CHAPTER NINE

INDIANS IN HOLLYWOOD

The Indian would come and register with Dad and then he would get them into studio work. Dad was after to get equal pay for Indians – say if an extra got $15 a day, the Indian would get $7.50. A non-Indian rolls off a horse, he'd get $150. If and Indian did it, he'd get $25. So Dad was insisting that he wanted equal pay for Indians. So he started getting it.

What Dad didn't like about the movies is the way they portrayed the Indian. Little People. Bloodthirsty, drunken savages. We was always getting our butt whipped. I don't think we ever won one movie. — Jack Thorpe

"The Hollywood Indian," wrote University of New Mexico professor Ted Jojola, a Pueblo Indian, "is a mythological being who exists nowhere but within the fertile imaginations of movie actors, producers, and directors." Although some authentic films have been made since about 1970 by American Indian filmmakers, Jojola's characterization still rings true for the vast number of Hollywood productions in which Indians appear.

It is also true that portrayals of the American Indian are among the most enduring and popular images in the movies. Films featuring Native Americans have been with us since the birth of cinema. When Thomas Alva Edison introduced the kinetoscope in 1893, the brief film he showed was *Hopi Snake Dance*. The first feature made in Hollywood was Jesse Lasky and Cecil B. DeMille's ***The Squaw Man*** (1914). It told a tale of doomed love between an Englishman and an American Indian woman. Its message was that white civilization has no room for natives and that American Indians and their culture are doomed to extinction.

D.W. Griffith, a pioneer in early cinema, was a believer in racial separation. In his *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1914), Indians are "stirred up" by the actions of villainous white men. In their agitation they even steal the heroine's little puppy dogs, planning to kill and eat them in ritual sacrifice. In Griffith's *The Call of the Wild* (1908), the hero is an Indian who attends college and lives for a time among the upper class, but his skin color and his Indian ways are at odds with civilization, and he returns to the reservation. There he is trapped in a disappearing way of life. He and his culture are doomed to be eradicated by government policies, education, disease, and the superior technology of the white man.

The Vanishing American, a novel by the popular Western writer ***Zane Grey***, dealt more realistically with the obstacles faced by American Indians at the end of the nineteenth century. In Grey's story, missionaries and corrupt Indian agents destroy Indian culture by taking away Indians' possessions. Grey called for awareness, understanding, and a change in government policies toward Indians.

Grey's novel was turned into a movie in 1925, but the movie version told a very different story. In it Indian soldiers, return from the battlefields of World War I. Then they revert to their innately savage nature. Stirred up, they discard their uniforms

(a mark of civilization) and attack a town with bows and arrows. There are no corrupt missionaries in this version of the story, as the filmmakers feared to offend white church-going audiences. Instead the Indian hero dies in the arms of the white heroine, as she reads to him from the Bible.

The Indian-as-victim was one dominant stereotype in the movies. The other was that of the godless savage swooping down on circled wagon trains. Often both stereotypes were played out in the same film, even in the same Indian character. In many movie plots Indians went on the warpath (exhibiting all the traits of the bloodthirsty savage) only after they had been victimized and treated unfairly by unscrupulous whites. In ***The Big Trail*** (1930), John Wayne plays a sympathetic character who says of the Shoshones and Cheyennes: "Feed 'em right and treat 'em well, and we'll have no trouble." But when the inevitable violent confrontation occurs, Wayne's character has no qualms about shooting one Indian after another.

Why have these stereotypes of Indians been so resilient that they color the perception of Native Americans to this day? The origins of these false images were deeply ingrained hundreds of years ago.

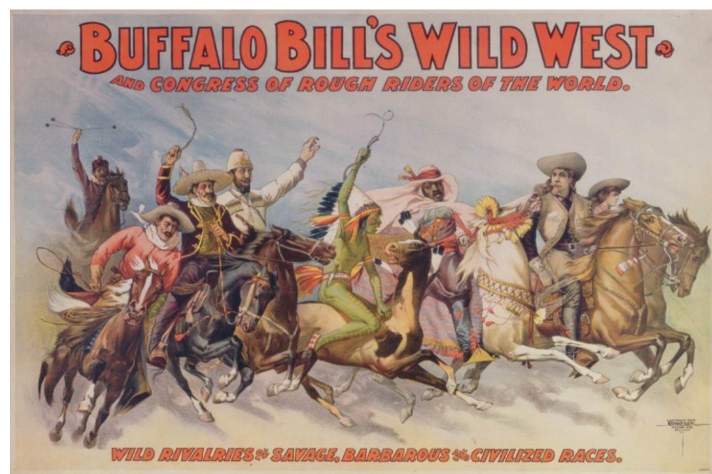
During the eighteenth century, philosophers of the ***Enlightenment***, most notably ***Jean-Jacques Rousseau***, put forward the idea that such indigenous peoples as South Sea Islanders were children of nature, free of the restraint and corruption of modern society. This idea of the "Noble Savage," as Anglophone writers dubbed such innocents, was then applied to American Indians. It ignored the range of human strengths and weaknesses that exists in every culture.

