



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

Native American Headdress Chief Thunderbird aka Richard Davis

August 6, 1866 - April 6, 1946



The Museum was very pleased in 2015 to receive a donation of a Native American, Cheyenne Headdress. The headdress was owned by [Chief Thunderbird \(Richard Davis\)](#), who was an actor in early 1900's, known for his work on *Annie Oakley* (1935), *Laughing Boy* (1934) and *Silly Billies* (1936). Additional pictures of Chef Thunderbird can be viewed at the [Autry Museum of the American West website](#) and on [Wikipedia](#).

The Museum's exhibit includes Chief Thunderbird's Headdress and selected pictures of the Chief. The exhibit will be expanded in 2016 to include various pictures of Native Americans in western films with descriptions of their roles and commentary on the presentation and interpretation of the actor's roll in the film.

An Important Note on Bald Eagle and Golden Eagle Feathers

[The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act](#) (16 U.S.C. 668-668c), enacted in 1940, and amended several times since then, prohibits anyone, without a permit issued by the Secretary of the Interior, from "taking" bald eagles, including their parts, nests, or eggs. The Act provides criminal penalties for persons who "take, possess, sell, purchase, barter, offer to sell, purchase or barter, transport, export or import, at any time or any manner, any bald eagle ... [or any golden eagle], alive or dead, or any part, nest, or egg thereof." The Act defines "take" as "pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb."



Native American Indian movies have been few and far between. Whether you are dealing with the portrayal of Native Americans in movies or the actors themselves, Hollywood has come a long way, when dealing with Native American Indian movies. However, Hollywood still has a lot more to overcome. Just as the African American and Hispanic actors have overcome many obstacles, the Native American finds that they too, have many barriers to face when dealing with Hollywood and the portrayal of Native American Indian movies.

The first introduction to Native American Indian movies would be that of the old westerns. However, the old westerns typically portrayed the Native American as a savage beast seeking the "white man" to kill and destroy. This depicts the Native American as uneducated and wild: the Injun Joe as portrayed in *Huckleberry Finn*. This is similar to the early roles that were given to the African American. Many of those roles were also based on stereotypes and falsehoods.

There is much written on the subject of Native Americans and the history of their portrayal in film. Three additional documents are available in our archive.

The Hollywood Indian From (Excerpts from *The Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* expanded edition by Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor)

Redface in Film and TV - Many references contributed by [Angela Aleiss](#)



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The Hollywood Indian

(Excerpts from *The Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* expanded edition by Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor)

Hollywood Indians are usually based solely on stereotypes of the Plains Indians, such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Comanche, ignoring completely the cultural diversity of the many tribes in North America. Although the film industry “is (mostly) far from purposeful distortion”, technical and business-related production decisions affect the Native American screen image.

O'Connor argues that audiences have certain expectations for characteristic representation – such as easy comprehensibility of the storyline and the morality – which they value over authenticity, and the same holds true for stereotypes. While most of the above features also apply to literature or other media, specific business-related decisions influence film in a way that might advance the stereotypical depiction of Native Americans. The impact of the resulting distorted images in film can be considered in different terms than that of other media. While novels certainly reach a broad public, the world-wide distribution of films allows for an amount of spectators on a totally different scale – not only in numbers, but also emotionally by using filmic devices such as light, music, and camera angles.

As the dominant carrier of filmic misrepresentations of Native Americans, the Western genre emerged in the early days of cinema and remained popular through much of the 20th century. Crucial to the frontier myth, the settlement of the West, and the founding of white civilization are the antagonists, and the indigenous population, served as the opposition to the white Western hero personifying the “agent of civilization”. These antagonists in form of a fictional, homogenized celluloid Indian have never really existed except in the stories told by white Americans to white audiences.

