

## **“Be Sure You're Right, Then Go Ahead”: The Davy Crockett Gun Craze** by Sarah Nilsen

In April 2005, sixty thousand members of the National Rifle Association gathered in Houston, Texas for their 134<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. The keynote speaker for the event was embattled U.S. House Majority Leader, Representative Tom De Lay. After his speech, De Lay was joined on stage by Lee Hamel dressed as Davy Crockett in full buckskin attire and a coonskin hat. Hamel presented De Lay with a handcrafted flintlock rifle that he had made for the event with his mentor, Cecil Brooks. The presentation of the reproduction rifle to De Lay is part of a long NRA tradition that began in 1955 when Walt Disney's Davy Crockett series first appeared on television. When Charlton Heston received his handcrafted flintlock rifle in 1989, he uttered his famous words, "From my cold dead hands." President Ronald Reagan and Vice President Dick Cheney also joined the list of those who received facsimile Davy Crockett flintlock rifles from a man dressed in Crockett buckskin attire. This tradition is part of the NRA's efforts to represent the gun as a key instrument in the founding of the United States. It secured this ideological representation in part by appropriating the mythology of early American heroes like Davy Crockett. Davy Crockett became emblematic of the gun mythology of early American life. This mythology was synergized by the NRA and popularized through children's television to promote a conception of the role of the gun in American cultural history consistent with its political agenda. Through children's television, Davy Crockett became an iconic figure for the promotion of the American gun craze.

The NRA's reliance on the media to support its political agenda is not remarkable considering its strategic goal to speak for a national, majority audience. What is significant is the NRA's continued dependence in its ceremonies and histories on a Disney hero that had been manufactured for a children's audience. This article considers the way in which a television show produced by the Walt Disney Corporation, the purveyor of wholesome children's entertainment in the 1950s, became incorporated within the NRA's vision of a historical past centered on the gun. The linkage of the NRA with Walt Disney signaled a radical change not only in the cultural production of the studio, but also the public perception of the relationship between childhood and gunplay. At a time when the public discourse was focused on the correlation between media consumption and juvenile delinquency, The Davy Crockett series was able to successfully align child's play and violent gunplay through the narrativization of the life of an American frontier hero. The unprecedented popularity of the miniseries, broadcast first on television and then repackaged for theatrical release, helped make the proliferation of toy guns in the hands of children appear not only acceptable but politically and historically correct because it was manufactured by the Disney studio.

The National Rifle Association of America Headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia, houses the National Firearms Museum which provides a dioramic chronology of the history of the gun in America. Key historical events and decades are recreated to highlight both the centrality of the gun within the formation of the United States and the social significance of the gun in the creation of American national identity. The NRA's narrativization of this history frequently relies on mass media sources to support its historical claims. The exhibit chosen to illustrate the 1950s is a recreation of a typical youngster's bedroom decorated with western-style wallpaper, furnishings, and a sampling of western-theme toys and games based on popular television shows. Consistent with the

museum's intent, the gun is central to this nostalgic reconstruction of childhood in the 1950s. A large variety of toy pistols in holsters hang from a coat rack and a gun cabinet with three rifles stands next to the bed. Over the bed is a rack of steer horns, off of which hangs a Davy Crockett coonskin cap. According to the NRA's reconstruction of the past for their members, the 1950s represented a period in which the immense popularity of the television western was instrumental in making the gun into an essential part of American childhood.

The Davy Crockett hat--and, by extension, the cultural image of Davy Crockett--offers a starting point for making sense of the ideological effects of the NRA display. This diorama represents the social significance of children's television in the galvanization of the gun culture in the United States during this period. Drawing on the NRA's image of a 1950s boy's bedroom, I will unravel some of the various cultural forces at work in the construction of this gun culture, focusing on the role of a children's television program produced by Walt Disney. The Davy Crockett television series provides some valuable insight into the way that television, in representing the gun in American history, blinded the American public to the way that it was normalizing the gun as part of youth culture. In the effects of this television series, we understand what media theorist Daniel Dayan means when he says "ideology is hidden in our very eyes" (Dayan 123). The Davy Crockett series displays ideology at work through the contradiction that animates it. By examining the seeming contradiction between the desire to ameliorate a perceived rise in juvenile delinquency on the one hand, while promoting the conjunction of youth and guns on the other, I intend to cast some light on the way that children's television programming, and in particular Disney, was able to motivate a particular conception of guns in American culture, while effectively diffusing broader social concerns and criticisms over gunplay.

