

DATE: 31st AUG, 1938

SCENE: 2B

TAKE: 12

Jesse James's getaway horse won't jump off a cliff, no matter how fast ace stuntman Cliff Lyons gallops her, snorting, toward the yawning edge.

For four hours now the film crew has been working on this stunt, destined to be the equestrian centerpiece of *Jesse James* (1939). They've tried whips and spurs, hollering and waving, even threw lit firecrackers at the little mare's hindlegs, hoping to panic her over. Now they have her wearing movie blinkers: serene equine eyes painted on a headstall, invisible in an extreme long shot. Tricks just like these have taught us horses in the Wild West loved to china-shop through saloons, collapse over tripwires, and soar boldly off fifty-foot cliffs under heavy gunfire—so utter was their devotion to the American cowboy.

But ace stuntman Cliff Lyons is careless on his first approach—he doesn't gallop fast enough, giving his mount time to notice the land is missing. All twelve subsequent jumps have ended with the little mare skidding to a halt, crow-hopping and shaking her mane at the abyss: a hard no.

On the shore below, Twentieth Century Fox contract director Henry King's threadbare patience frays. He's spent six months preparing to shoot five seconds, scouting the ideal ratio of sublime crag to rangy poplar, consulting depth charts. Anachronistically poured in 1931, decades after the James Gang rode the range, the manmade Lake of the Ozarks remains the only deep-water lake in Missouri. It rests several counties away from the production's home base in sleepy Pineville, Missouri, where a star-struck city council let his crew bury Main Street in fill dirt and nail wooden facades over the storefronts downtown: Justice of the Peace, Acme Tool Company,

First National Bank of Northfield. Due to these and other on-location expenses, Henry King's budget for *Jesse James* is already over a million dollars and climbing each second this goddamn horse doesn't jump off that goddamn cliff.