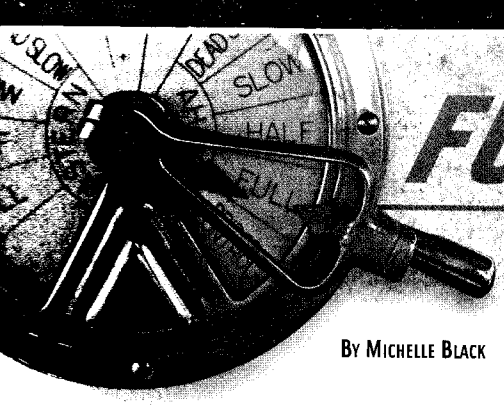


FULL STEAM AHEAD

The Steampunk movement goes west.

By Michelle Black

With his degree in Victorian history, history and physics, Thomas Willeford found a new hobby in blackpowder shooting and he became a cowboy action shooter with SASS's West Shore Posse in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, from 1999-2001. "I didn't have the best shot," he admits, "but I would show up in a different costume every time."

His love of the Victorian-era period clothing got him interested in Steampunk, and since he was not the best shootist in the end, he shifted gears and became a purveyor of handmade corsetry, leather goods and other Steampunk accessories at Brute Force Studios. He recently dressed a character for a Steampunk episode of ABC's *Castle*.

When asked what he thinks cowboy action shootists and Steampunkers have in common, Willeford responds, "They want to live in adventure. . . . People who like to role play will find any excuse to do it as much as possible."

Steampunk . . . Say What?

Steve Hauff, noted train historian and author, was the only man in the room of Steampunk enthusiasts not dressed in funkified Victorian garb, but you could tell from his authoritative voice that he loved to share the history of the steam locomotive. This transportation phenomenon that tamed the vast distances of the Old West frontier was finding a new and admiring audience at the "Weird, Weird West" Steamcon convention in November 2010.

The growing cultural phenomenon of Steampunk that attracted 2,000 participants to Seattle, Washington, is often described as "Victorian Science Fiction," but that sound bite does not truly capture these Steam Age enthusiasts. Steampunk embraces not only its own literary and dramatic genre, but it also has become a style of dress, an aesthetic movement and even a type of music.

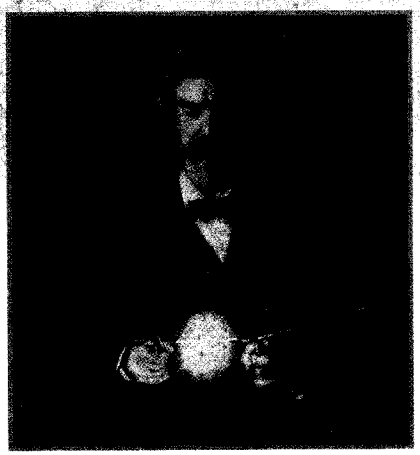
What Wild West showman Buffalo Bill Cody might wear if he produced a Steampunk convention.

– Designed by Robert Ray / original photo courtesy Robert G. McCubbin Collection –

Though Steampunk is often associated with the Science Fiction novels of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, the name itself evolved as a joking play on words by fantasy author K.W. Jeter, who suggested, in a letter to *Locus* magazine in 1987, that the speculative Historical Fiction he and some of his fellow Science Fiction authors were writing should be labeled "Steampunk," in contrast to the popular "Cyberpunk" novels of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. Cyberpunk stories typically take place in a dystopian future. Steampunk novels, in contrast, are more often set in a re-imagined, steam-driven 19th century in which all manner of fantastic inventions are posited to exist and technology, in the grand tradition of the Victorians, is viewed as an exciting and positive hope for the future.

Gibson and Sterling even went on to contribute their own entry into Steampunk literature in 1990 with *The Difference Engine*. The book is set in an alternate 1850s London in which Charles Babbage's mechanical computer becomes a functioning reality and dramatically changes the British industrial revolution.

Mike Perschon, a college English instructor and doctoral candidate who is writing his dissertation on Steampunk literature, defines Steampunk as an applied aesthetic to be found in a wide array of expression, be it film, costuming, art, gaming or home décor.



Mark Twain: An Original Steampunker

The high voltage current passing through author Mark Twain brought the lamp to incandescence in Nikola Tesla's lab in the spring of 1894. Twain's love for technology led him to invest in promising inventions, including a steam pulley. He wrote in his autobiography, "The steam pulley pulled $32,000 out of my pocket in 16 months, then went to pieces and I was alone in the world again, without an occupation."