The tremendous fan base attached to the Davy Crockett television series suggests an element of identification and enjoyment that was unparalleled in children's entertainment. In 1955, the American family was swept up by a craze the likes of which had never been seen before. As *Life* magazine reported, there was "an army of Americans which had a sudden and shattering impact on the nation's home life" ("U.S. Again Is Subdued by Davy" 17). The article's central subject was a "pleased 3 year-old, who sees himself as the King of the Wild Frontier. He is a Davy Crockett fan and is a brother in arms of almost every American of both sexes from the age of 2 to 12." ("U.S. Again Is Subdued by Davy" 17). The television program, *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier*, was originally designed by the Walt Disney studio in 1954 as a three-part television series and as the first installment in a larger series about American folk heroes to be shown on *Disneyland*, the weekly Disney television series aired Wednesday evenings on ABC: "Davy Crockett, Indian Fighter" appeared on December 15, 1954, "Davy Crockett Goes to Congress" on January 26, 1955, and "Davy Crockett at the Alamo" on Feb. 23, 1955. In June 1955, Disney refashioned the Crockett series for release as a feature length film to add fuel to the craze. The Crockett craze was "by far the best selling myth in America" (King 145). Over 3,000 Crockett items filled the stores and led to \$100 million in sales. In some department stores, Crockett accounted for as much as 10% of sales. "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," a song which had been written as filler for the already completed shows, sold 18 million copies, was recorded by over 20 different singers in sixteen different versions (including the "Davy Crockett Mambo"), and was the number one song of 1955. Retailers sold 14 million Crockett books, and a

comic strip appeared in syndication in 200 newspapers. Sylvia Porter, a syndicated financial columnist, recognizing the social significance of the Crockett craze, explained, "The youngsters always have had a vital influence over the family's spending habits--but now even the pre-reading ones are developing definite buying habits. We're creating a nation of spenders from infancy. It tells as much about us in 1955 as the original tall tales about Davy Crockett told us about American in 1835" (Sann 29).

Coupled with the spending frenzy of the series was the promulgation of American family values and ideals. Under the title "Davy Crockett Says," Disney distributed newspaper columns featuring a picture of Fess Parker, the actor who played Crockett in the series, as Davy, and homilies regarding honesty, trust, justice, duty and frugality (Derr 27-28). In all of these cultural venues, Disney's Davy Crockett became a constant presence. At every turn this figure of Davy Crockett appeared, and the gun was always at the center of his image and his message.

A children's television program centered on gunplay would appear anathema to the company credited with creating one Hollywood's most famous anti-hunting and anti-gun films, *Bambi* (1942). In Disney's adaptation and alteration of Felix Salten's novel, the focus of the narrative becomes the wild baby animals in their natural environment whose pacifism and innocence is put under siege by the destructive forces of "Man" and his gun. The film became a national symbol for the inhumanity of the hunters whose gun shots destroyed the peaceful harmony of the natural world. But the Walt Disney studio responsible for the Davy Crockett television series had been radically transformed by two events. First, the traumatic strike at the studio in 1941, lead directly to Disney's personal involvement in the HUAC hearings, and his appointment as first vice president for the notorious anti-Communist organization, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. Secondly, Disney's enlistment of the entire studio for military use during World War II had a distinct impact on the studio's creative work. By 1943, almost ninety percent of the studio's output was in producing films for the Navy, Army and other government agencies. As *Theatre Arts* reported at the time, "the government in Washington looks to him [Disney] more than it does to any other studio in chief as a factor in building public morale, providing training and instruction to the soldiers and sailors, and utilizing graphic art in expediting the intelligent mobilization of fighting men and civilians in the cause of the United Nations" (Delehanty 31). Included in Disney's military contributions during the war was the production of hundreds of insignia for all branches of the military. Disney characters were now visible icons throughout the armed forces appearing on uniforms, bombers, and the bombs themselves. For purposes of national defense, Disney began aligning his cuddly animal characters from the pre-war period with the arsenals of war. It was during the war years, then, that Disney began to see the power of combining signs of war, the military, and violence with national pride and identity. The politization of the studio's creative output was heightened further by the HUAC hearings and the redbaiting in Hollywood. Walt Disney began to view his work as being socially and politically significant, and as a means for national instruction and spiritual guidance. No longer was this a man who felt that, as Douglas Churchill wrote in 1938, "describing his work in terms of philosophy [gave] it a highfalutin importance that it [did] not merit" (Churchill 9). By 1945, Disney was proclaiming that "the generation that used the motion picture to help train its fighters and its workers into the mightiest nation in history, is not apt to ignore the motion picture as an essential tool

in the labor of enlightenment, civilization and peace” (Disney "Mickey as Professor" 125).

