

## Marketing a Texan as the “Marlboro Man”

by Scott Sosebee

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*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

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(Jan 30, 2023) If one were to ask anyone in the world to “draw a Texan” I have no doubt that what they would produce would be a rendering of a “cowboy.” Texas has become synonymous with cowboy culture through both its history as a cow-producing region, but also through the pervasive presence of “Texas Cowboys” in books, movies, television, and any other form of popular culture one could conjure. I suspect that for people of a certain generation their cowboy sketch would look a lot like John Wayne or perhaps Clint Eastwood; for the youngsters out there it might look more like Kevin Costner as John Dutton. But still others might have another icon in mind: “The Marlboro Man.” Since the 1960s the Phillip Morris Tobacco Company (now a part of the Altria Group) has used the cowboy as the symbol of its Marlboro Brand of cigarettes, which has been the best-selling cigarette in the nation almost since the moment it adopted the “Marlboro Man” as its symbol. What many may not know is that the first permanent “Marlboro Man” was a real, working ranch cowboy by the name of Carl “Bigun” Bradley.



We know decisively today that cigarette smoking is horrendous to not only the smoker’s health but also for those around them. Evidence is also conclusive that tobacco companies knew how bad cigarette smoking was even before the public did, but they hid that fact for decades. However, that fact—or perhaps better the obscuration of that fact—did not deter people throughout the nation from taking up the habit, especially in the years after World War II when millions of GIs returned from war hooked to the highly addictive habit after receiving free cigarettes from tobacco companies during the war. These same companies competed

mercilessly for customers in those years and the primary device they used was advertising. In the years between 1950 and 1970 (beginning in 1971 cigarette advertising was banned on television) cumulative advertising dollars spent on cigarettes led all other products. Selling cigarettes was big business.

Smoking cigarettes was profitable, but its image—at least in public—was also something else: masculine, especially to smoke an “unfiltered” cigarette. Through the mid-1960s, the biggest selling cigarettes were the British-American Tobacco Company’s “Lucky Strike” and “Pall Mall,” and R.J. Reynolds’ “Camels,” all three unfiltered cigarettes. Filtered cigarettes were invented in 1931 when the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company introduced “Parliament,” but that brand was marketed as an “upscale smoke” and commanded a premium price. Brown and Williamson then came out with their “Viceroy” brand in 1936, the first to be sold at a competitive price. However, while other companies came out with their own filtered brands, like R.J. Reynolds’ “Winstons,” filtered cigarettes were criticized as “too mild for men,” and mostly marketed as “suitable for women.”

The Phillip Morris’ entry into the filtered cigarette market was “Marlboro,” and in its first years they did market it primarily to women. Marlboro sold poorly, barely making a dent in market share, so in 1954 Phillip Morris—which at the time was nation’s smallest cigarette maker with none of their brands in the top ten of sales—decided to change the taste, packaging, and image of their cigarette. They asked their ad agency, Leo Burnett of Chicago, to design a campaign that would appeal to men. The agency’s product was a series of ads featuring a smattering of masculine images such as pilots, athletes, sportsmen, and—yes—cowboys. All of these men were rough-hewn and sported things like tattoos and scruffy whiskers. But, for the better part of ten years the campaign did not work, even while filtered cigarettes began to increase their sales. “Winston,” for example, overtook “Lucky Strike” as the bestselling cigarette in the United States.

Phillip Morris, and Leo Burnett, decided to change strategy in 1963. They agreed that the most effective image of the campaign had been the cowboy, so they decided to construct an entire campaign—television, print, and radio—around the “cowboy” and call it “Welcome to Marlboro Country.” They designed the campaign, but they needed a central character, one who would fit the “image.” Burnett executives suggested John Wayne or James Arness (the star of TV’s “Gunsmoke”), but Arness turned them down and Phillip Morris balked at Wayne’s asking price. They found what they were looking for when Neil McBain, a Burnett art director, was scouting locales for a soap ad in 1963. He was at the 6666 Ranch near Guthrie, Texas when he came across ranch foreman Carl, “Bigun” Bradley. He hired Bradley on the spot and he became the “Marlboro Man” who filmed and was photographed for all ads in all mediums. Bradley’s face—if not his name—became well-known throughout the nation.

Bradley was a unique popular culture figure, perhaps almost “too authentic.” He never made much money for portraying the Marlboro Man—less than \$10,000 a year—and so he never gave up his job on the 6666. He also famously refused to sign a contract with Phillip Morris, giving him the option to quit anytime he wanted to. But the campaign worked. In fact, it may very well be the most successful advertising campaign in business history. Marlboro almost immediately shot up to become a top ten cigarette brand and by the end of the 1970s it was the clear number-one selling brand in the U.S., garnering almost fifty-percent of the market. It continues that run today, selling about forty-percent of all cigarettes in the United States.

Unfortunately, “Bigun” Bradley did not live to see the phenomenal success of the campaign and sales. He continued working as a cowboy and in 1973 he rode off to deliver a horse he had sold to a neighbor. When he did not return his wife became concerned and asked two of the other 6666 hands to look for him. They found him face-down in a stock pond drowned with his horse; apparently the horse had reared and bucked—some have speculated at the sight of the ubiquitous rattlesnakes that squirm around King County—and then slipped and fell on Bradley, pinning him under water. He was only 36, and newly married. And when they pulled the “Marlboro Man” from the water, what did he have in his front pocket? Yes, a pack of cigarettes—Kool cigarettes, a brand he had exclusively smoked since he was 16.

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