

Hidalgo – from Myth to Movie

by

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Even though Frank Hopkins claimed to have won more endurance races than anyone in history, there is no confirmed photograph of him on horseback.

The Trail of Deceit

Frank T. Hopkins, hero of Walt Disney's forthcoming movie *Hidalgo*, claimed to have an extremely impressive résumé.

According to Hopkins his father was the only white survivor of Custer's Last Stand, his mother was a Sioux Indian princess, and he was born at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in 1865. During the 1930s and 40s the self-proclaimed legend told a naïve American public that he became a dispatch rider for the US government on his twelfth birthday, then went on to work as a buffalo hunter, Indian fighter, endurance racer, trick rider, bounty hunter, Rough Rider, big game guide, secret agent and star of the Wild West show. In his spare time Hopkins said he taught frontier lore to Billy the Kid, was the inspiration for Zane Grey's novels and "rode knee to knee with Teddy Roosevelt."

Do you believe Hopkins' amazing tales?

If so, then you join a long list of respected American authors, magazine editors and media moguls who have been duped by the biggest Old West hoax in American history.

As Gregory Michno, noted author of *Lakota Noon: the Indian narrative of Custer's Defeat* (1997) wrote, "It is so obvious that Hopkins is a fraud, I cannot see how he could have fooled people for so many years."

In search of the answer to that question, 70 academic experts in five countries decided to take a closer look at the emperor's clothes!

Hoofprints through History

Though Frank Hopkins claimed to have done everything and to have known everyone in the Old West, it is his endurance racing pretensions that have propelled him into twenty-first century notoriety.

This counterfeit cowboy said he won an 1800 mile race from Galveston, Texas, to Rutland, Vermont, in 1886.

Not according to Casey Greene, Head of Special Collections at the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, Texas.

"We've referenced every newspaper between 1880 and 1890 but there is absolutely no mention of Frank Hopkins or a race from Galveston to Vermont. I think we better start a new file called 'Galveston Bogus Claims'," Greene said.

Further north, James Davidson of the Rutland Historical Society was equally scathing.

"The only endurance Hopkins ever did was with his pencil," chuckled Davidson.

According to Hopkins, it was because of his stunning imaginary victory in this non-existent race that he was hired by Buffalo Bill Cody to star in the Wild West show.

That's not what Dr. Juti Winchester, the Curator of the Buffalo Bill Museum at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, says.

"We are unable to find **any** Frank T. Hopkins in our database of known cast members, acquaintances, employees, or friends of Colonel Cody. We find that after Cody's death in 1917, some people made pretty spectacular claims about their relationship with him, what they did in the Wild West Show, and so on."

Dr. Winchester went on to denounce Hopkins as one of "a legion of early twentieth century pretenders that used Cody's name and reputation to bolster their own."

But Cody was in his grave by the 1930s when Hopkins began circulating the greatest equestrian forgery of all time.

Having invented his endurance racing credentials and faked his friendship with Cody, Hopkins next claimed that the Wild West show paid for him and his mustang stallion Hidalgo to journey to Arabia in 1890.

According to the Hopkins mythology, the American was invited to take part in a 3,000 mile race across the burning sands of Arabia. This race had been run, Hopkins said, every year for a thousand years, and until then only the finest Arab horses had been allowed to participate. Hopkins and his mustang stallion, Hidalgo, supposedly won the race with 33 hours to spare.

If such a race had really taken place every year for a thousand years, then surely it would have been enshrined in Arabian history?

Experts in both Saudi Arabia, and Yemen where the race allegedly started, ridiculed the very idea of such an elaborate equestrian contest.

Dr. Mohammed Talal Al-Rasheed, a scholar in Arabic and English literature and history, laughed at the very notion of Hopkins' race. "The idea of such a race in Arabia is a non-starter and can be debunked simply from an intellectual point of view without even getting into the ludicrous logistics of it. It is a shabby fantasy."

Meanwhile, Dr. Awad Al-Badi, Director of Research at the King Faisal Center and an authority on western travelers to Arabia over the centuries, said "There is absolutely no record or reference to Hopkins with or without his mustang ever having set foot on Arabian soil."

