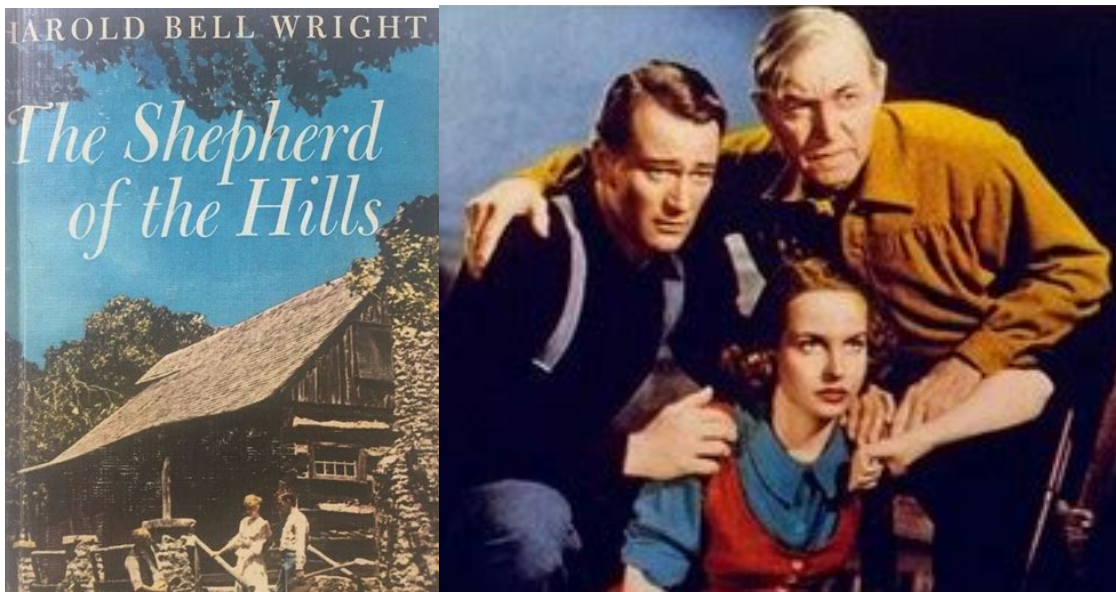


## Film Review: "*Shepherd of the Hills*"

This is an obscure 1941 film emphasizing the Christian themes of **love**, **redemption** and **forgiveness**. It stars John Wayne, Betty Field, and Harry Carey Senior, along with a cast of highly-acclaimed and veteran character actors. Its plot is **quite** loosely based on the novel by Christian Minister Harold Bell Wright of the same title, and takes place in Southwestern Missouri's Ozark hills during the *Great Depression*.



**John Wayne, Betty Field, & Harry Carey Senior**

A mysterious elderly man calling himself **Daniel Howitt** (Harry Carey Senior) appears in this remote region of Missouri's Ozarks looking to purchase some land on which to retire. At first, *Howitt* is suspected of being a "revenuer" from the **Treasury Department**, but he quickly gains acceptance and demonstrates his benign intentions by successfully treating a *moonshiner's* bullet wound, and later saving the life of a sick little girl whose windpipe was partially blocked. It was commonly acknowledged that *Daniel Howitt* has "**the knowin' of city ways.**"

These mountain people are impoverished and backward, and reside in a place where modern medicine, telephones, and even banking have never intruded. Instead, they rely on "*mountain learning*" and superstition to explain events. One commonly held belief is that everything about the Matthews clan is cursed, including their land. Even his kinfolk frequently remind **Young Matt Matthews** (John Wayne) that his family is the source of that curse. Every misfortune is attributed to the curse, which is presumed to have originated when *Young Matt's* father abandoned his wife -- **Sarah Matthews** -- while *Young Matt* was an infant. *Young Matt* has vowed a blood oath to kill his father for abandoning his mother, and thereby end the family curse.

Because of the curse, most of this mountain community carefully avoid the Matthews Homestead in *Moaning Meadows*, and it remains untouched since *Sarah* died many years before. Despite the curse, *Howitt* offers to buy it, and then proceeds to make *Young Matt's* bitter and hate-filled **Aunt Mollie** (Beulah Bondi) a generous offer that she can't refuse. Steeped in superstition like everyone else, *Young Matt* opposes *Howitt's* purchase of *Moaning Meadows*, and even threatens *Howitt* with a rifle in an attempt to drive him away. He tells *Howitt* that only his mother *Sarah* is fit to be there, since that's where she is buried.

**Undeterred by *Young Matt*, *Howitt* begins moving into the former Matthews Homestead when he is visited by a young woman and neighbor named *Sammy Lane* (Betty Field,) who also happens to be *Young Matt's* love interest. It is at this point in the film where an explanation for *Sammy's* puzzled stares at *Howitt* are finally understood, when she acknowledges *Howitt's* striking resemblance to *Young Matt*. *Howitt* immediately concedes that *Sammy's* suspicions are correct, and that he is *Matt's* father and the man who abandoned *Sarah* and *Young Matt* 25 years ago. (He does not divulge any reason until later.) Because of his blood oath, *Sammy* is fearful that *Young Matt* will murder *Howitt* if he discovers his true identity.**



### **Sammy Is Struck by the Shared Resemblance**

In their candid conversations, *Sammy* informs *Howitt* that this mountain community used to be a much happier place, where pious people **"...sang songs and worked. Now all they do is sit around and try to outsmart the government."** She is referring to the fact that distilling corn liquor has become the area's primary source of employment, and moonshine its currency, facts that *Sammy* equates with evil and devilry.