By the 1950s the studio’s public relations material had transformed Walt Disney from a humble Midwesterner into a conquering American hero in his involvement in the newly expanding television market. As one pressbook proclaimed, “Producer Disney tells a story as big as America itself, as lavish as the wealth of the great rolling plains, as heart-stirring as the gigantic wilderness which wooed, won and was in turn conquered by the hardy pioneer in one of the most stirring sagas of all time” (Walt Disney Productions I). No longer was Disney creating creatures of the screen that are “simply laughing at human weakness” (Churchill 9), but was now educating his audience about the rich history of this great nation. As he explained to Hedda Hopper for her syndicated column, his Disneyland television series would include a series called “Frontierland” which would provide “yarns of America about exciting, fabled characters, giants of men like Paul Bunyan. We have men big as that today. It will be pure Americana and show America at its best. Like it?” (Hopper). During a time of intense social anxiety due to the escalation of the war against communism, Disney turned to the mythology of America’s heroes as a way to generate a patriotic nationalism that offered the certainty of a triumphant past.

The Davy Crockett series was produced by a studio that had been significantly transformed during the war, and those events directly impacted Disney’s television output. There was also, however, a cultural shift that greatly affected the creation and reception of the show. The Disney show premiered at a time in which the public fear of the spread of juvenile delinquency had reached a crisis point throughout the nation. The Senate, under the auspices of Senator Ester Kefauver, began a series of investigations into juvenile delinquency that continued into the 1960s. As one Senate subcommittee reported in 1954: "the Committee has received about 15,000 or more unsolicited letters from people all over the country. Of this 'man on the street' reaction, nearly 75% seem to me to reflect some concern either over comic books, television, radio or the movies" (Gilbert 143). As historian James Gilbert explains, "As much as anything else during the 1950s, the hearings publicized delinquency and thereby lent credence to the impression of a mounting youth crime wave" (Gilbert 145). From the middle of World War II, a great many Americans, led by federal law-enforcement officials, concluded that broken families, mobility, and absent working mothers had caused a marked increase in delinquent behavior. Following the war, vigilance against delinquency increased. This fear peaked from 1953 to about 1956, simultaneous with the emergence of the Davy Crockett craze.

Television was frequently cited as the causal agent for delinquency. As the *Christian Century* reported, a special subcommittee was convened to investigate the effect that television was having on American youth. After months of investigations and hearings, the committee concluded that on television, "life is cheap; death, suffering, sadism and brutality are subjects of callous indifference. The manner and frequency with which crime through this medium is brought before the eyes and ears of American children indicates inadequate regard for psychological and social consequences" ("Warn against Violence on Television Programs" 1013). The *Saturday Review of Literature* listed a series of incidents that illustrated television's "pernicious influence." For instance, it reported, "In Brooklyn, New York, a six-year-old son of a policeman asked his father for real bullets because his little sister 'doesn't die for real when I shoot her like

they do when Hopalong Cassidy kills 'em'" (Bogart 277). Public awareness and acceptance of the psychologically detrimental effects of television on the youth of America was widespread. Television critic Leo Bogart suggested at the time:

If television cannot really be blamed for turning children into criminals or neurotics, this does not imply that it is a wholly healthful influence on the growing child. A much more serious charge is that television, in the worst aspects of its content, helps to perpetuate moral, cultural and social values, which are not in accord with the highest ideals of an enlightened democracy. The cowboy film, the detective thriller and the soap opera, so often identified by critics as the epitome of American mass culture, probably does not represent the heritage which Americans at large want to transmit to posterity. (Bogart 289)

Of particular concern to Bogart and other media critics was the "cowboy film" with its emphasis on violence and gunplay. These critiques become ironic in light of the way that Disney promoted the Davy Crockett series.