If anyone had information about this thousand-year-old race, then surely it would be the ruler of the country in which it was supposed to have taken place. Yet the last ruling Sultan of the Quaiti State in what is now Yemen, Ghalib Al-Quaiti, was equally dismissive.

"There is absolutely no record of any horse race in the past staged from Aden!" said the former Sultan, who has studied history at both Oxford and Cambridge universities and written extensively on his ancestral homeland.

So how is it that so many people, from magazine writers in the 1930s to screenplay-writers in the 21st century, have been fooled into believing Frank Hopkins?

Who helped turn his twisted daydream into a cinematic event?

Passionate Promoter

Frank's fantasy might have been lost to history if one of America's slickest salesmen had not pedaled it to a gullible public.

Americans have recently been reintroduced to the heart-warming 1930s tale of Seabiscuit, the heroic little horse that refused to be beaten. Seabiscuit was the ultimate underdog who triumphed against the mighty and previously-unbeaten thoroughbred, War Admiral. Charles Howard, Seabiscuit's owner, understood that everyone wants David to beat Goliath.

Nobody needed to explain that ancient concept to Charles B. Roth.

Roth had made a career out of championing the underdog. He was a Denver-based author whose income was generated by books written for salesmen of his day. Two of Roth's titles, *How to use your imagination to make money* and *How to remake your personality to get more out of your life*, could have been written with Frank Hopkins specifically in mind.

While Seabiscuit was racing around the track, setting records and melting American hearts, Charles B. Roth, who dabbled in American history, was selling stories of overlooked underdogs around the country. These included promoting Fred Kimble, an American who claimed to have invented the choke-bore shotgun, Frank Mayer, a forgotten buffalo-hunter, and Gama, an Indian wrestler.

Roth's disregard for facts was recently illustrated by Graham Noble, a historian who has studied the famous wrestler. Noble wrote about the "error-filled article of 1947 by Charles Roth," and went on to dismiss Roth's scholarship as "simply a fantasy."

What evidence did Roth have to support Hopkins and his claims to Arabian racing fame?

None!

In a letter dated August 1966, Roth admitted to a fellow magazine writer, "I do not have any documentary proof of Mr. Hopkins' race in Arabia."

Proof or no proof, over the course of the 1930s Charles B. Roth relentlessly publicized Frank Hopkins' mythology, especially Hopkins' claims to have won the non-existent race in Arabia.

"A modest man," Roth wrote in a 1936 article in *Horse* magazine, "Mr. Hopkins does not list himself in the great riders, but in my opinion he not only belongs in the list – he belongs at the head of it. Look at his record: in over 400 long distance races, he was beaten but once, and then by foul; he finished first but was disqualified. These races varied in length from 50 to 3,000 miles. Three times he won the title of 'World's Greatest Horseman,' in competition with picked riders from the cavalry of the world. Other horsemanship prizes too numerous to mention he also won. So I place him first in the list of greats."

It was this and similar articles which laid the foundation stone for the Hopkins myth.

Roth, who died in 1973, was not an impartial observer, but a visitor to the Hopkins' Long Island home. Frank Hopkins also visited Roth in Colorado.

What did Roth feel about the Old West liars of the time?

In an article, *The biggest blow since Galveston*, published in *The Denver Westerners Monthly Roundup* in January 1956, Roth reveals his sympathy with the braggarts.

“When we deal with the West, we deal with a myth. It is a lusty myth, as strong, as beguiling, as immortal as any that came out of Rome and Greece. If you ask me, the myth of the West is about ten times as interesting besides,” Roth wrote. “Maybe what they contributed is even more valuable than truth, which is usually dull and stodgy.”

Roth concluded the article with an astonishing admission.

“I hope I can always be an Angel towards the blowhards of the Old West. It's nicer that way.”

While Seabiscuit was making documented history, Roth was busy elevating Hopkins' chicanery into the next level of public awareness. The Denver salesman did this by helping Hopkins to deceive one of America's most respected equestrian historians.

Eager accomplices or naïve victims?

Albert Harris knew horses and endurance riding. He admired and bred the hardy mustang as well as the pure-bred Arab. Harris raised and raced mustang-Arabian crosses in the early 1920s, with a notable lack of success.

