone. If we look at some trends in Germany over the last several decades I believe that we can begin to appreciate a larger pattern into which the Karl May phenomenon fits.

According to an article from Newsweek in 1963, West Germany was being swept then by a "Wild West Welle" (Wild West Wave). Evidence of this was the Western gear craze which caused a surge in American exports of such items as cowboy boots and hats and Levis;

Munich's Western Store, called "The Latest from Texas," supplies gun-slinging Bavarians with everything from ornamental Western saddles to sheriffs' stars and sends dude duds to mail-order customers as far away as Hamburg. Autobahn drivers have become hardened to the sight of cowboys in full regalia spurring Porsches toward a weekend roundup in the Black Forest.¹⁷

During a "Fasching" carnival it was estimated that half the revelers in Munich were dressed in some concoction of Western gear. Apparently many astute members of the German business world cashed in on this fad because it was reported that dozens of Western saloon-type bars had sprung up in major German cities. And movie theater owners have long been guaranteed a success with almost any Hollywood Western.

Although this "Wild West Welle" has been good for those in the

business world, it is only the froth above a stronger and deeper current. To gage this current one needs to look beyond the flashy Western trend to facts documenting the existence and history of an unbelievable number of Western-type clubs in Germany today. The following five news excerpts from 1963 to 1980 give an indication of the Western network throughout Germany which few of us Westerners would have expected:

1. "Wild West-Germany" (Newsweek, 1963). Members of more than 40 Western clubs meet to study American history, and to practice lassoing, fast-drawing, sharpshooting, and trick riding at weekend ranches; they put out their own magazine, the Dakota Scout, and hold an annual council attended by more than 1,000 delegates. The oldest group is the Munich Cowboy Club, organized 50 years ago during an upsurge of enthusiasm for the Westerns of Karl May.
2. "Out West in West Germany" (New York Post, 1970). West Germany has an estimated 120 Western-lore clubs with membership totalling 3,500 persons. At annual spring powwows, German Indians and cowboys come together to swap pelts and costumes over evening campfires.
3. "First Day In West Texas -- For Lubbockites" (Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, 1973). Lubbock visitors from Lubbock, Germany, got their first look at West Texas Wednesday. Decked out in new hats and boots, nine members of the Indian and Western Friends group that has created an Old West town in Germany, toured the Ranch Headquarters out-door museum at Texas Tech.
4. "Cowboys and Indians Rekindle the Old West" (Time, 1979). Throughout the year, in more than 100 clubs in West Germany, devotees of the Old West spend thousands of man-hours and deutsche marks preparing their costumes or polishing such arcane skills for the council competitions as tomahawk throwing, quick-drawing, and tossing lariats. Then, at the three-day camp-out, they can relive the American frontier days in full dress with almost complete historical veracity.
5. "In Freetime: Cowboy" (A German newspaper clipping included in a 1980 issue of the German Texas Heritage Society Newsletter, translation mine). In the open fire juicy steaks are sizzling, Mac is cooking up red beans, Benny sings to guitar

accompaniment his newest Western song and a third rings the Mexican bell: Western Romantic on the "Quarter Horse" Ranch. However, the ranch isn't in the Wild West, but rather stands on a green meadow in Ratingen, and the cowboys are Mac, Benny and whatever else they are called, only in their free time. "Quarter Horse" belongs to the Western Club of Düsseldorf, one of over 50 societies in the Federal Republic in which there are organized about 15,000 "freetime" cowboys.

The numbers quoted here are impressive and, I believe, surprising to most Americans, but the motivation behind the numbers which appears in these articles again and again is even more astonishing: these German Westerners are devoted to the careful study of authentic details of life on the Western Frontier. They shun the trigger-happy cowboy of the movies as a figment of the Hollywood imagination just as they have long since discovered that Karl May never saw the Wild West. Said one German "Sheriff": "The authentic cowboy was a poor fellow, who usually didn't even own his own horse, who rode for months with the gigantic cattle herds, was underway in blizzards or in scorching heat and had to swallow a lot of dust until he finally reached his destination" (translation mine).¹⁸ Another German Sheriff indicated that Americans are not necessarily welcome at councils: "Most Americans don't know enough about their own history to make a contribution. They think Wild Bill Hickok's real name was Bill."¹⁹

Why do West Germans want to spend their weekends recreating their approximation of authentic frontier life? Friedrich Ullman, a 37-year-old sculptor who specializes in creating hand-made replicas of Blackfoot tribal costumes, gave an answer to this question when he told a reporter: "We are German romantics. Our own German history is too narrow, and so we go elsewhere, to the American West for our hobby. By dressing like the frontier people and living their customs we feel we are participating in their history."²⁰