Though the Disney television series was a "cowboy film," Disney held up Crockett as an authentic American folk hero who represented the best of American values and heritage. Fess Parker, the actor playing Davy Crockett, recognizing his own significance in the lives of America's children, announced his belief that "through Davy Crockett I can perhaps be doing something good to combat juvenile delinquency" (Watts 321). In a piece for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Parker argued that in modern America "hero hunger [is] a children's ailment. It's like vitamin deficiency, only it affects the development of character rather than body" (Watts 321). Considering the hearings about and criticism of television, and especially cowboy shows, it seems counterintuitive but in fact, the mythologization of Davy Crockett by Disney was instrumental in combating the fear that the mass media was leading children to criminal behavior. He was part of what Fess Parker himself called the "rediscovery of national heroes and served as a wonderful example of the historical do-or-dies who staked their lives for ideal" (Watts 321). As commentators in *The New York Times Magazine* noted at the time, "Crockett remained a good natured superman--salty, humorous, even modest in a reverse-English sort of way--and his present revival may be taken as a healthy sign by those who have deplored the vogue of comic book superman" ("Coonskin Superman" 20). *Newsweek* reported that Disney had "furnished the youth of America with a hero--brave, intelligent, stalwart, and kind. Parents and educators were delighted" ("Davy: Row and a Riddle" 56-57).

Relating the craze to the crisis of the Cold War, family relations specialist Dr. Evelyn Mills remarked that "due to the restiveness of our whole society today, more than five or twenty years ago, [we] require tangible evidence of human beings able to battle the problems of their lives" ("Mr. Crockett Is Dead Shot as Salesman" 38). Dr. Mills praised the Crockett fad, saying that although the physical frontiers had disappeared, there was a definite "need for disciplined exploration in literally hacking our ways through the social frontiers" ("Mr. Crockett Is Dead Shot as Salesman" 38). There was some criticism of the show, but the focus of those attacks was on the historical accuracy of Disney's portrayal, not on the centrality of the gun or on the violence in the Crockett

image. As John Fisher, the editor of *Harper's* argued, "These infant brainwashees have been bedazzled into worshipping a Crockett who never was--a myth as phony as the Russian legend about Kind Papa Stalin. The historic truth is that Davy Crockett was a juvenile delinquent who ran away from home at the age of thirteen" (Fisher 16). Even these attacks of the Crockett myth were roundly criticized by a variety of defenders. A negative column in *The New York Post* that revealed Crockett's more unsavory historical past caused a "band of youngsters to picket the newspaper's office with placards reading, "Who you gonna expose next!--Santa Claus" ("Davy: Row and a Riddle" 56). William F. Buckley, Jr. joined in the chorus of defenders on the Mutual Broadcasting Company's news and comment show, "State of the Nation," stating that "The assault on Davy Crockett is one part of a traditional debunking campaign and one part resentment by liberal publicists of Davy's neuroses-free approach to life. He'll survive the carpers" ("Davy: Row and a Riddle" 56). Kefauver himself joined in the praise of Davy Crockett and even sported, as part of his vice-presidential campaign in 1956, a Crockett coonskin hat. And President Eisenhower, recovering in his hospital bed after a heart attack, received a golden Davy Crockett necktie as a birthday present from the newspaper, radio and television correspondents.

The *Disneyland* series on which the Davy Crockett series premiered won a Peabody Award for its educational value and an Emmy for best adventure series, and as the television historian, Lynn Spigel, has written, "its prosocial themes--respect for elders, family values, courage--must have tempered adult fears about the commercial aspects of the show" (Spigel 127). So, at the height of the fear of an increase in juvenile delinquency due to the influence of television and especially through action-adventure genres like the western, even the head of the Senate investigation into juvenile delinquency praised the Davy Crockett craze, and Crockett was considered the ideal hero for America's youth. This apparent contradiction between the soft family values of the Disney studio and its alignment with the hard violence of frontier life can be explained by the transformation of the postwar audience due to America's military triumph during World War II. The family audience that was caught up in the excitement of the Crockett craze was no longer contented with the animated and anthropomorphized images of the earlier Disney productions. They were instead drawn to the reality offered in a live action program that celebrated a strong, masculine hero with a gun who was ready and willing to fight to defend his country and its ideals. And yet they were also expecting and anticipating the strong, middle class values that Disney productions came to embody by the 1950s in their representation of the Disney doctrine: "a notion that the nuclear family, with its attendant rituals of marriage, parenthood, emotional and spiritual instruction, and consumption, was the centerpiece of the American way of life" (Watts 326).