Another stereotype, that of the "godless savage," came from the first European colonizers of the American continent. These men, such as the founders of ***Jamestown*** and the ***Plymouth Colony***, acted on the belief that the natives they encountered were inferior, devil-worshipping impediments to the spread of Christian civilization. The Indian, in their eyes, had no real culture and did not know how to properly use the land. If they failed to give way to European demands for territory, then they would have to be eradicated. These perceptions say more about the interests of what would become the dominant culture than about the native people the early colonizers dealt with.

These two images, of the noble savage and the godless savage, were embedded in literature. Because of its dramatic appeal, writing about Indians was very popular in the eighteenth century. ***Captivity narratives*** written by white men or women who had been taken prisoner and then redeemed from the savages, became best sellers. The nineteenth century novels of ***James Fenimore Cooper***, featuring both noble and savage Indians, continued the trend.

In 1863 the first dime novel, *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, was published. The term "***dime novel***" was as a catchall phrase used not only for actual novels but also weekly publications and pulp magazines. In dime novels, the lives of such historical figures as Kit Carson, ***William "Buffalo Bill" Cody***, and "Wild Bill" Hickock were fictionalized in an exaggerated, heroic, highly romantic way. The Indians, of course, were either vile brutes or saintly savages.

Buffalo Bill Cody's popular "***Wild West Show***" and its numerous imitators brought the image of the headdress-wearing Plains Indian on horseback to audiences all over the world. In 1885 over one million people attended a Wild West show.



Buffalo Bill's Wild West
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Hollywood adapted and expanded on stereotypical stories about Indians. Television continued the trend. Indians protested, but their voices were few and their protests were ignored. There was no lobby for Indians

in Hollywood. Early directors like D. W. Griffith felt that Indians were the only cultural group that could be portrayed as villains without public censure. Producers worried more about the reaction of the American Humane Association to the treatment of horses in Westerns than the reaction to their treatment of Indians.

Jim Thorpe's experience in Hollywood was like that of many other struggling actors. When he arrived in Los Angeles in 1930, his expectations were high. Just the year before, he had sold the rights to his life story for a movie to be called *Red Son of Carlisle*. Jim had only been paid $1,500 but he was told that he would be hired to play himself. The film was never made, partly as a result of the financial difficulties of the Depression.

Thorpe (right) in Battling With Buffalo Bill
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

Meanwhile, Thorpe and his second wife, Freeda (who died in 2008 at the age of 101), had a ***growing family*** to feed. Jim took take whatever work was available in those Depression years. His first job in California was as a painter for an oil company, painting gas stations and trucks. In the fall of 1930, he got his initial job at Universal Studios, playing a bit part as Swift Arrow in ***Battling with Buffalo Bill***, followed by parts in a film about baseball and another about football – in which Pop Warner also appeared. But bit parts didn't pay the bills, and Jim took other jobs. During one brief stint in 1932 as a laborer, a photographer took his picture of him working on the excavation for the new Los Angeles City Hospital at 50 cents a day. The newspaper article described the former Olympian as a man who could not even afford a ticket to the ***1932 Olympic Games***, which were about to take place.

Jim Thorpe as Laborer, 1932
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

One person who read that article was the vice president of the United States, ***Charles Curtis***. Not only was he, like Jim, from Oklahoma, but his ancestry was also a mix of white and American Indian (Kaw) ancestry. Curtis knew Thorpe; his daughter was married to Thorpe's friend and Carlisle teammate Gus Welch. Curtis invited Thorpe to attend the opening of the Los Angeles Games and sit with Curtis in the presidential box. When Thorpe was introduced to the crowd of 105,000, the stadium erupted in a roar of applause. But when the Olympics ended, Thorpe was back in the job hunt. He continued to get ***movie work***, mostly non-speaking bit parts, which included being one of the native dancers in the epic *King Kong* (1933).

