

**CRIME, HISTORY,
AND HOLLYWOOD**

CRIME, HISTORY, AND HOLLYWOOD

*Learning Criminal Justice History
through Major Motion Pictures*

Willard M. Oliver
Nancy E. Marion

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To
James F. Hilgenberg, Jr.,
who shares my love of history and has been a good mentor,
colleague, and friend.
and
Joyce Hilgenberg,
a beautiful lady and friend to the family,
Requiescat in Pace.
W.M.O.

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In 2003, one of the authors (Oliver) began teaching in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University, in Huntsville, Texas. One of the classes, which was part of the core curriculum, was the History of Criminal Justice. As I had previously authored a book on the subject (*A History of Crime and Criminal Justice in America*, 2nd Edition, with James Hilgenberg, Jr., Carolina Academic Press), I regularly taught the class for our criminal justice majors. With each passing semester, more and more students would challenge me on my presentation of history. They would tell me in some major motion picture they had watched, they saw something different than what I was conveying in my lectures. I told them the film was historically inaccurate and, expecting to move on, continued to lecture. Yet the students would usually stop me and ask me to explain in more detail why it was wrong. Thus, I found myself taking more and more time to teach the historical inaccuracies of Hollywood films than actually teaching criminal justice history.

I toyed with the idea of teaching one of my criminal justice history courses through the use of film, but decided that students would come away with a very sparse knowledge of criminal justice history overall. Still, students continued to challenge my read of history with their read of Hollywood films. Finally, in the summer of 2006, I was asked to teach a special topics course on whatever I liked. I decided to try teaching the concepts that are now found in this book, *Crime, History, & Hollywood*. By teaching students the real history, as well as the techniques that Hollywood uses to subvert real history which make films more simple and enjoyable to watch, I could teach them how to analyze a film for its accuracy. What happened next amazed me.

Students came to class fully prepared to discuss and criticize the historical accuracy of the films we watched in class. Either they had dog-eared a page in the book and drew upon that to point out a historical discrepancy in the film or they surfed the web for critical reviews of the films to see what others had to say. Many found historical websites or those maintained by historians that also reviewed our films in question, and from these, the students brought to class many observations, small and large, that I had overlooked in my own

analysis. Then, when these mistakes were brought up in class, the students often became engaged in debates as to whether the historical inaccuracies were mistakes or intentional on the part of the director. And sometimes at issue were debates over whether something was historically inaccurate or not. Further, students with specific interests brought into class observations based on their particular knowledge of such things as baseball, guns, and automobiles; observations that further led to the recognition of historical inaccuracies.

Thus, in the end, after having taught this same class multiple times, and with each film shown, learning new mistakes from my students, I would be remiss in not thanking them for making this book possible. Still further, I should acknowledge Sam Houston State University and the College of Criminal Justice for allowing me the opportunity to teach such a class in the first place.

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