The *Disneyland* show, on which the Davy Crockett series premiered, was a variety program that included edited versions of previously released theatrical features, visits to the construction site of the Disneyland theme park, nature documentaries, and behind-the-scenes broadcasts of forthcoming releases. Disney agreed to produce the series in order to raise the necessary capital to build the Disneyland theme park. The Davy Crockett series, television's first miniseries, was the start of a series of Disney programs focusing on American folk heroes. Due to Walt Disney's exacting standards, the series was shot more like a film than a television program. The production included shooting at historically accurate locations in Tennessee and the construction of a life-size replica of the Alamo. The first three episodes of the series ended up costing \$600,000,

which was three times the industry's standard for telefilm production. The high quality of the production, however, was not what was exceptional for a Disney product produced during the 1950s. Instead, it is the overt portrayal of violence and killing through live action that is truly remarkable for a prime-time children's television program produced by Walt Disney, especially a show directed at pre-teen viewers. The death and violence in the series was unprecedented in television westerns produced for a children's audience, and was much more similar to adult westerns, such as *Rawhide*; *Got Gun, Will Travel*; and *The Rifleman*.

The Davy Crockett series is episodic in structure and revolves around a string of violent encounters that Crockett and his sidekick, George Russell (Buddy Ebsen), experience as Crockett is transformed into a national hero. As Steven Watts explains, Davy Crockett "was presented as a sturdy American individualist who made his own way in the world with his charm, his honesty, and his skill with a rifle" (Watts 317). The three parts of the series center around the evolution of the gun from an instrument for individual survival to one grounded within the American ideals of liberty and freedom. In the first episode, "Davy Crockett- Indian Fighter" (December 15, 1954), Crockett seeks a truce with a local tribe of Indians headed by chief Red Stick who have assaulted a military outpost. Crockett is joined by his friend, Russell, in helping the Army under the command of General Andrew Jackson launch a series of attacks against the tribe. In this section of the series, Crockett's gun is linked to frontier survival as it becomes the primary means of a settler's defense against hostile assault by the native population. In this most domestic episode of the series, Crockett joins the Army in their attacks not as a patriot but rather to defend his family. Due to the threat of marauding tribes, Crockett, along with other early pioneers, joins up with the Andrew Jackson to bring peace to the region. The rifle becomes a force for the establishment of civilization and the expansion of the white settlers into the territory. A dominant visual trope in this portion of the series that helps to enhance the audience's identification with Crockett is the positioning of Crockett in the foreground with his back to the viewer when he is shooting. The small size of the television screen enhances audience participation in the violent skirmishes between the settlers and the Indians since the audience is made to look down the sights of Crockett's rifle as he proceeds to kill a significant number of Indians. These shoot-outs are frequently shot in slow motion with elaborate death sequences and with the audience, through Crockett, getting to pull the trigger. The battle sequences between Crockett and the tribe form the dynamic core of the narrative in this episode with Crockett's rifle easily defeating the primitive tomahawk wielded by his arch nemesis, Red Stick. The episode ends with Red Stick's defeat and Crockett's lesson to the tribe that "Thou Shall Not Kill" thus leading to the peaceful containment of the native population.

In the second episode of the series, "Davy Crockett goes to Congress" (January 26, 1955), the gun becomes part of national identity. Crockett, with his companion Russell, travels to Tennessee, where he learns of the death of his wife, Polly Crockett, due to an unexpected illness. He wins a seat in the Tennessee House of Representatives and later the United States House of Representatives. Moving from the protection of the individual, the gun now is used for the establishment of law and order into the rapidly expanding frontier communities. At the start of the episode, Crockett tells his wife and family that he has become constrained by the influx of white settlers into the eastern territories, and he sets out with Russell to find more untouched lands for their own "paradise." He discovers instead that the problems in the frontier have migrated to the

community itself and that lawless individuals are undermining the peaceful establishment of a thriving, wholesome town. Through a shooting match, Crockett uses his superior gun skills to defeat the local thug that has been threatening the stability of the town and thereby guarantees the healthy development of the nation. Crockett's successful establishment of order in the town leads to his election to Congress. By the time Crockett appears on the Senate floor, he has become a national figurehead defined by his buckskin attire and his rifle. By the end of this episode, the protection of the nation has superseded domestic concerns and the gun is celebrated, through the community ritual of the shooting match, as the primary instrument for establishing a lasting, productive community.