On the other hand, Harris had won a 300 mile endurance ride in 1919, mounted on a pure-bred Arabian mare, Ramla.

When not in the saddle, the wealthy Harris was running the Chicago bank that his father founded.

The general opinion, then and now, was that Albert Harris was an honorable gentleman.

But he had a weakness – he wanted to believe.

The Chicago banker and author had a pet theory. The mustang, he thought, was a direct descendant of Arabian war horses brought to the American continent by Spanish Conquistadors.

Imagine the Arabian breeder's excitement when he read Roth's article, *Great Riders*, which seemed to validate Harris' hypothesis that mustangs and Arabians were historically linked. In Roth's story, Hopkins was quoted as saying that after he won the Arabian race he left his mustang stallion, Hidalgo, behind so the American stallion could be bred to Arabian mares.

Harris was overjoyed.

He contacted Roth.

The Denver salesman put him in direct touch with Hopkins.

The Long Island cowboy realized he had an unexpected opportunity to maneuver his far-fetched stories into respectable circles and wasted no time in repeating them to the trusting banker.

“My dear Mr. Harris,” Hopkins wrote on February 18, 1940, “Mr. Charles B. Roth, whom I esteem very highly, has asked me to answer your questions in your letter to him.”

That letter details the imaginary Galveston to Rutland race.

In a second letter about the Arabian race, dated March 9, 1940, Hopkins said what Harris longed to hear.

“My Hidalgo began passing other horses on the fourteenth day of the ride and gradually moved up toward the front every day. Hidalgo reached the finish stone thirty-three hours of actual travel ahead of the second horse. I was sixty-eight days in all on that ride of over 3,000 miles...I left him [Hidalgo] in that land of fine horses where he belonged.”

Harris reverently copied Hopkins' accounts of the make-believe races, word for word, into his privately printed book, *Blood of the Arab*, published in 1941.

“The account he [Hopkins] gives us must surely leave the reader with the impression that the blood of the Mustangs, or Spanish Barbs, they rode had not deteriorated and that they were as much

Arab war horses by heritage and performance as when they left Arabia in 647,” concluded Harris triumphantly.

What evidence did the author receive that verified this tale?

Hopkins sent Harris a photograph of a wooden carving which he said resembled the fictional Hidalgo!

Unbelievably, Harris fell for it.

"The statuette of Hidalgo and Indian is characteristic of the Indian war horse. Mr. Hopkins says it is a good likeness of the horse, including his tail carriage," wrote the trusting Harris.

The banker should have listened to his father instead of Hopkins!

"No one's judgment is any good unless it is based on facts," the elder Harris had frequently warned his son.



Because Hidalgo never existed, this photograph of a small wooden statuette was the only image Frank Hopkins could provide for Albert Harris to put in his book, "Blood of the Arab."

Carol Mulder, a published expert on Arabian horses, has recently completed a biography of Albert Harris, published in *Imported Foundation Stock of North American Arabian Horses* (Volume 3).

Mulder is sure the renowned horseman would be mortified to learn the truth about Hopkins.

"I firmly believe Harris was a very honest man and that now, today, when Frank Hopkins has been exposed as a fraud, Harris would be appalled and try to do something to rectify his mistake in believing Hopkins."

But the damage was done.

Once the Hopkins tale had been printed in *Blood of the Arab*, later authors had no hesitation in recirculating the lies.

The first to fall victim was famous Old West author, J. Frank Dobie, who wrote about the non-existent Galveston to Rutland race in later editions of his book, *The Mustangs*.

Where did Dobie get his information?

From Harris!

"The Arabian Horse Club Registry of America, Chicago, has granted me permission to use the letters of Frank T. Hopkins, as quoted in the book by Harris," wrote Dobie in 1952.

Professor David Dary, who headed the School of Journalism at the University of Oklahoma, is not impressed with Dobie's sloppy research.

"It was typical of Dobie to quote from other books," said Dary, the recipient of the Cowboy Hall of Fame Wrangler Award and author of more than a dozen books on the American West, including *Red Blood and Black Ink: Journalism in the Old West* (1998).

