



- [About Slackerwood](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Venue guide](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Archive by category](#)
- [Archive by month](#)
- [Contact](#)

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Interview: Craig Whitney, 'The Garden and the Wilderness'

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on June 11, 2013 - 1:30pm in [Local Indies](#)



In Greek mythology, Icarus is given a pair of wings constructed out of wax and feathers by his father, with the advice that he is to follow his flight path and not to fly too close to the sun or the sea. Icarus ignores his father's advice and, through his curiosity, unknowingly flies too close to the sun, which melts his wings and sends him falling to his death in the sea. The popular understanding of this tale is the consequence of not minding elders and of personal over-ambition. But maybe filmmaking legend Stanley Kubrick had it right during his 1997 D.W. Griffith Lifetime Achievement Award **acceptance speech**: The moral really is to build better wings.

Austin filmmaker [Craig Whitney](#) has taken Kubrick's advice to heart. Instead of searching for film projects to suite his taste, he "built better wings" and started [Better Archangel Pictures](#) in 2008 to coincide with the release of his first short film, the award-winning *Harvest Home*. The University of Texas alum, who was quick to point out that he had no formal filmmaking training, has swiftly navigated his way through the industry (*Harvest Home* premiered at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival's Short Film Corner). His second short, *The Garden and the Wilderness*, was recently chosen by the Houston Film Commission to represent the state at this year's [Texas Filmmaker's Showcase](#) on June 30 in L.A.

A modern day Western filmed on-location in Central Texas, *The Garden and the Wilderness* tells the story of Will James (Larry Grant Harbin), an aging ranch hand who learns that the land he has tended for decades will be sold to a developer following the owner's death. Whitney says he became inspired to write and direct the short after reading an article in *The Atlantic* years ago about the caretaker of the former king of Afghanistan's private hunting grounds. Work on the film began in 2009, and the film premiered about two years later at the Rome International Film Festival in Rome, Georgia.

Slackerwood: Where did you get the name for your production company, Better Archangel Pictures?

Craig Whitney: There's a part of *Apocalypse Now* that I really always liked. They're telling Martin Sheen's character about the mission that they're sending him on and they're talking about Col. Kurtz, Marlon Brando's character, and the general talks about this mission. Kurtz had supposedly ordered these four Viet Cong operatives killed and Martin Sheen in the voiceover says, "He didn't get approval from the generals or nothing, he just thought it up and did it." And the name of the mission was Operation Archangel.

I've always liked that because I don't have any formal film training, in fact, I don't think I've ever taken anything apart from like an informal seminar, or something like that. So, when people are like, "How did you get into film?" I'm always like, "I don't know. I just kind of thought it up and did it." I figured the name Archangel Pictures was probably already taken. It's a pretty generic-sounding name.

What did your family and friends think when you went into filmmaking?

Whitney: I think all of my friends, it's exciting to them. A lot of people I knew in high school had two kids in their early twenties, or they're working at a job they don't particularly like, so the idea that I'm going off to film festivals or flying out to L.A. for the Texas Filmmaker's Showcase seem very glamorous to them because they don't know the realities of what it's actually like.

So, all my friends are supportive and they'll think it's cool, but I have so many friends that are in the film industry, we all watch each other's films and work on each other's projects and stuff like that, so it's not quite as novel to them as it is to my non-cinematic

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industry friends. I think my parents, they don't really get the kind of movies that I want to make, but they're extremely supportive of me because they recognize how passionate about it and how many sacrifices I make in my life to do it and they respect that even though their idea of a good movie and my idea of a good movie might not always align perfectly.

Slackerwood: Where did the title for *The Garden and the Wilderness* come from?

