

# Westward the Women

USA | 1951 | 118 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	William Wellman
<b>Screenplay</b>	Charles Schnee Frank Capra (story)
<b>Photography</b>	William C. Mellor
<b>Music</b>	Jeff Alexander

## Cast

<b>Buck Wyatt</b>	Robert Taylor
<b>Fifi Danon</b>	Denise Darcel
<b>Patience Hawley</b>	Hope Emerson
<b>Roy E. Whitman</b>	John McIntire

## In Brief

William A. Wellman ("Across the Wide Missouri"/"The Robin Hood of El Dorado"/"Blood Alley") directs this wonderfully ridiculous feel-good offbeat western based on the story by Frank Capra and written by Charles Schnee. In 1851, in California, wealthy rancher settler Roy Whitman (John McIntire), of Whitman Valley, hires the misogynist hard-boiled trail guide Buck (Robert Taylor) and fifteen men to bring 100 women from Chicago across the country to be mail-order brides for his mateless lonely men.

The film is played mainly for comedy, and it gets a few laughs while it also shows the ladies learning to become more masculine as they handle guns and the reins of the wagon train and becoming equally good pioneers as the men. The black-and-white film looks good, and Wellman made it look more authentic as a pioneer crossing over harsh terrain by having his cinematographer, William Mellor, use filters as sparingly as possible. This gives the film an impressive austere sunbaked look.

Here's a movie that even fans of movies in general and westerns in particular have told me they've never seen or heard of when I mention it and I can well understand why. WESTWARD THE WOMEN is by no means a traditional western and every time I watch it I'm kinda amazed that it was made in 1951 since the story is told in such a raw, unglamourized fashion. It features women and minorities prominently in the cast and they are treated not as stereotypes but as honest human beings. Sex and death are handled with realistic brutality and this is a movie where the happy ending is truly deserved by the characters and not just a manufactured one to make the audience feel good. The characters in this movie well and truly go through Hell and when they come out on the other side we feel as though we've made every step of the hideously horrible journey with them.



Roy Whitman is an extraordinarily wealthy landowner who owns an entire California valley that he's turned into a thriving community. Now the only things his men need are wives. 'Good women' Whitman insists and not the floozies and harlots his men have become used to consorting with. Whitman intends to go to Chicago and recruit 150 brides and bring them 2000 miles across country to his valley for his men. To accomplish this he hires Buck Wyatt (Robert Taylor) one of the best guides and wagon masters around. Wyatt turns down the job at first and for good reason. He's a confirmed misogynist, doesn't like anything about women, and doesn't even want them to cook for him. This guy's not only a member of The He-Man Women Haters Club, he's the president. After Roy promises him a thousand dollar bonus, Buck agrees to take the job.

They go to Chicago and recruit the women for the journey. Among them is Fifi Danon (Denise Darcel) a dancehall girl who wants to go to California, leave her past behind and make a new life for herself. Patience Hawley (Hope Emerson) is a woman of Amazonian proportions from a Massachusetts whaling town who has recently lost her husband and three sons in a storm at sea. Maggie O'Malley (Lenore Lonergan) is a bespectacled schoolmarmish type who turns out to be a better shot, rider and roper than any man. She soon finds herself in a rivalry with Jean Johnson (Marilyn Erskine) whose skills easily equal hers. Mrs. Maroni (Renata Vanni) and her young son Tony (Guido Martufi) are also determined to go along despite the fact they speak not a word of English.

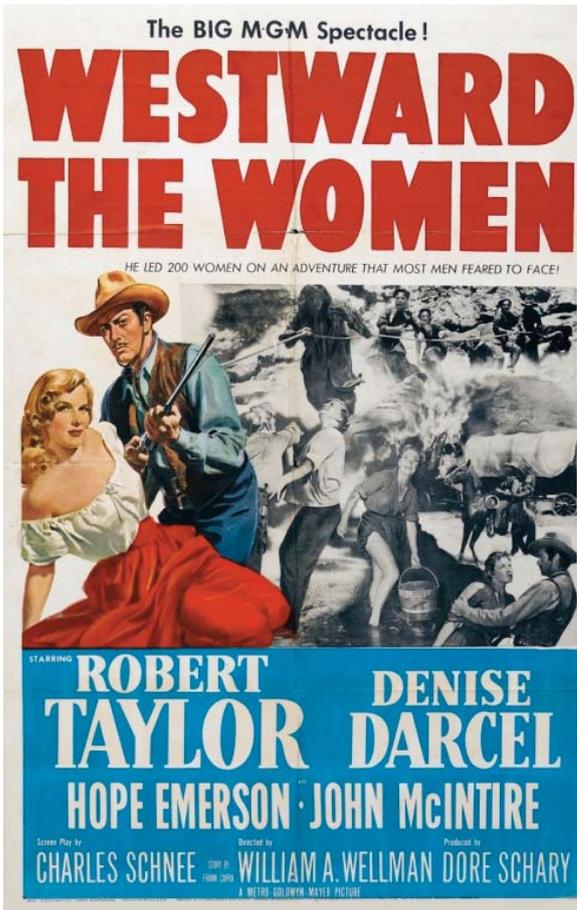
Right from the start the trip doesn't go well. The sexual tension between Buck's crew and the women would be obvious to Stevie Wonder and there is a brutal rape that Buck handles in an equally brutal fashion by killing the man in a scene that you don't find in most westerns. The guy says to Buck, "Aren't you going to give me a fair chance to draw?" Buck doesn't say a word, simply pulls his gun and shoots the dude dead before his hand even touches his gun.