“I am convinced that Dobie dropped Hopkins and his claims after quoting from Harris’s *The Blood of the Arab* in *The Mustangs*. Someone probably informed Dobie that Hopkins’ stories were fiction. If not, Dobie would have reused the Hopkins material in later writing, which was his habit,” Professor Dary said.

Wishful thinking and a lack of research had fooled Charles Roth, Albert Harris and J. Frank Dobie into believing the tall tales told by Frank Hopkins.

When Hopkins died in 1951, he must have been pleased with the way his equestrian fantasies had progressed from insignificant magazines into reputable books by respected authors.

This Pecos Bill of Long Island could not have foreseen that he would become the center of a 21st Century international controversy.

Was he the greatest endurance rider that ever lived, as Hollywood would try to depict him?
Or would he go down in history as the biggest equestrian liar of all time?



Frank Hopkins claimed to be the “world’s greatest horseman” and endurance rider. But this picture of him in a diving suit – apparently taken in New York Harbor – is one of the few photographs of the counterfeit cowboy!

Photograph courtesy of the American Heritage Center

After Frank’s death, the Lady Macbeth of this story took the helm of the Hopkins Ship of Charades. Frank’s widow, Gertrude, spent the rest of her life trying to hoodwink the world into believing that her late husband was the hero he pretended to be – and the first person she fooled was the author of “Shane” and “Monte Walsh.”

Long on Credulity, Short on Suspicion

Jack Schaefer was the author of two best-selling books about the demise of the Old West, both of which were made into movies. The classic *Shane* was released in 1952. Starring Alan Ladd, it told the bittersweet story of a gunfighter trying to come to terms with a changing world.

Monte Walsh, Schaefer’s book about the life and times of a turn-of-the-century cowboy, was turned into a movie in 1970 and starred Lee Marvin. More recently, America was treated to a television version of *Monte Walsh*, this time starring Tom Selleck.

Though trained as a journalist in Connecticut, Schaefer spent his spare time absorbing the history and memoirs of the men who had lived in the Old West. After the success of his first book, *Shane*, Schaefer moved to New Mexico and wrote about the west full time.

One of his lesser-known works was a delightful little book, *The Great Endurance Race – 600 Miles on a Single Mount, 1908, from Evanston, Wyoming, to Denver*, published in 1963. This book tells the story of a documented race. It also makes brief mention of the imaginary Galveston to Rutland endurance ride which Frank Hopkins claimed to have won in 1886.

Where did Schaefer get that information?

From Gertrude Hopkins!

“Jack Schaefer wrote me a while ago,” Gertrude said in a letter to a friend. The widow Hopkins went on to explain that the famous author was, “seeking information regarding the Galveston-Rutland ride and I did my best to be helpful.”

By “helpful,” Gertrude meant she tried to mislead Schaefer into believing the race actually happened.

In a letter dated June 1962, Gertrude apologized to Schaefer for not replying sooner to his request for confirmation of the Galveston ride. “My delay in replying to your letter is due to my trying in vain to find something that might lead to a clue in finding a record of the Galveston to Rutland race.”

Schaefer, who was known for his impeccable research, had been seeking independent proof of Hopkins’ alleged equestrian achievements.

He couldn’t find any!

We do not know if he believed Gertrude’s version of events.

We do know, however, that the scales tipped for Schaefer when he found what he thought was proof in another book. Unfortunately, the author of that book was Albert Harris, who had himself been duped by Frank Hopkins in the 1940s!

In a letter dated June, 1962, Schaefer writes, “Very interesting, and somewhat consoling, to learn that someone else has been plagued with negative results in regard to Frank Hopkins and his races. In the last few days, however, I have begun to get a few positive results. There is some data about Hopkins and the Galveston-Rutland race and his activities in Arabia in Albert Harris’s book *The Blood of the Arab, 1941....*”

Schaefer was hooked.

With the publication of his own small book, *The Great Endurance Race*, Schaefer became the next victim of the Hopkins Hoax.

And who was Schaefer discussing Frank Hopkins with?

Anthony Amaral, the magazine writer who did more to kick Hopkins’ tales onto the international stage than anybody else.

A Make-Believe Map

In July 1962 *Horse Lover’s Magazine* published a story entitled *Hidalgo and Frank Hopkins*.