Whitney: E. L. Powell. I believe he's a Baptist preacher. I think he's from Tennessee. He was one of the most respected preachers in Tennessee or something. One of the things that attracted me to the article in *The Atlantic* was that it really reminded me of the Garden of Eden. I think that was kind of the seed that germinated in my mind along with the bare elements of the plot about a man taking care of the hunting ranch. There are a lot of tiny little Easter eggs seeded throughout the film about various little Edenic similarities. The youngest son is named Seth, which is Adam and Eve's third child. So, I was reading a lot about the Garden of Eden and religious writings like that. And that sermon just absolutely blew me away when I read it.

Powell in this sermon talks about kind of the Fortunate Fall, but he talks about it in a very 19th-century, early 20th-century American kind of way. He's talking about this Garden of Eden story but in this very sort of technologically oriented, American, Manifest Destiny sort of way. He's kind of saying that just as it was good that Adam and Eve left the Garden to go out into the wider world, we, as Americans, have this destiny to go out into the rest of the country and spread our wings and flex our muscles and grow.

There's this tension in the movie between the ranch and a bit more of a, I don't want to say a spiritual way of life, but they have more of a connection to the land, the James family that lives on the ranch full time, versus the Porlock family who owns the property but never comes there.



Slackerwood: What was the research process like?

Whitney: I probably watched more deer hunting videos than any person of my very, very limited hunting background will ever watch in their entire life. Some of them were amazing. There was one that was called *The Legacy of a Deer Hunter*, I think. Imagine Larry the Cable Guy doing an impression of George W. Bush and that's what this guy acted like.

At the beginning of this video he's showing you his house and from ceiling-to-floor, all the way across the wall (there's) deer antlers and heads. It was impressively off-putting. It was a monument to what a great hunter this guy was. He's talking about in the video: "What is my legacy I'm going to leave to my son as a hunter?" He goes on every possible kind of hunting expedition that you can go on.

He was brilliant, he was so good at it, but every time he would shoot something he would say, "Jiminy Christmas." He was like James Bond when he was lining up the shot but when he'd get up to the deer he would just lose it. He would get more and more excited. It was really important to me to watch all this stuff because I grew up in New England and I don't have any connection whatsoever to the way of life that was depicted in the movie. I have much more in common with the owners of the ranch than I do with the people who live on it. So it was very important to me to understand the mentality of the characters as best I could.

Slackerwood: Where did you find the ranches in *The Garden and the Wilderness* and was it difficult to get approval to film there?

Whitney: It was not difficult to get approval once we found the right ranch. There's a prologue section of the movie and we filmed that in September of 2010 and that was down in Lockhart. The owner of that ranch had a friend in Waelder [Texas], who had a 19th-century schoolhouse and a residence. He bought both of these buildings, had them moved to his ranch and had them connected. He was an archaeologist for the State of Texas during his professional career, so he had all of these great antiques: furniture, books.

It was just an amazing house and it was absolutely perfect, not only because it was just so right for the combination of being rustic enough for the family to live there, but being picturesque enough to think that a wealthy New England family would want to come there on vacation. All of the ranchers couldn't have been nicer to us or accommodating and were so hospitable. We wouldn't have been able to do this without them. We used four different exterior locations to represent the ranch.

Slackerwood: What was the most difficult part of the film?

Whitney: I think the toughest part of the shoot was the following day we were shooting the scene where he's talking about "in 50 years this will be houses" and we were filming in this tiny pasture on the same ranch. When we went out to scout, it had a couple young ponies that were perfectly well behaved when there were two or three of us in the meadow, but when we got 20 people and three or four cars out there they started getting very antsy and made it very difficult, because I was as concerned for people's safety as I was getting my shots. We didn't have an animal handler that day (and) unfortunately we had to reshoot that scene because of the difficulties that posed.

Keep an eye on the [website](#) for *The Garden and the Wilderness* to find out more about the film and when it will be available for you to see it yourself.

[article on Craig Whitney film maker,](#)

Submitted by Claire Kincaid on June 14, 2013 - 4:47pm.

What a creative mind Whitney has. I love to learn the thought processes behind all the decisions that do into film making. Break a leg, Whitney.