Twentieth-century images

Early depictions of Native Americans in film are surprisingly diverse. Although the Indian as the villain, antagonist, or simple-minded savage was present, a complex array of characters populated the silent screens between 1909 and 1913, a period when Indian characters were especially popular: the villain could be white as well as Indian; lasting white-Indian relationships emerged; and mixed-blood Indians could be villainous as well as sympathetic. [Edwin Carewe](#) (real name Jay Fox), a Chickasaw filmmaker from that era, made more than 60 feature films and directed the 1928 version of *Ramona* starring Delores Del Rio and Waner Baxter. By the late teens, the popularity of Indian movies and cowboy-and-Indian movies decreased, and even though Indian movies continued to be produced in moderate numbers, they only became popular again by the mid-1930s. One of the most notable directors from 1924's *The Iron Horse* to 1964's *Cheyenne Autumn* was John Ford, often working with John Wayne as his male protagonist. Ford's depiction of Native Americans actually showed both hostile and sympathetic Indians such as in *Stagecoach* (1939), but also in *Fort Apache* (1948) and *Wagon Master* (1950). The first two movies in the cavalry trilogy, *Fort Apache* and *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949) feature sympathetic Indians with speaking roles and the conflict is mostly the fault of white prejudice rather than the inherently bad nature of the typical screen Indians. Not all Indian portrayals were savage; by 1950, Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* had set the stage for a new era of Indian/white peaceful coexistence.

Note: from <http://www.filmreference.com>

“John Ford (1894–1973), the master European American filmmaker who began making movies during the silent era, produced many western films; his most famous silent western, *The Iron Horse* (1924), featured eight hundred Pawnee, Sioux, and Cheyenne Indians along with twenty-eight hundred horses, thirteen hundred buffalo, and ten thousand Texas steers. The film was a mythic version of the completion of the trans-continental railroad in 1869. Ford almost single-handedly rewrote American Western history by codifying conventions of the western genre, including those related to the representations of Indians in such films as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), his farewell to the western film tradition he helped found.”

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A gradual change in the American Indian's screen image did occur from the 1940s and 1950s onwards, at the height of the Western's popularity, when a turn towards “the gradual elimination of the stereotypes in big budget movies” is noticeable. The social and political consequences of the World War II paved the way, as Native Americans were no longer the principal antagonists and World War II supplied America with new enemies, namely, the Germans, Italians, and Japanese. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a decline in the production of Western films, thus also diminishing the representation of Native Americans. Influenced heavily by the experiences of the Vietnam War, Native Americans symbolically came to signify any indigenous population threatened by annihilation at the hands of the United States. In this way, though the typical savage disappeared almost entirely from the big screen, Native Americans in motion pictures were reduced to a vehicle of criticism of contemporary politics.

The 1970s and especially the late 1980s saw the emergence of independent films outside the Western genre depicted contemporary Native life. The decisive difference was that “Native American characters become significant in and of themselves”. At a time when the Western was nearly extinct, this new image marked an important step towards a greater variety of Native American images on screen. By the mere fact that it involved Native Americans in the production process more than ever before – by employing Native actors for Native parts, for telling stories from a Native perspective, sometimes basing them on Native novels – these films contributed to the visibility of Native peoples. Some examples are *House Made of Dawn* (1972), *Spirit of the Wind* (1979), and *Powwow Highway* (1989), although none of these films attracted a large, mainstream audience. More accurate film representations were now being made, but they were reaching nowhere near the exposure of the earlier, stereotypical images in Westerns.

The release of *Dances with Wolves* (1990) unexpectedly revived the Western genre. Arguably the most influential Native American-themed film of the last few decades, it paid reasonably careful attention to the depiction of Lakota life, traditions and clothing, at least compared to earlier efforts. However, the basic formula of the Hollywood stereotypes – at its heart the idea of the white lead ‘going Native’, the arrival of the ‘White Savior’ – was not transcended, and there were still cultural errors in the film. Thus, the evaluation of scholarly criticism boiled down to granting the film good intentions, but at the same time classifying the movie as a revisionist Western simply replaying the romantic Noble Savage with the white as the hero. *Dances with Wolves* was followed by other sympathetic or revisionist Western blockbusters such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993) and caused mainstream media to put American Indians on their agenda, at least for a short while. One of the few Hollywood movies that portrays Native life outside the Old West and instead sets its story in contemporary times is *Thunderheart*.

Contemporary Native American Cinema

In the past two decades, a striving Native American independent cinema has developed. Native Americans have formed their own production companies and political organizations to influence their own representations and to counter negative stereotypes. What distinguishes Native American cinema from Hollywood productions is the involvement of American Indians as directors, writers, and producers, such as Sherman Alexie, Chris Eyre, Sterlin Harjo, Hanay Geiogamah, and Greg Sarris. Two of the most characteristic features are the casting of Native actors for Native roles, and the setting of the stories in contemporary America as opposed to the 19th-century West. ***Lakota Woman*** (TV 1994), ***Skinwalkers*** (TV 2002), ***Smoke Signals*** (1998), ***The Business of Fancydancing*** (2002), ***Grand Avenue*** (TV 1996), and ***Edge of America*** (TV 2003) are some best-known examples. Additionally, new media is providing a platform for short films and videos by independent producers, comedians, and other content-creators.