This article describes how Frank Hopkins, an overlooked underdog of the American West, and his forgotten pal, Hidalgo, triumph over great hardships and beat Arab horsemen on their own ground.

Sounds like the premise for a great movie.

“Hidalgo will never have a bronze monument erected in his memory to grace a green turf as have Man O’ War and Citation,” lamented the story’s author, Anthony Amaral. “And for some reason his name and pluckiness escape the pages in the books that list the ‘Who’s Who’ of the equine world.”

Could the reason possibly be that there are photographs and documents proving the existence of Man O’ War and those other equine heroes?

Strangely, there was no map of this 1,000-year-old race, so Anthony Amaral invented one to illustrate his story.

The American author made no secret of his admiration for the man he described as “slender and dauntless” – even though he had never met Hopkins. So what evidence did the enthusiastic Amaral have to promote to the world the tainted story of Hidalgo and the Arabian race?

A single letter from the merry widow, Gertrude.

“Dear Mr. Amaral, I am sorry I do not seem to have any records of the [Arabian] ride you referred to in your letter to me of June 27th, 1962, although some mention must have been made of it at the time since the Congress of Rough Riders of the World backed it. The late Theodore Roosevelt (later our President) was the most interested.”

The unsuspecting Amaral had no way of knowing that it would later be proved that Frank Hopkins never went to Arabia and almost certainly never met Roosevelt.

Gertrude elaborated on the lie by hinting that the *New York Times* or the *Herald Tribune* may have reported on it.

In order to strengthen her argument, she wheeled in a long-time Hopkins ally, Charles B. Roth, the Denver salesman turned magazine writer.

“Perhaps Charles B. Roth in Denver knows where this [Arabian] ride was written up as he was a friend of Mr. Hopkins and knows of his rides.”

What proof did Roth, who wrote extensively about Hopkins during the 1930s, offer Amaral as evidence that Hopkins had won a 3,000 mile race in Arabia?

“I do not have any documentary proof of Mr. Hopkins’ race in Arabia. I am sorry, I have never seen a picture of Hidalgo,” Roth told Amaral.

Like Schaefer, Amaral was still looking for independent proof of Hopkins’ claimed feats.

Four years after contacting Gertrude, Amaral finally followed her suggestion regarding possible newspaper reports on the 1,000-year-old Arabian race. He wrote to the Library of Congress, asking if they had “anything that might indicate authenticity.” The prestigious National Library replied three weeks later.

“An examination of the 1888 and 1889 editions of the Index to the New York Daily Tribune and other sources has failed to reveal a reference to the ‘annual endurance event’ described in your letter.”

Amaral was stymied.

He could find no evidence.

What did he do?

He decided to publish the increasingly suspect Hopkins story again!

Only now his luck was changing.

Bob Gray, the editor and publisher of *Horseman* magazine, wasn’t buying it.

After being offered another version of the Hopkins tale, Gray raised a red flag of caution.

In a letter dated February 10, 1967, the editor wrote to Amaral asking for some documentation to prove the Arab race ever happened.

“Frankly, a lot of Arabian breeders simply won’t believe that tale. Not unless you’ve got some sources and some reliable authority to back it up. So can you come up with some sort of written award, newspaper clippings, letters from somebody other than Hopkins to pin down the authenticity of that ride?” Gray asked Amaral.

The wary publisher then expressed strong reservations about the story Amaral was trying to sell him.

“You can readily understand that our magazine would be accused of irresponsible reporting if we printed a story such as this without knowing the basis of the background facts.”

Heedless of Gray’s warning, and ignoring the lack of any independent proof to substantiate Hopkins’ Arabian race claims, Amaral sold the story elsewhere.

Who bought it?

America's most widely-read equestrian magazine!

Amaral's article, *Frank Hopkins... best of endurance riders?* was published in *Western Horseman* in December, 1969.

It was thanks to the *Western Horseman* article that the Hopkins tales multiplied beyond the boundaries of the United States and entered the English-speaking world at large.

When *Western Horseman* was contacted on 4 June 2003 by The Long Riders' Guild and warned that Hopkins' credibility had been destroyed by seventy historians, neither the editor nor the publisher responded. Follow-up emails and telephone calls also went unheeded.

What did *Western Horseman* do?