Thorpe was not a charismatic presence on screen, and his delivery was wooden in the few speaking parts he landed. Despite this, he appeared in at least 65 movies between his first role in *Battling with Buffalo Bill* (1931) and his last in ***Wagon Master*** (1950).

He was friends with such cowboy icons as Tom Mix, but was never quite comfortable in the Hollywood milieu. When his daughter Grace came to live with him, he cautioned her to stay away from actors because "They're all phonies." One of the worst was Errol

Flynn, the swashbuckling hero of countless movies. The story (told in our documentary by Jack Thorpe), of Jim's run-in with Flynn during the production of ***They Died With Their Boots On***_is a famous example of Thorpe's lack of patience with poseurs. It may have signaled the end of his movie career, for he appeared in only a few films after he floored Flynn.

Poster: "They Died With Their Boots On"
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

Thorpe made a mark in Hollywood in other ways. He knew every Indian who worked in the film industry, and he was outraged by the way Indian actors were treated in the 1930s. Indian extras were paid $5.50 a day, while white extras got $11. Similarly, if a white stunt man fell off a horse, he would get twice as much as an Indian for the same stunt.

Another problem was the grossly inaccurate depiction of Indians in films. The ***Indian Actors Association*** was formed partly in response to this. Instead of having white actors playing Indians who "talk and grunt like morons" (as a member of the Indian Actors Association expressed it in a June 4, 1939, New York Herald Tribune article), they urged that the studios hire Indian technical experts who could teach authentic sign language and spoken vocabulary. One of the founders of the Indian Actors Association was ***Luther Standing Bear***, a Lakota who had been part of the first class of Carlisle students in 1879. Standing Bear had traveled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and then come to Hollywood to play movie Indians.

Thorpe became an active member of the Indian Actors Association. He served as the primary spokesman against the practice of hiring non-Indians. Although in some of the earliest movies major parts were played by Indians, such as ***Princess Red Wing and her husband, James Young Deer***, by the 1930s, most Indian parts were played by non-Indians. With the assistance of the Department of Labor, Thorpe determined that less than half of the so-called "Indian" extras were actual Indians. Even Jimmy Cagney, later famous for his tough-talking gangster roles, played a spray-painted red Indian in one film.

Being a Hollywood Indian brought Thorpe in contact with Indians of many tribes.

Whenever an Indian arrived in Hollywood looking for film work, he or she went first to Thorpe, who put together a list of 250 "real" Indians and demanded that casting offices hire only from his group. He even went so far as to send a letter of protest to President Franklin Roosevelt when producers and directors failed to hire from his list.

Thorpe was also known among Hollywood Indians as a practical joker. An elderly Pueblo/Apache friend of mine named Swift Eagle told me a story: When he first met Thorpe, Swifty was asked if he could shoot a bow. "Yes," Swifty replied. Then Thorpe led him to a movie set and gave Swifty a bow.

"A man will step out of that doorway over there. Can you shoot him?"

"Yes," Swifty replied, "But I don't miss. I might kill him."

"Don't worry," Thorpe said, "He'll duck back in time." Then Thorpe walked over to that doorway about a hundred feet away and went inside. "Now," Thorpe shouted, and a man leaned out of the door.

Swifty shot his arrow, and it hit the man right in the chest. "Oh no!" Swifty shouted. He dropped the bow and ran to the doorway where Jim Thorpe was standing and laughing over the dummy Swifty had just shot.

In another of Thorpe's practical jokes, he and his friends petitioned the federal government for recognition as a new tribe, to be named the "Hollywood In-

dians." The Bureau of Indian Affairs took the request seriously and wrote back a detailed letter explaining why such recognition would not be possible.

The efforts of Jim Thorpe and the Indian Actors Association met with partial success. By the mid-1930s, Indian actors were receiving salaries equal to their white counterparts. More Indian actors were being hired, and Indian advisors were occasionally retained to ensure that the Plains Indian culture was more accurately portrayed. The Indian language spoken in films was now often an actual Native American tongue—though it was frequently different from the one called for by the role.