Vicarious enjoyment as a correction or addition to limited daily life is surely a common experience for the thousands of Germans, who ever since the time of Karl May, have been swept away in their fantasy to the Wild West. Where reality is restricted by crowded conditions, confining boundaries, imposing bureaucratic regulations and is pressured by complexities of modernization, by alienation from nature and by demands of material profit and gain, what could be more comforting than the image of the lone cowboy on the vast, open, rolling prairie, independent of all law except his own, self-reliant in his simple existence in nature and above all free from the power of the dollar? It may well be this last characteristic, the freedom from profit and property, which emerges today as the foremost attribute of "der Cowboy" from the subconscious of a society which has produced the "Wirtschaftswunder". It may indeed be an ironic truth that somehow the idea of

freedom from a materialistic reality directed that German cowboy in his Porsche to head for his rather expensive cowboy club outside of town. The strongest written support for this view of the cowboy through German eyes appears in a book entitled Der Cowboy: Legende und Wirklichkeit von A - Z; Ein Lexikon der amerikanischen Pioniergeschichte. As closing material I have translated here two paragraphs which reveal the German perspective on our cowboy which I find to be the essential one:

Although, at first glance, there seems to be a vast difference between the type of the wild trappers and mountain men, who perfectly adjusted their ways to those of the wilderness and that of the later puritanical settlers and city builders, yet, the characteristic of the striving Yankee seeking only profit is as similar to them both as it is to the gold seekers and the railroad builders, the saddle bag doctors and priests, the bandits of the dollar, officials, judges and lawyers. For all human types which the new world pressed into the corset of her moral with an unparalleled sweep, the Dollar was the almighty fetisch, which caused them to risk everything, to win or lose everything and finally which allowed the primary impulses to be programmed in such a way that today controls the moral and pseudomoral of half the world.

The single exception in this development was the cowboy, to whom personal freedom was everything and money was nothing. He was really a type of anti-American. That the cowboy as a symbol of freedom has stood for decades as an equal beside Uncle Sam, the symbol of Pragmatism, is one of the many paradoxes in the accepted scene of the American, who not only is as much an extreme Puritan now as before, but who also tries in all the pseudo-historical presentations of the cowboy to present him as the prototype of Puritanism.²¹

I conclude that this German interpretation of our cowboy as an opponent of Yankee greed goes a long way toward explaining the ideal which fires the imagination of those German cowboys speeding down the Autobahn today to their Western clubs. Even though the writer quoted above goes so far as to call the cowboy a type of anti-American, there is at least the assumption that he is an American anti-American and this is surely a step forward into the complex grey tones of reality from Karl May's German anti-American, Old Shatterhand.

NOTES

¹Henry and Mary Garland, The Oxford Companion to German Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 577.

²"Karl der Deutsche," Der Spiegel, 12 Sept. 1962, p. 54.

³Joseph Wechsberg, "Winnetou of der Wild West," Saturday Review, 20 Oct. 1962, pp. 52-53, 60-61.

⁴Ray A. Billington, "The Plains and Deserts through European Eyes," The Western Historical Quarterly, 10 (Oct. 1979), 468.

⁵Walter Laqueur, "Cowboys for the Kaiser," The New York Times Book Review, 29 Jan. 1978, p. 7.

⁶"Karl May: Mit Peitschen und Pistolen," Civis, July 1968, p. 24.

⁷The best work in English to date is Richard H. Cracroft, "The American West of Karl May," M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1963.

⁸Civis p. 24.

⁹Wechsberg, p. 52.

¹⁰Klaus Mann, "Karl May: Hitler's Literary Mentor," Kenyon Review, 2 (1940), 399-400.

¹¹Arno Schmidt, Sitara und der Weg dorthin: Eine Studie über Wesen, Werk und Wirkung Karl May's (Karlsruhe: Stahlberg, 1963), p. 213.

¹²Lexikon der Weltliteratur, ed., Gero von Wilpert (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1963), p. 888.

¹³Ralph S. Walker, "The Wonderful West of Karl May," American West, 10 (Nov. 1973), 28-33.

¹⁴Wechsberg, p. 60.

¹⁵Joachim Schmid, Director of the Karl-May-Verlag in a letter of Dec. 5, 1980. The following statistics are translated from the Elspe Festival program booklet for the 1979 season: "Audience numbers as they have been registered at the Karl-May festivals in Elspe are totally unprecedented in theater records. Together with the guest appearances in Ratingen and in Vienna, the attendance last year for the Elspe production was about 600,000 people. That is the highest attendance record set by a single production of a German stage show within a year. Even the largest theaters with changing productions

reach only half that number within a year" (translation mine).

¹⁶Ronald A. Fullerton, "Creating a Mass Book Market in Germany: The Story of the 'Colporteur Novel', 187/-1890," Journal of Social History, 10 (March 1977), 265-283.

¹⁷"Wild West-Germany," Newsweek, 20 May, 1963, p. 96.

¹⁸"In der Freizeit 'Cowboy'," German-Texan Heritage Society Newsletter, July 1980, p. 50.

¹⁹"Sie Ritten Da' lang, Podner," Time, 18 June, 1979, p. 51.

²⁰"Out West in West Germany," New York Post, 2 Dec. 1970, p. 46.

²¹H. J. Stammel, Der Cowboy: Legende und Wirklichkeit von A - Z; Ein Lexikon der amerikanischen Pioniergeschichte (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann-Lexikon-Verlag, 1972), pp. 7-8.