In the July 2003 issue of *Western Horseman* there was a short article about the forthcoming film in the "Horses and People" section.

"*Hidalgo* is based on a true story about the annual race in which entries typically were restricted to top Arabian horses. However, in 1890 a sheik invited Frank T. Hopkins, cowboy and U.S. Cavalry dispatch rider, to compete against the Bedouin horses and riders, and thereby hangs the tale," wrote *Western Horseman* reporter, Fran Devereux Smith.



Anthony Amaral invented a map to illustrate the imaginary Arabian race. Based on information obtained from Albert Harris and Gertrude Hopkins, Amaral believed the race started in Aden and ended in Syria. Unfortunately for Amaral, in another version of the story, Frank Hopkins said the 3,000 mile race started and ended in Aden!

Having sold the unsubstantiated Arabian race story to *Western Horseman* in 1969, Anthony Amaral apparently had second thoughts about Frank Hopkins, though Amaral never went public with his new reservations.

Curiously Amaral's book, *Mustang*, published in the late 1970s, does not mention either the much-vaunted Hidalgo or Frank Hopkins.

Had Amaral finally seen the light?

Too late – the damage was done.

Amaral died in the 1980s, but his original *Western Horseman* article reaped enormous publicity for Hopkins and became a legend in its own right.

Now there was only one step between Hopkins and Hollywood.

In 1976, the prestigious University of Oklahoma Press published a book entitled *The American Paint Horse*. In it, author Glynn Haynes swallowed the Hopkins legend hook, line and sinker.

Why?

Because Hidalgo, the mythical mustang, was said to be a pinto-colored horse.

And where did Haynes get this information?

"In the words of Anthony Amaral," Haynes wrote, and then went on to recirculate Hopkins' lies as they had been passed on from one lazy writer to another for forty years.

Starting with Charles B. Roth in the 1930s, the Frank Hopkins fantasies had been quietly making their way up the media food chain.

After generations of slapdash research, the myth reached its zenith when it was embraced by Hollywood.

The Key to the Magic Kingdom

Frank Hopkins needed a friend in Hollywood and he found one in John Fusco.

An award-winning screenwriter, John Fusco has a string of films to his credit including *Crossroads*, *Thunderheart* and *Spirit – Stallion of the Cimarron*.

"I really believe in research," Fusco told *Screenwriter* magazine in April 1993, and went on to talk about how he became "deeply immersed" in his subject-matter.

Yet Fusco resembled Charles Roth, the self-proclaimed "Angel towards the blowhards of the Old West." Like Roth, who first wrote about Hopkins in the 1930s, Fusco has shown sympathy for dubious characters of the Old West. Consider Fusco's decision to go against the historical trend and present Brushy Bill Roberts as the real Billy the Kid. Though most academics are convinced Roberts was a fraud, Fusco depicted Brushy Bill as the famous outlaw in his film *Young Guns*.

Hopkins was out of the same stable as Brushy Bill Roberts.

And Fusco found him equally intriguing.

He decided to write a screenplay that immortalized the counterfeit cowboy!

What Fusco could not have foreseen was that, like Harris, Dobie, Schaefer and Amaral, he was about to be led astray by Hopkins.

"I never took native history at face value, I always looked deeper into it," John Fusco told *Cowboys and Indians* magazine in April 2003.

Yet in the screenplay for the movie *Hidalgo*, Fusco included a scene in which Hopkins is supposedly present at the Battle of Wounded Knee.

What did Hopkins himself have to say about this infamous massacre?

In his unpublished manuscript, Frank wrote, "I saw Black Elk riding toward me. He was wild-eyed. I yelled at him to stop; there was a tepee that the women had left there and meat was still boiling on the fire. Black Elk and I went in there and ate the stew. While we were eating, some soldiers rode by and fired into the tepee and the shot went through the pot of stew, but we kept on talking just the same."

What inspired Hopkins to write this story?

He plagiarized it out of the 1932 first edition of *Black Elk Speaks*!

Famous Lakota mystic Black Elk really was at the massacre of Wounded Knee.