When Crockett makes it to the Alamo in "Davy Goes to the Alamo" (February 23, 1955), he has become a mythical figure. In this final episode, Crockett and Russell are joined by a gambler, Thimblorig, on their trek to Texas, where they arrive to battle Mexico's General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna at the fortress, the Alamo. Crockett and his few companions willfully choose to sacrifice themselves to defend their nation against foreign invaders. The gun has now become central to the maintenance of national sovereignty and liberty. The central event in this episode is the extensive battle by the small group of Americans against the overwhelming forces of the attacking Mexican army. The heroism of the Americans is rendered through their stoicism and persistence in the face of insurmountable odds. As each of his compatriots is cut down, Crockett continues to use his rifle to kill the advancing foreign soldiers. The final shot of the episode is of Crockett, the last American standing, surrounded by the bodies of his companions, his rifle raised in defiance, as he is graphically shot by the Mexican army. The audience never sees him fall down or die. This final image of Crockett, gun raised, is accompanied by the verbal proclamation that "Their spirits will live and the legends grow as long as we remember the Alamo." The mythologized Crockett that Disney constructed in these three episodes provided a contradictory role model for its audience of children viewers. While uncontrolled violence within the popular discourse was a marker for juvenile delinquency, the historical contingencies that surrounded the life of Crockett as portrayed in the Disney series made the use of the gun and killing itself, a heroic, patriotic, and necessary act.

Historicized gunplay as central to the founding of America spilled over into the Disneyland theme park. By the time of the park's opening on July 17, 1955, the Davy Crockett series had become an unexpected, national obsession. Walt Disney exploited the popularity of the series by foregrounding Crockett in the live television broadcast of the park's opening which was viewed by an estimated audience of 90 million. The immense popularity of the television show drew in an overflow crowd of suburbanites, celebrities, and local dignitaries including the governors of California and Tennessee (present for the Davy Crockett based events). Reporting on this national event was Ronald Reagan, Art Linkletter, and Bob Cummings with Walt Disney making frequent appearances during the proceedings. After a dedication by Disney and a prayer, Air Force bombers flew overhead and then it was off to the parade on the Main Street of Disneyland. Representatives from each of the four lands of the park passed the crowd lined streets. Heading the Frontierland section were Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen on horseback with their rifles raised in the air. They were the few characters in the television coverage to be shot in close up and their celebrity status was equal to that of the fantasy characters such as Snow White whose float also received special recognition



and commentary. After the end of the parade sequence, the show traveled to each of the individual lands starting with Frontierland which was identified as “the Old West and Davy Crockett”.

When the news coverage shifted to Frontierland, Art Linkletter took over as master of ceremonies with his young son, Dan, at his side. Handing Robert a pistol, Linkletter instructed him to shoot it in the air in order to call Davy Crockett. Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen are then shown from a long shot riding up on horseback. Once in front of the microphone, they relate for the gathered spectators how they had just been attacked by Indians but were able to win with the help of Davy’s gun, Old Betsey. This segues into Parker singing the ballad for Old Betsey while a group of square dancers perform. The prop for each square dancing couple is a rifle which in the dance they point at each other and use to swing each other around. The performance culminates with Parker in the center of the dancers raising his rifle overhead.

Walt Disney discussed his own conceptualization of Frontierland in an article published in the pulp magazine, *True West*, whose byline was “All True- All Fact- All Stories of the Real West”. Frontierland was meant to represent the world of the Old West and specifically Davy Crockett. Disney considered this area of the park closest to his childhood memories when he was growing up in Marceline, Missouri. As he remembered the town, it was a place where a “boy could have fun imagining outlaws swooping down on the coaches and shooting it out with the law” (Disney "Frontierland" 11). In his narrativization of the park, Disney began his description of Frontierland as “a typical frontier village that catches your eye first, and you’ll find many things to hold your interest...The Davy Crockett Frontier Arcade with its authentic display of guns that won the West.” He continues in his tour to describe the reconstructed Indian village where “you’ll see a forest of tepees, built exactly as the redskins made them, plus a tribe of Indians. They are friendly, though, and will perform their tribal dances” (Disney "Frontierland" 12). For the baby-boomers who flooded the park, Frontierland was a living re-enactment of the television series they had seen both on television and on movie screens. Using history as a form of entertainment, already mythologized figures like Davy Crockett become, via Fess Parker and Disney, a metonym for a history of American conquest in which guns have “won the West”. The synergistic relationship between the television series, the film version, the theme park reenactment and the merchandizing guaranteed an unprecedented market for Crockett paraphernalia. The coonskin cap was not the only product flying off the shelves; more significantly, the rifle became the more natural accessory for a national hero.

The coverage of the craze in the popular press also focused on the manner in which children's re-enactment of the series centered on the gunplay. In an article in *The New York Times* titled, “Should Small Fry Carry Small Arms?”, Gerald Walker asked, “Are we inadvertently promoting the idea that violence is the final arbiter of human conflicts? Has our youngest generation- be the cause TV Westerns, comic books or a succession of hot and cold running wars- gone suddenly gun crazy?” (Walker 14). For \$7.98, a child could get a complete Davy Crockett outfit, which included a rifle, powder horn, cap, etc. *Life* explained that “being a stickler for details, the Davy Crockett fan insists on toting at least one Crockett gun and wearing a coonskin hat, sometimes to bed.... But the true Crockett fan is busy with his own forms of hero worship. He kills

imaginary Mexicans, shoots imaginary bears and adds his own verses to the Crockett ballad" ("U.S. Again Is Subdued by Davy" 27).