Additional links and references

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollywood_Indian

<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/arts-entertainment/recovered-and-restored-ramona-silent-movie-by-chickasaw-filmmaker/>

<http://www.chickasawtimes.net/Web-Exclusives/Archive/2014/December/Edwin-Carewe-was-pioneering-director-during-silent.aspx>

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Redface in Film and TV

In early films, American Indians were almost always depicted as half-clothed savages, screaming war cries as they got shot off their horses by the white heroes. It's almost comical now, but that was the only Hollywood image of American Indians until the mid- to late-1970s; and it was exported to the entire world.

Thomas Ince's *Heart of an Indian* (1912) showed Indians as sensitive people but DW Griffith's *The Battle of Elderbrush Gulch* (1914) presented the Indians as absolute savages. *The Vanishing American* (1925) and *Broken Arrow* (1950) present a "noble savage" stereotype.

The White Squaw

The Indian woman of early films was depicted in only two categories. She was either a princess or a squaw. Either she was a dangerous and seductive threat to the white frontiersman, or she was the faceless, dutiful figure tagging along behind her buck with papoose in tow. Her only utterance was "Ugh." The word "squaw" means wife, but only through a very rough interpretation and in only one of the hundreds of Native American languages. The princesses of celluloid fame generally served the white man, fell in love with him, and died tragically. Early white male stars who played Indian roles in western film pantomimed their Indian-ness in braided wigs and make-up; likewise, established white actresses always played Indian princesses. Some of those seen bathing in the streams and in chic haute couture doeskin dresses were Yvonne de Carlo (*The Deerslayer*, 1943), Elsa Martinelli (*Indian Fighter*, 1955), Linda Darnell (*Buffalo Bill*, 1943), Debra Paget (*Broken Arrow*, 1950).

In early Hollywood Westerns, most of the background Indians were real Navajo people. There was a colony of Navajo Indians living traditionally in a camp in Malibu who were on studio pay. When Indians of any tribe were needed for a western, a bus would pull up and load up for their background work. That is why in all those films, most of the time the language you hear spoken is "Dine," one of the Athapascan dialects of the Navajo and Apache people. The major speaking roles for American Indians would still go to non-Native actors like Burt Lancaster and Charles Bronson.

Burt Lancaster -- Apache

Progress has been gradual, but somewhat steady. Jay Silverheels -- a native of the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve near Ontario, Canada -- was perhaps the first legitimate Native American television star. From 1949 to 1957, he entertained TV audiences as Tonto, the *Lone Ranger's* dependable -- albeit stereotypical -- Indian sidekick. The real Silverheels, though, was not limited by the stereotype. He recognized that fellow Native American actors needed to truly be masters of their craft in order to compete in the unforgiving film industry, so he founded the American Indian Actors Workshop in Echo Park, Calif., as a place where they could do that. In 1979, Jay Silverheels was the first Native American actor to be awarded a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

In 1956, John Ford's film, *The Searchers*, earned praise for its more balanced depiction of American Indians. But "balanced" had a different meaning back then. In "The Searchers" Indians are portrayed only as savages who kill innocent settlers and kidnap and rape their women. The hero, John Wayne, is someone who hates Indians so much that he thinks that white women who are raped by them, should be killed.

Stagecoach is another John Ford/John Wayne film where Native Americans are nothing but vile savages who deserve to be shot. These films are considered classic Westerns by film critics who ignore the blatant racism in them.

The Navajos in Monument Valley who worked on *The Searchers* -- as extras, consultants or other staff -- were paid less than their white counterparts. At that time, too, they were not even allowed to leave the reservation without written permission from the government; so the fact that they were happy to have the work must be viewed in that light. But Ford's efforts were progressive for his day and laid the groundwork for some of the more truly balanced movies to come.

Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man*

It was in the 1970s that Indians began to be portrayed more authentically and more prominently in film story lines. In *Little Big Man* with Dustin Hoffman the Native Americans are actually shown laughing and crying, like real human beings rather than the stereotypical stoic and unemotional Indians normally seen in Hollywood features. The Indians were depicted just like any other people -- some good, some not so good. Chief Dan George was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award, making him the first Native American to receive the honor.