This is how he remembered it:

"We rode into the camp, and it was all empty. We were very hungry because we had not eaten anything since early morning, so we peeped into the tepees until we saw where there was a pot with papa (dried meat) cooked in it. We sat down in there and began to eat. While we were doing this, the soldiers shot at the tepee, and a bullet struck right between Red Crow and me. It threw dust in the soup, but we kept right on eating until we had our fill," Black Elk said.

There is no mention of Frank Hopkins in *Black Elk Speaks*, or indeed any other document linking him to the Lakota people.

Viggo Mortensen, of Lord of the Rings fame, has been cast to play Frank Hopkins in *Hidalgo*.

"This should be a Western like no other," Mortensen told *Cowboys and Indians* magazine in April 2003.

Truer words were never spoken.

Like Fusco, Mortensen too has been beguiled by Hopkins' stories, especially the episode at Wounded Knee.

"*Hidalgo* corrects historical misinformation, particularly with regard to the Lakota people," Mortensen told *Cowboys and Indians* magazine in April 2003. "The highlight of the shoot has been the painstaking recreation of the tragic massacre at Wounded Knee."

When doubts were raised about the credibility of Frank Hopkins' so-called "true story," John Fusco went on the attack.

In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* in March 2003, Fusco said, "I've been researching Hopkins' life for more than 12 years now and compiled research from more than 15 well-respected historians that verify this story."

The screenwriter went on belittle those who questioned Hopkins' version of events.

"Their comments sound like saloon tales to me," Fusco said.

Yet Fusco has never publicly announced the names of his "well-respected historians," nor revealed the sources of his "12 years of research."

Nevertheless, the Walt Disney Studio believed the story to be true.

Why?

Disney's Dilemma

According to various film-buff websites Disney was looking for a script which could compete with the Universal Pictures juggernaut, *Seabiscuit*.

Disney wanted a true story.

In rode Frank Hopkins.

The stage was set.

As the sun rose on the year 2003, *Hidalgo*, the mythical mustang, was lined up against *Seabiscuit*, a documented equine hero, in a cinematic horse-race.

A skillfully orchestrated publicity campaign began when the Walt Disney Studios trumpeted their forthcoming film *Hidalgo* as an \$80 million epic action-adventure film about "the ultimate underdog who became a legend."

Sound like *Seabiscuit*?

The screenplay delivered by John Fusco was allegedly "based on the true story of the greatest long-distance horse race in history. Pony Express rider Frank T. Hopkins (Viggo Mortensen), becomes the first American ever to enter the Ocean of Fire – a 3,000 mile survival race across the Arabian Desert and the greatest endurance horse race ever run."

So what justification did Disney have for claiming its film was historically accurate?

None!

Gregory Michno, noted author of many books about the Old West, said, "Coincidentally I am currently working on a book that discusses Hollywood versus history in western movies. These are some of the very points that will be examined, such as whether or not it is Hollywood's duty to tell accurate history, or simply entertain us with a good story. The latter may be the case, but it should not give us falsehoods under the guise of truth."

Nina Heyn, Disney's Executive Director of International Publicity, dismissed concerns about Hopkins' authenticity out of hand.

"No one here really cares about the historical aspects. Once a movie has been shot people move on to the others. We are like a factory. It's like making dolls, once the latest baby is out we go on to the next one. If it transpires that the historical aspects are in question, I don't think people would care that much. *Hidalgo* is a family film. It has little to do with reality," Heyn said.

Professor David Dary, a recipient of the Cowboy Hall of Fame Wrangler Award and author of more than a dozen books on the American West, took exception to Heyn's stance.

“Yes, the Hopkins story is exciting,” Dary agreed. “It has all of the ingredients that make a good story and in turn a good motion picture. But to misrepresent to the motion picture viewing public that the upcoming film is a ‘true story’ is not only misleading but it raises a serious question about the credibility of the Disney organization. Disney should simply tell the public Frank Hopkins' story is just a story and not the truth.”

Due to the unprecedented international controversy swirling around *Hidalgo*, Disney delayed release of the movie from October 2003 to March 2004.

To add to the confusion, although the trailer for *Hidalgo* still maintains the movie is “based on a true story,” a synopsis of the film which appears on the Disney website now claims it is “based on the autobiography of Frank Hopkins.”

This is disingenuous.