*Howitt* suggests to her that, **"Maybe there's a way of going ahead by getting back to the way you were."** By this he clearly meant abandoning their moonshine culture and economy, and a return to happier and more pious times. Oddly, this was a theme that went undeveloped in the film, since there's no scene in which *Howitt* speaks out against either corn liquor or intemperance. However, the local trading post soon experiences a decline in the demand for moonshine, which many blame on *Howitt*.

Soon afterward, *Howitt* engages in a third act of Christian charity by paying to have ***Granny Becky's*** (Marjorie Main) eyesight restored by a physician from a neighboring city, despite her being blind since birth. A large gathering of the community is invited to celebrate the "*unveiling*" of *Granny Becky's* bandages, so her kin and neighbors can witness this miracle. It's a moving scene, as *Granny Becky* begins to associate the many voices she recognizes with the faces she can now see for the first time. Unfortunately, she also recognizes and verbalizes the same thing *Sammy* first saw, that *Young Matt* is the *spitting image* of *Daniel Howitt*.



***Granny Becky* Recognizes Father & Son**

*Young Matt* immediately seeks to retrieve his rifle from his horse in order to shoot *Howitt* and thereby fulfill his blood oath. However, a young cousin grabs *Young Matt's* rifle before he can reach it, and attempts to throw it over a cliff so *Howitt* won't be murdered. Wishing to see the curse end with the death of *Howitt*, the boy's mother, *Aunt Mollie*, tries

to grab the rifle from him, but their *tug-of-war* results in her son being accidentally but fatally wounded in the struggle. This immediately ends the celebration on a very sad and tragic note. After witnessing this tragedy, *Granny Becky* declares: **"I wish I'd stayed stone blind in the good, clean dark."**

*Sammy* tries to convince *Young Matt* that his father clearly must be a changed man because he's been a "good shepherd" to these mountain folk, and has only benefitted the community since his return. Like most headstrong males his age, *Young Matt* stubbornly refuses to listen to anyone, even *Sammy*. *Sammy* tells him bluntly that if he intends to fulfill his blood oath, all hope is over between the two of them. To this *Young Matt* replies that **"there never was no hope between us,"** and that marriage was never a possibility because of the Matthews Curse.



***Sammy Trying to Reason with Young Matt***

In the film's *denouement*, *Howitt* spies *Young Matt* approaching his new home with his rifle-in-hand and revenge in his eyes, but courageously walks out to meet him, anyway. He previously told *Sammy* that if he had to die to free *Young Matt* from the Matthews Curse and *Matt's* blood oath, he was willing to accept that fate. Just as *Young Matt* is about to shoot him at close range with his rifle, *Howitt* surprisingly shoots him first with a pistol in a non-lethal area, and *Young Matt* drops to the ground.



**First on the Draw**

In the next scene, a team of surgeons from the city -- who could only have been hired by *Daniel Howitt* -- are attending to *Young Matt* at the home of *Sammy Lane* and her father. As *Young Matt* is recovering from surgery, he hears *Howitt* and *Sammy* conversing on the other side of a sheet that's been draped around his bed to improvise a surgical "*theater*" for his doctors. *Howitt* discloses to *Sammy* that the reason

he didn't return years ago is because he's been serving a prison sentence for killing a man. All his actions thus far have been aimed at discouraging *Young Matt* from making the same tragic error that he made 25 years ago.

Hearing this, *Young Matt* experiences an epiphany, and immediately accepts his father's explanation and forgives him. And, now that the curse is presumably lifted -- and following *Young Matt's* astonishingly rapid recovery from a bullet wound -- he indicates that he would happily marry *Sammy* if she were to ask him nicely.

As with most fiction, we are obliged to "*suspend disbelief*" here, as well. We are never informed how *Daniel Howitt* miraculously managed to accumulate significant wealth during the *Great Depression* while spending 25 years in prison for murder. Likewise, when Howitt first enters his former home, the Matthews Homestead, it's in nearly pristine condition despite the intervening years. In addition, Matt's rapid recovery from his bullet wound is a miracle nearly on par with *The Virgin Birth*. If viewers are able to overlook details such as these, this is a moving and entertaining film and well worth watching.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** A play far more closely resembling Harold Bell Wright's book has been produced in Branson, Missouri for more than 60 years. It has a large, regional following in Southwestern Missouri, Eastern Oklahoma, and Northwestern Arkansas, in addition to many others who are touched by its themes of love, redemption and forgiveness. Many make the pilgrimage to Branson each year to see the play reenacted at the *Branson Family Entertainment Park*.