



How the West was Conned

By Christina Harlin, your
Fearless Young Orphan

The Baron of Arizona (1950)

Directed by Samuel Fuller

The Baron of Arizona may come to your attention for a couple reasons – maybe because it was an earlier movie made by Samuel Fuller, maybe because it stars

Vincent Price as a con artist. These aren't the reasons you should watch it, however. Fuller, who could even make a terrible film interesting (I'm looking at you, *Shock Corridor*), didn't do much with this one except set a camera down to watch actors move around a set. Vincent Price, who became larger than life just being Vincent Price, is miscast in this role.

Why you *should* watch *The Baron of Arizona* is because it is based (in a loose and simplified way, I admit) on the unbelievable true story of a man who came very close to bilking the United States out of huge chunks of Arizona and New Mexico. Though in the previous paragraph I commented on the film's uninspired direction, Samuel Fuller is also the writer, and we've got to give him credit for seeing the potential in this terrific, old-fashioned, massively ambitious con game. My honeypunkin, a history buff, might have heard of this long con before but I sure hadn't. Apparently at the turn of the 20th Century, James Reavis (Price) came forward to the United States government with proof that the territory of Arizona



***Dr. Phibes and the Mysterious Territory
of Arizona***

had been bequeathed to his wife's family by the King of Spain almost two hundred years before. By rights, he and she were the Baron and Baroness of the territory.

Anyone can claim such a thing, if they're of a mind. But Reavis worked his con carefully, spending years setting up documents and proofs including sophisticated forgeries inserted into actual royal Spanish archives, the creation of a fictitious noble family of Spain, and marrying himself to a mysterious orphaned girl who he claimed was the long-lost heiress of the land grant. Reavis was not just a man looking to make easy millions; he seemed to take utter joy in the intricacies of the con game and figuring out every way in which his

claims could be disproven so he could circumvent them. Read about this guy. He was a nobody from nowhere who figured out he could forge signatures. From there, he somehow formed the idea that since the United States was obliged to honor land grants that had been decreed by Spain and Mexico, this was a great opportunity for the biggest land grab in history.

The Baron of Arizona tells the tale in a far more romantic light than was the reality, making certain that we focus on the relationship between Reavis and his "baroness" wife – another nobody on whom he does the full "Anastasia" treatment, turning her into a noble woman from an important Spanish line. The film is far more concerned about whether Reavis can grow to truly love this woman he has duped since the time of her childhood, stealing her identity and forcing her into a mold that fit his scheme. Also, it is her dedicated love that will eventually convince him to relinquish his claims against the government. Well, you might guess the truth: the real Reavis never fell prey to such romantic notions; if the United States government hadn't figured out his forgeries with the help of an expert, we'd have had a barony in Arizona for who knows how long.

When Reavis came forward with his claims, Arizona was already well-populated with settlers, with many good-sized towns developed, railroads and valuable mines at work. Some were willing to pay Reavis for the right to continue living or working there (he made a considerable fortune granting quit-claim deeds) even before the government ever said “okay, Reavis, it must be yours.” Others, particularly those without the money to buy their way out, considered killing Reavis for the injustice of what he planned to do. Fuller does a fair job conveying the danger that Reavis and his wife were in when they stood before angry mobs claiming that they owned the land those people were mistakenly, if unknowingly, calling theirs.

Fuller’s rendition of the tale is also severely shortened, leaving out a “first attempt” made by Reavis when he was working with a partner. Bringing in an heiress was his second try, meant to bolster the claims from the first. On the other hand, at 90 minutes in length, I have to admire the expediency with which Fuller imparts information. It is quite easy to understand what’s happening, as well as to appreciate the meticulous work done by Reavis over more time than it takes to get through med school. The story is relayed by a group of men coming together to toast the statehood of Arizona, and Reavis, despite his dishonesty and swindling, is credited by them as being very much responsible for the creation of Arizona’s statehood.

It is a shame that Vincent Price simply fails to make his role of Reavis breathe. He’s far too elegant to be a convincing con artist, even when said con artist is *trying* to be elegant. He looks sad, disdainful, rather ashamed of himself, lacking the seductive charm of a real scoundrel. I picture a man like Reavis as being jubilant, enjoying the hell out of himself, and able to draw people to him with sheer magnetism (on imdb.com, a reviewer suggested Burt Lancaster for the part). The acting from supporting characters lacks the skill to fill out the story, so every scene falls to Price to keep the story afloat and he’s simply not playing the part correctly.

I rented *The Baron of Arizona* with the notion that it was a “western.” Well, at first I thought I’d made quite a mistake – there’s no gun-fighting or cattle rustling, no sheriff standing off against a villain at high noon, no circling of the wagons. Nothing of the sort. So is it a western? Let’s think about it on the other hand, though. What is more a “western” tale than the story of how that half of our



A man who can talk his way out of his own hanging is not a con artist. He's a con artiste.

country came to be? This is the tale of a man trying to take land that doesn't really belong to him, then suffering the backlash and the danger presented by the people who already live there and aren't willing to give it up? Yes, I mean that in both the serious and sad way, in that it feels like nobody took anything fairly when it came to manifest destiny. But I also mean it in the way that the lawless landscape was full of men driven by their own desires and willing to kill each other to keep whatever they'd carved out of it. Reavis aimed for the same goal with the weapon of paperwork, which is how all the best cons are accomplished. Remember that "the pen is mightier than the sword," unless you're being stabbed by a sword and have only a pen – I mean, that's just taking it too literally.

So, despite not fitting comfortably into the western genre, this was still a movie about the forming of the Wild West, about a man who grabbed at territory with more creativity and patience than those who would just shoot their way across.

One has to wonder about men like Reavis, as clever as they are. You'd think that all those brains could be used to make themselves legitimately rich. Wouldn't you? But then again, would legitimacy ever be as fun as knowing that you swindled Arizona away from the United States? I submit that it would not. Job satisfaction is important.

Fuller's film is a bit dull overall, Vincent Price miscast as the protagonist, but for the sheer amazing balls of the swindler and his story, we have to give this one a 9/10 and a hearty recommendation that somebody take this story and make a better rendition of it. Drama or documentary or TV miniseries, it matters not to me. It's a great story and should be told in a great way.