Firstly, an “autobiography” is assumed to be a true tale of somebody’s life.

Frank Hopkins’ claims to have raced across Arabia on *Hidalgo* are untrue!

Secondly, the so-called “autobiographical manuscript” written by Frank Hopkins in the 1930s was discovered by the international research team headed by The Long Riders' Guild, after filming had been completed.

With pressure building from the press, Disney circled their wagons and are now maintaining a wall of silence regarding the historical fantasies upon which their movie is based.

Emails to their publicity department have gone unanswered.

A letter to Michael Eisner, CEO of Walt Disney, has never been acknowledged.

Professor Dary thinks he knows why.

“The problem seems to be that they [Disney] made no attempt in the beginning to confirm John Fusco’s claim that the Hopkins story was true. They are now trying to ignore the truth and brush off questions about Hopkins’ credibility in hopes the issue will go away,” Dary said.

Hidalgo-gate

Thanks both to the Disney movie and the Internet, Frank Hopkins’ lies are spreading at an alarming rate. Even today magazine writers, authors, webmasters, screenplay writers, and Hollywood moguls are eagerly embracing this exciting, though implausible, tale.

The September 2003 issue of *Cowboys and Indians* magazine published a story entitled “Hollywood Horses,” which stated, “To be released later this year is the Disney period epic, *Hidalgo*, the true story of Pony Express rider Frank T. Hopkins and his paint horse *Hidalgo*, who take on the challenge of the 3,000 mile ‘Oceans of Fire’ race across the Arabian Desert.”

Insight Magazine recently reprinted a syndicated *New York Times* newspaper article from July 2003 which quoted Anthony Amaral’s 1969 *Western Horseman* magazine article and stated the movie *Hidalgo* is “being billed as an ‘epic action-adventure’ based on a true story.”

The internet site of the American Paint Horse Association boasts, “*Hidalgo*, an epic action adventure from Walt Disney Pictures, based on the true story of the greatest long-distance horse race in history, started production recently and will feature a registered American Paint horse in the starring role. In all, five American Paint horses are being used at various times to play the role of *Hidalgo*, the colorful equine star of the film.”

Hopkins’ lies are being circulated as fact in dozens of languages on websites around the world.

But if the Internet has been used to promote the Hopkins Hoax, it was also thanks to this 21st Century tool that the team of academics in five countries was able to uncover the paper trail which unmasked Hopkins as a fraud.

Intelligent use of the World Wide Web means the public is no longer forced to bow to the Disneyfication of history.

Previous ignorance of the facts is no defense for Disney now.

The famous Hollywood studio should follow the example of noted American scholar Dr. Don Worcester.

Though 88 years old, Worcester had the courage to admit Hopkins fooled him.

The Distinguished Emeritus at Texas Christian University briefly mentioned Hopkins in his book, *The Spanish Mustang*, and acknowledged he used passages from J. Frank Dobie's book instead of researching Hopkins himself.

But when presented with copies of Hopkins' unpublished manuscripts and articles, Dr. Worcester realized the man who claimed to be the world's greatest horseman was a complete fraud.

When asked if Hopkins should be credited with having created the largest Old West hoax of all time, Worcester laughed.

"I wouldn't say Frank Hopkins should be 'credited' with these stories but rather 'discredited' by them. I certainly can't think of a bigger hoax!"

The retired academic believes it is important for historians and researchers to come clean if they discover they have been duped.

"If the Walt Disney studio does not announce that the movie *Hidalgo* is fiction, then years from now people will be misled into believing it is a true story." said Worcester. "If these people don't admit they were misled, then I wouldn't trust them on anything else!"

It has now been proved that Frank Hopkins wears the dubious double crown of the greatest equestrian hoax and the biggest Old West fraud of all time.

The Long Riders' Guild, which coordinated the international team researching Hopkins' life and lies, is therefore calling on Disney to admit publicly that research mistakes were made and the movie is entirely fictional.

Basha O'Reilly is a Founding Member of The Long Riders' Guild. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society after riding her Cossack stallion from Russia to England. For more information about the largest ever study into the Hopkins Hoax, please visit www.thelongridersguild.com. There you will find a complete list of the documents and academics who made this unprecedented study possible.