

# Cooper and a time for heroes

Three weeks ago, at a celebration honoring my father Gary Cooper's 100th birthday, I had the opportunity to sit in the chambers of my paternal grandfather, Judge Charles Cooper, chief justice of the State Supreme Court in Helena, Mont. For the first time, my sights fell on the valleys and mountains and big sky of my father's boyhood, which shaped his concept of America. I walked around the family ranch near Craig and brought home to Manhattan some earth that I'll put on my father's gravesite in Long Island.

On Sept. 11, a new mountain of earth was created through the extermination of human life. It is now a sacred place, and

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR



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questions of justice, strength and courage fill my thoughts — all of the qualities my father tried to bring to life on the screen. He used to say, "I want to portray the best a man can be, the best an American can be."

A hero can be defined as an ordinary man or woman doing extraordinary things.

How moved he would have been at the heroism of the thousands who risked their own lives at the charred skeleton of the World Trade Center to help in whatever way they could. I wish he could have known of

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Todd Beamer and the passengers of Flight 93, who heard what had happened in New York and determined to take action against their hijackers. Theirs is the American spirit that Gary Cooper tried to capture in his most famous roles — Sergeant York of World War I, baseball great Lou Gehrig, Robert Jordan in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," and, of course, Sheriff Will Kane of "High Noon."

Isn't "High Noon" an apt metaphor for the showdown our country is facing now? We are collectively like Will Kane, who looked for backup from his fellow citizens, only to have the good people cite "real and understandable reasons" for not participating in the town's defense. Will America be rejected by the townspeople (today—the

world community) as Kane was when he asked them help?

Our "High Noon" of the spirit is in headlines every day. Ordinary men and women are doing extraordinary things, just as my father knew they could. They are doing it in real life, in an unscripted drama with an end that has yet to be written. If Gary Cooper were dealing with the larger, global reality of recent days, he might turn to his favorite and famous lines from John Donne: "No man is an island, entire unto itself." I pray that our friends, the townspeople of the world community, will back the "sheriffs" who guard our destinies, and stand fully by our side in our time of need. If they do not, I fear the rest of the Donne lines will also ring tragically true: "Do not send to know for whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee."

— Maria Cooper Janis