Playing cowboys and Indians reached its peak of popularity as a form of child's play during the 1950s (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 33). Many of the home movies shot by parents during the Davy Crockett craze show very young children engaged in shoot outs in their backyards swinging toy rifles. The majority of the children, including both girls and boys, were dressed as cowboys. In interviews, conducted by folklorist Rayna Green, of hundreds of "current and former Cowboys and Indians," most revealed that they chose the Cowboy role because they 'did not like getting beat'. Those who did chose the Indian role were overwhelmingly girls who liked the costume and the 'underdog' aspect of the role (Green 54). In the popular discourse of the time, playing with toy guns was seen as a necessary and healthy part of childhood development. *The New York Times* offered that "the toy gun provides a release from negative, protest feelings, but it also has a positive value. Toys are the medium of a child's social activity, and play- be it cowboys and Indians or basketball- is essential to developing his ability to abide by the rules of a group and to get along with others. Thus the gun is a useful tool for aligning a child with his peers" (Walker 14). In their book on children's play, the psychologists Ruth Hartley and Robert Goldenson reassured parents that they should not be afraid when "bombs and sixshooters invade the kindergarten." They go on to argue that "Five is simply showing awareness of his culture; as long as guns are part of our world, they are going to be part of the five and six year old. The gun furnishes a delightful opportunity for saying, 'Bang'; it is not recognized as a deadly weapon with any sense of reality" (Hartley 123). Even Dr. Spock weighed in arguing that the parents who discouraged gunplay are the problem. As he explained, "They try to discourage gun play in the four-to-eight-year-old period fearing it might lead to gangsterism or brutality in adult life, whereas it really represents, at this stage, a way station in the progress toward civilization" (Spock 134). Stories of actual shootings with real guns while playing cowboys and Indians did receive national coverage in newspapers throughout the 1950s but the widespread availability of guns or the proliferation of television westerns for children were never casually linked to these events. The Davy Crockett craze actually fed into the postwar rise of American gun culture by making gunplay not only an acceptable and naturalized form of child play, but one that actually helped stem the rising tide of juvenile delinquency through its celebration of authentic American heroes.

The series made Crockett into a major folk hero and popularized his Kentucky rifle, the "all-American weapon," to which middle class, mass market publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post* dedicated feature articles. The demand for antique weapons skyrocketed following the series, and one expert estimated that the price for Kentucky rifles increased 430 percent from 1938 to 1958. As the sales of guns rose, the toy gun market boomed. Seventy American manufacturers produced 20 million toy guns a year at a profit of \$60 million. During this time, there were "about two guns for every three boys and girls in the country between 3 and 10" (Walker 14). It is essential, then, to consider how the Western genre both on television and film during the 1950s participated in the construction of our national past as centered on the gun. The modern gun culture in America as we know it today actually came into existence following World War II. As Kennett and Anderson explain, the Depression had dealt the gun industry a severe blow, with the industry's products dropping from \$30 million to \$9 million between 1919 and 1933 (Kennett and Anderson 217). The war changed all this. Remington expanded

2,000 percent to fulfill its war contracts, and Smith & Wesson manufactured more arms during the 1940s than they had produced in the preceding 90 years. In the process, the firm developed a manufacturing capacity "larger than that of the combined revolver manufacturers of the world" (Kennett and Anderson 217). Well before the war's end, small arms firms laid plans for conversion to peacetime manufacturing by developing new lines in anticipation of a lucrative civilian market. And they were not disappointed. By 1945 there was considerable demand in the civilian market that had been neglected for nearly half a decade. The demand was further spurred by returning veterans. Some 12 million men had received military training and some familiarity with firearms and many returned to civilian life with a continuing interest in weaponry. In addition, there was an expanded interest in shooting sports, as evidenced by the increase in shooting clubs and associations. By the time of the war, the NRA had had some 3,500 affiliated local clubs, but by 1963 it stood at 11,000. Hunting too became increasingly popular after the war. In 1937, hunters purchased seven million licenses--the number had doubled by 1961.