The next morning Buck and Roy awaken to find that Buck's crew has abandoned them along with about a dozen of the women. The only other men besides them is Ito (Henry Nakamura), the Japanese cook and Sid Cutler, one of Buck's crew who has fallen in love with one of the women and wants to be the father of her unborn child. Despite Roy's misgivings, Buck insists that he can get the women through to California and he'll do so if he has to turn them into skin, bone and muscle. "They're going to hate your guts," Ito warns Buck who answers back without missing a beat, "I hope they do." And the rest of the movie is a grueling marathon of suffering and pain as we watch these women encounter Indian attacks, deadly flash floods, starvation, hailstorms, deserts, and that's just the easy stuff as they make their way across an America that back those days was really savage and wild and hostile and death could come without warning and frequently did.

There's a lot of things in WESTWARD THE WOMEN that makes it different from your average western. First off, the cast is mostly women but they're not all your average glamorous Hollywood starlets. Except for Denise Darcel who is exceptionally gorgeous the other women

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are remarkably realistic looking. Some are very pretty. Some are just pretty. Some are okay looking. Some are thin. Some are fat. Some are ugly. Some look like something you'd buy in a live bait store. But all of them have their share of screen time. We're not just looking at Denise Darcel all the time. And even when we are we grow aware of some disturbing things about her character Fifi Danon. Y'see, she falls in love with Buck and it seems that she spends most of her time deliberately pissing him off so that he can whomp on her. Their whole relationship seems based on violence and there's a disturbing scene where Buck lashes her with a horsewhip as well as smacking her around with the back of his hand a couple of times. "Is that what you wanted?" Buck asks. Fifi looks up at Buck, wipes the blood drooling from the corner of her lip and there's obvious sexual satisfaction in her voice and eyes as she answers, "Yes. I'm okay now."

Equally surprising is Buck's relationship with Ito, the Japanese who signs on as a cook but we never see him cook a single meal in the entire movie. In fact, after the rest of the men leave, Buck finds himself relying more and more on Ito for friendship and counsel. Ito isn't played as an offensive coolie type spouting pidgin English. For much of the movie he's riding side by side with Buck and there are scenes where he and Buck argue about how to handle the women and how they're going to finish this insane journey. They bond one rainy night over a jug of rum they've dug up out of a grave. They bicker and quarrel. They make up. They watch each other's backs. And when and if you watch this movie notice how every suggestion Ito gives Buck, he takes and acts upon. With success.

The performances are first rate starting with Robert Taylor and going all the way down to the pooch playing Tony Maroni's dog. I've never been a big Robert Taylor fan but I like him a helluva lot in this movie. His character of Buck Taylor may not go from being a misogynist to a profeminist which I would have found highly unrealistic but by the end of the movie he has come to an understanding and respect of women he didn't have before. Hope Emerson is a standout as Patience

who refers to everything in nautical/whaling terms and the relationship between her, Buck and the other women is interesting. Henry Nakamura is wonderful as Ito. I really liked the scenes he has with Buck and what I like even more is there never any mention made of Ito's race outside of when he and Buck first meet and after that, we never hear anybody refer to Ito being Japanese and in fact, there's quite a bit of Japanese, French (Fifi Danon is French) and Italian spoken with no subtitles which isn't as much of a distraction as you might think and indeed, is quite powerful in one scene where Mrs. Maroni breaks up a fight between two women and chastises them in Italian. Nobody understands a word she's saying but everybody knows exactly what she means.

So should you see WESTWARD THE WOMEN? I would certainly recommend that you do. It's a remarkably well-made movie that has a realistic feel and tone to it. The filmmakers really tried to show how hard and difficult it was for people to get across the country back in the days of The Old West. It was tough enough for whole families but for a bunch of women by themselves...well...lemme put it this way: there's nothing in this movie that says it was based on a true story but it should have been because WESTWARD THE WOMEN is filled with enough heart and truth in its story to have been real. And it probably was.

*Derrick Ferguson's Movie Review Notebook*

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