

Where the Red Fern Grows

US : 1974 : dir. Norman Tokar : 97 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Stewart Peterson](#)
 James Whitmore; Beverly Garland; Jack Ging; Lonny Chapman

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Appealing family drama about a boy's devotion to two hunting dogs, and how his experiences teach him about responsibility and growing up. Set in 1930s Oklahoma. Based on Wilson Rawls' novel. Followed years later by a sequel. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"Family fare that borrows liberally from Disney. Stewart Peterson is a young lad who wants nothing more than to own and train redbone hounds to be the best coon hunters in the county. **½"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Depression? What Depression? It may be 1930s Oklahoma, but a 12-year old boy (Peterson) can still horde \$50 to buy himself a pair of racoon hounds and start adventuring towards manhood. A syrupy kids' yarn from former Disney animal-movie specialist Tokar, backed by appropriate soundtrack odes from The Osmonds and Andy Williams."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Fine family fare about a boy's love for two hunting dogs and his coming of age in Oklahoma in the 1930s.¹ Rated "G" **** "

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

¹ Coming of age for *what*? Do they have an "age of consent" for racoon-hunting now?

"Momma, d'you think god made a heaven for all good dogs?"

Forcing a boy of 12 to utter lines like that must surely amount to cruel and unusual punishment, but in that case Stewart Peterson was being severely punished in this film, for he calls on the almighty at regular intervals. The viewer, meanwhile, is put through the wringer by a selection of insipid little songs performed by Andy Williams and written – wait for it – by The Osmonds. From which it will be plain whose religious agenda is behind this film. Think "**Little House on the Prairie**" deep in the Ozarks, and you won't be far from the mark.

Not that it is a bad film at all in the boy-and-his-dog stakes. Platinum blond Peterson plays the central role of XX, a good hard-working farmboy with an unusually sympathetic father in Jack Ging (?) and a conventionally sympathetic grandpa in James Whitmore. The menfolk know a boy's gotta do what a boy's gotta do, which in this case means getting a dog of his own so he can hunt to extinction the local racoon population. After much praying to god on his part XX consults grandpa, who suggests he take a more proactive role in raising the means to buy a dog for himself. This XX does, and in no time flat two puppy hunting dogs are waiting for him in the depot of the next town downriver. He names them Sam and Ann, and sets to work training them for "treeing coons" (in Oklahoma, racoon hunting seems to entail a deal of tree-felling – killing two wild creatures for the price of one).

One day XX is challenged by a couple of young brothers from a neighbouring farm to prove his dogs' mettle by tracking down the legendary local "ghost coon". These are two sassy, disagreeable boys, in dire need of fustigation in the seating area, and grandpa is so galled by their impudence he urges XX to accept the challenge. The three boys meet by night and run the ghost coon to ground, but a quarrel ensues and the elder brother is fatally stabbed (he trips and falls on his own blade). XX is so shocked and guilt-stricken he pledges his mother never to hunt again, but a boy's gotta do what a boy's gotta do, and grandpa tries to revive his spirits by suggesting he enter the two dogs in the annual state coon-hunting contest. The rest, of course, plays out exactly as one would expect. "**WHERE THE RED FERN GROWS**" refers to a supposed indian legend where two star-crossed lovers were found dead, and between their bodies grew the rare red fern, a symbol of the most precious kind of love. How that ties in with the film I shall not reveal.

Peterson plays his part functionally, lending XX a quiet dignity to offset the stuffiness of such a goody-goody role. He travels barefoot throughout in the one pair of threadbare shoulder-slung britches, but otherwise the film gives no indication that the times are unduly hard. Indeed, when he treks to the nearby town to collect his new dogs, he's made self-conscious by the better-dressed town boys riding about on shiny new bicycles. One would scarcely think half the country was near to starvation.

See subject index under **DEATH / DYING CHILDREN, DEPRESSION ERA** (1930s settings), **DOGS** and **GRANDPARENTS**.