In 1975, Will Sampson delivered an uncanny performance as Chief Bromden, one of the most pivotal characters in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. But instead of crediting Sampson's acting skill and talent for his indelible depiction of the character, whom he made absolutely unforgettable while having almost no lines. The Hollywood press diminished his skill and talent to simply "acting Indian." Explaining why Will Sampson was overlooked for an Academy Award nomination, one director was even quoted as saying, "Why should an Indian receive an award for playing an Indian?"

That is how, in the eyes of many directors, Sampson's performance became a pattern for the big silent Indian. Sampson was typecast and did not have access to a wider range of roles that would have demonstrated his talents. But Will Sampson was determined to make change, one way or another. He went on to be one of the founders of the American Indian Film Institute, producers of the American Indian Film Festival.

There were other noteworthy films in the 1970s, like *A Man Called Horse*. But then we had to wait until the early 1990s for Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* that had a modern take on American Indian people and how the Lakota people of the plains might have lived. Some claim Costner's story showed the Indians as too uniformly benevolent and white folks as simply evil. After all, though in real life Indian nations suffered much ill treatment at the hands of the government, not all real white people were bad and not all real Indians were angelic. But the overall message of the movie was a good one. Graham Greene, with his brilliant performance as Kicking Bird, joined the ranks of Oscar nominees with a Best Supporting Actor nomination.

Hollywood also had Iron Eyes Cody (April 3, 1904 – January 4, 1999). His ancestry became the center of some controversy when it became known that he was actually Italian by birth. But he did not just work as an Indian in Hollywood in the 1950s and '60s; he truly lived his life as an Indian. He can be credited as the most famous Indian in the world during that time. Even

though he was not born an Indian, we should not forget that Iron Eyes Cody raised awareness for the American Indian people and also of the importance of environmentalism (Keep America Beautiful Public Service ad campaign) in a way that no one else was able to do at that time.

Whether the noble Indian is shedding a tear for a 1960s' environmental public service commercial or being saved by the great white hope Captain John Smith in the recent Disney movie Pocahontas, hints of self-pity and romanticism continue to haunt American Indians in film. While Hollywood no longer portrays American Indians as painted and uncivilized savages, waving tomahawks and scalping the innocent European settlers, contemporary movies maintain the stoic 'Indian' image smothered with sentimentality.

Nowadays, most producers do their best to hire actors that are from American Indian descent, or at least to some degree. But the issue is still a sensitive one. There is much bickering and infighting about who should get the available roles in Hollywood A-list films.

There have been mixed reactions to Johnny Depp playing the lead role of Tonto in the upcoming **Lone Ranger** movie; some people insist they must know, does he have Indian blood, and is it enough? The beautiful Q'orianka Kilcher landed the lead role of Pocahontas in Terrence Malick's **The New World** (2005), but some in the Native community were not pleased that she was of Peruvian and German descent. Rudy Youngblood, aka Gonzales, endured the same intense scrutiny when he got the lead role in Mel Gibson's film **Apocalypto** (2006). But we don't hear much fuss about Jake Gyllenhall playing the **Prince of Persia** (2010), Mel Gibson playing a Scot in **Brave Heart** (1995) or Anthony Quinn playing **Zobra the Greek** (1964) when in fact he was one hundred percent Mexican.

Russell Means, an American Indian activist who has played high profile parts in several movies including **The Last of the Mohicans** (1992), **Natural Born Killers** (1994), and **Wagons East!** (1994), stated that "...as Americans we have faced up to many social ills. Anti-Semitism, racism against blacks, oppression of women, and now it's time to face up to the Indian issue."

The American Indian Film Institute (AIFI) is a non-profit media arts center founded in 1979 to foster understanding of the culture, traditions and issues of contemporary Native Americans. In 1992 the Native American Producer's Alliance was created.

Additional links and references

Thank you to Educator, Author, Historian [Angela Aleiss](#) for her contributions.

The Shifting Other: Native Americans in Film, 1950-Present Bill Schnupp <http://bill-shiftingother.blogspot.com/>

Hollywood Indians Jay Tavare http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-tavare/native-american-actors_b_846930.html

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Excellent Reference: "Indian Pictures": Film Portrayals of Native Americans in the Silent Era - <http://jannasoeder.wixsite.com/silent-natives>