After the war, film and television producers rediscovered the frontier and western themes in American history and exploited them. The cowboy and his weaponry got even greater attention. In 1956, *Life* magazine examined the western film genre and noted that in Hollywood "eight films with 'gun' in the title had been completed and actors are learning how to shoot and be shot" ("Bang! U.S. Boys Bite the Dust" 28). As *The Nation* explained, "At every nightfall, 20 to 30 million Americans homes rock with the sound of sudden gunfire, preceded by an ominous uproar and followed by deadly silence. For all this suburban gunfire, the police are never interested. The gunmen are merely TV actors acting as if, in their scriptwriters' conception, they were living west of the Mississippi in a brief period following the year 1870" (Cort 21).

The cult had its effect on American youth. In 1962, toy guns were the largest category of toys for boys with sales exceeding \$100 million annually. A longitudinal study of changes in children's game preferences shows the games of cowboys, bow and arrows, and shooting appearing for the only time in 1959 as the top game choices for boys (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 33). The adults were also drawn into the western craze with the emergence of quick-draw and fast-draw clubs. By 1960 there were over 600 of these clubs whose members were busy reviving the lost arts of "up-twisting fanning," "the border shift," and "the road agent's spin." The quick-draw fad began to draw adverse comments because of the frequency of injuries. By 1960, a medical journal published an article on a new national malady: "Gunshot Wounds of the Lower Extremity: Fast Draw Syndrome" (Kennett and Anderson 223). In the 22-year period from 1946 until the Gun Control Act of 1968, American industry sold some 45 million small arms into the domestic civilian market, as many as it had sold in the preceding half century. During the same period, 10 million imported arms were sold. The gun culture flowered spectacularly in the years following WWII. The war itself had only served to stimulate a predilection for firearms long characteristic of American society. A conjunction of circumstances in the postwar era allowed that predilection to flourish unhampered. For all its problems, the era was one of prosperity and leisure, permitting an unprecedented indulgence in popular tastes. As had been the case before, concern over military preparedness lent to the gun a certain respectability and acceptance for even children gunslingers who needed to be ready to fight the battle against communism. As the poet Jonathan Holden writes in *Guns and Boyhood in America: A Memoir of Growing*

*Up in the 50s*, "It was the Colt .45 six-shooter, after all, that had "won" the West, had secured for us our ongoing daydream of boyhood paradise... We sensed, all of us, that if one were born American and male, then mastery of such sounds, together with ownership and control of the machinery to make them, was our birthright" (Holden 15-16).

*Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* tapped into an American ethos that saw the gun as American and as a fundamental and necessary part of national identity. Here we see the power of television to create and sustain gun-friendly subjects. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx points out that the production of commodities also demands this kind of production of subjects to consume the commodities. He says, "Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material" (Marx 92). As a result of the production of the need for the gun, the idea of children with guns became natural and separate from the widespread hysteria over juvenile delinquency. Even publications such as *Parents Magazine* published articles titled, "Are You a Gun-Shy Parent?" which led with the statement that "The desire to shoot seems inborn in young Americans. They start at a very young age to play soldier with toy guns. Then comes the age of air rifles and after that the .22 caliber rifle. If your boy does not have a rifle, he goes with boys who do have" (Erk 31). Fess Parker publicly supported the NRA, which he lauded for "the high aims it has for the youth of this country, both in sport and in defense of the nation" (Watts 322). When Parker visited Washington, D.C., newspapers all over the country carried wire service photos of the actor, Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, and Lyndon Johnson standing shoulder to shoulder holding Ol' Betsy, a replica of the frontiersman's prize rifle.

A powerful Cold War atmosphere in 1950s America summoned forth a flurry of fringed leather, coonskin caps, and plastic Kentucky long rifles. Crockett's famous saying from the Disney episodes --"Be Sure You're Right, Then Go Ahead"-- became a rhetorical emblem of what Americans wanted to believe about themselves in their global contest with Communism. The NRA museum's reduction of the history of the gun in 1950s America to a boy's western outfitted bedroom makes much greater sense when considered within the context of the television western genre and the role it played at that time in the celebration and vast expansion of American gun culture into the lives of American youth. As *Time* reported, "the western story has given television something that it seriously lacked: a taproot into the American tradition, a meaning beyond the moment.... In its finest expressions, it is an allegory of freedom, a memory and a vision of the deepest meaning of America" ("Westerns: The Six-Gun Galahad" 60). It seems only right that the Crockett motto may actually be an abbreviated version of a boyhood shooting rule: "Be Sure You're Right, and then go ahead and pull the trigger."

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