– True West Archives –

His website, the Steampunk Scholar, breaks down the essential elements of this aesthetic to include: "neo-Victorian"—drawing from the time period of roughly 1839 to the beginning of WW I; "retrofuturistic"—how the Victorians saw their own future; and "technofantasy"—anachronistic technology, either ahead of its own time or not yet possible.

So, in essence, Steampunk has no "punk," but the term rolls off the tongue a lot quicker than, say, "Neo-Victorian, retro-futurist technofantasy."

The newly-restored Virginia & Truckee railroad in Carson City/Virginia City, Nevada, was a dream destination for these Steampunk enthusiasts. Those gathered below in September 2010 include folks from the Great Basin Costume Society of Reno, Nevada, and the Sacramento, California, Steampunk Society.

– By Dusty Bacon / *DustyCouture.com* –

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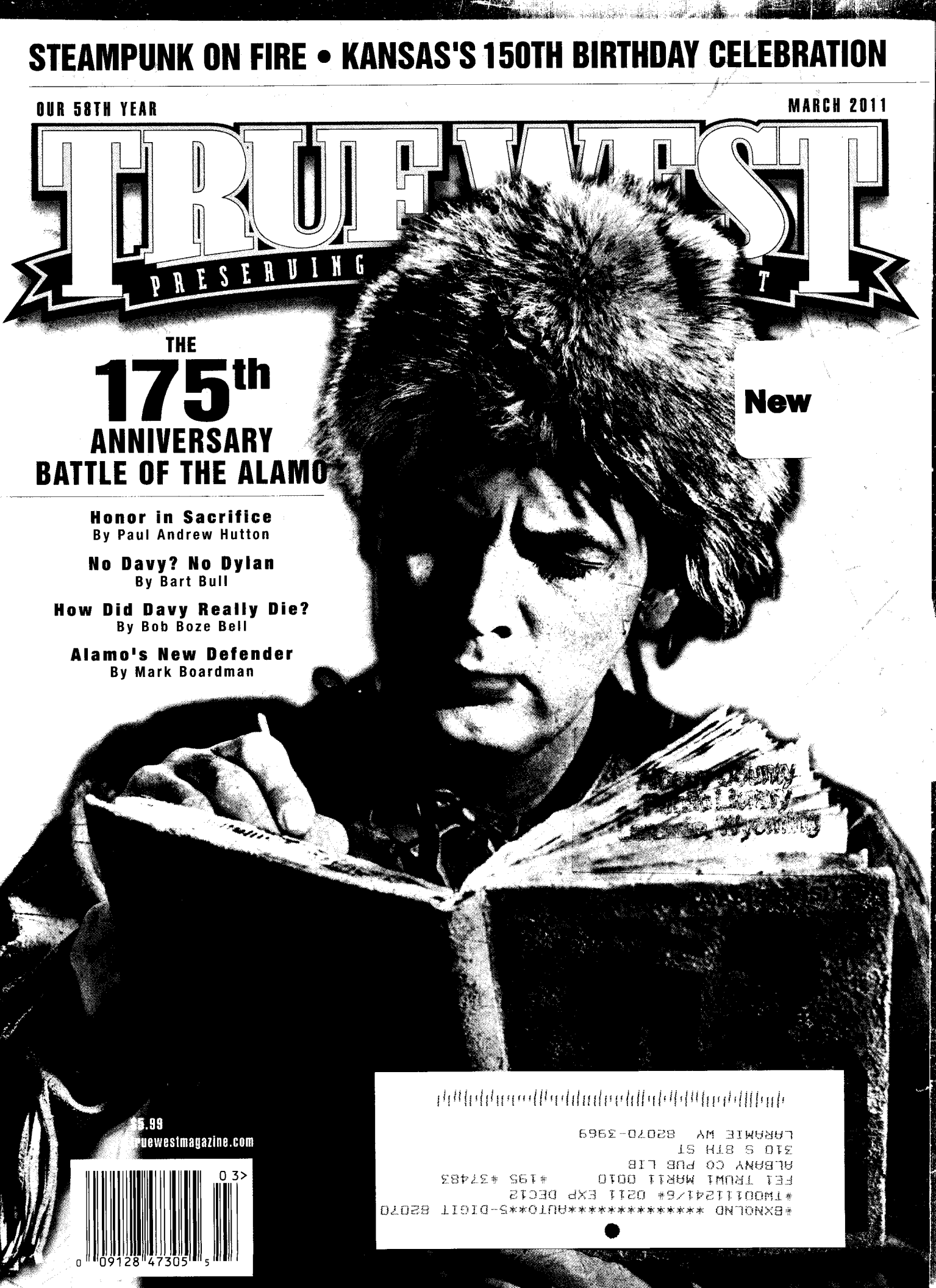

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