Still, whenever there was a starring Indian role, male or female, it went to a white actor. In *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), the Sioux leader Crazy Horse was played by Anthony Quinn. And despite all of Thorpe's efforts, Indians still ended up being portrayed as stereotypes. This remained true until ***Chief Dan George's*** 1970 role in *Little Big Man* marked a turning point.

Indians in Hollywood found that they could not get parts in movies or succeed in the growing tourist trade if they did not "look Indian." If they had short hair and wore their everyday clothing, they were not judged authentic. Not just in Hollywood, but all over the nation, Indians had to dress and act like their movie counterparts to earn a living. That meant looking like a Plains Indian from the mid-nineteenth century. The result was that during much of the twentieth century, native people engaged in any aspect of entertainment began to dress (and even behave) like movie Indians. Even if they were Cherokees from North Carolina, Powhatans from Virginia, or Iroquois from New York State, the Plains-style eagle-feather headdress and a stoic demeanor became a must for any public occasion. As Ted Jojola put it, this process of revisionism recast "native people away from and apart from their own social and community realities."

In 1950 when Thorpe was recognized as "the football player of the half-century" and "male athlete of the half century," the renewed publicity made a film about his life seem feasible. Thorpe had tried repeatedly to regain the rights to his own story, without success. Warner Brothers purchased the rights from MGM after World War II – reportedly for $35,000. With Burt Lancaster in the leading role, another white man in dark makeup playing an Indian, ***Jim Thorpe, All-American*** was released in 1951. Thorpe was a paid advisor on the film, but it drastically revised aspects of his sports career, and largely ignored his later life, including his fight for the rights of Indian actors.

Thorpe at Premiere of Jim Thorpe, All-American
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

However, at Thorpe's request, the movie premiered on the same day, August 23, 1951, in both Oklahoma City and Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Thorpe, who attended the showing, was honored with a parade.

INDIANS IN HOLLYWOOD
Concepts and Discussion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about the images of Indians in the movies and the roots of those images in popular culture and history, as well as the ways in which Jim Thorpe attempted to make a change in Hollywood.

TEACHER'S QUICK REFERENCE

- The Hollywood Indian as a "mythological being"
- Early films with Indians: *Hopi Snake Dance* and *The Squaw Man*
- D.W. Griffiths portrays Indians as doomed "noble savages."
- Another popular stereotype is the "murdering Redskin"
- Zane Grey's novel *The Vanishing American* is a more realistic portrait of Indians, but the movie version reverts to stereotypes.
- False images of Indians originated with the Enlightenment and New World explorers, dating back to Columbus.
- These images are integrated into eighteenth century popular literature, including captivity narratives.
- The romantic novels of James Fenimore Cooper continue to distort the perception of Indians.
- Dime novels and Wild West shows continue the trend, and Hollywood picks up the thread.
- Indians protest but lack a lobby to effect changes.
- Jim Thorpe comes to Hollywood, gets small parts in the movies as well as a variety of odd jobs.
- Thorpe becomes active in the Indian Actors Association, advocating for Indian actors in Indian roles as well as equal pay for Indians.
- Anecdotes about Thorpe's practical jokes, Swift Eagle shoots a dummy.
- Indians are required to look like Hollywood Indians in order to get work.
- Thorpe's life story made into a movie with Burt Lancaster in 1951.

KEY CONTENT

- Images of Indians in movies
- Noble savage vs. murdering Redskin
- Sources of the images of the Indian
- Native views of the stereotypes
- Jim Thorpe's Hollywood experience

CONTENT REVIEW

- What are the usual images of Indians in cinema?
- How long have these images been part of American film?
- What are the earlier sources of these stereotypical images of Indians?
- Why have these images remained popular for so long?
- How do American Indians feel about the way they are often represented in movies?
- Why did Jim Thorpe go to Hollywood?
- What successes did he have there?
- What are some of the problems Indian actors and stuntmen faced?
- What did Jim Thorpe do to help other Indians in Hollywood?
- Why did his life story finally get made into a movie?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Discuss the practice of casting white actors as American Indian characters. Is this done with people from other racial groups? Take a look at clips from old films in which "white" Indians appear (many can be found on the Internet) and compare them with more recent films in which such white actors as Raquel Welch played Indians.
- A number of recent and contemporary films have attempted to portray Indians more sympathetically. Discuss one or more of those films – such as *Dances With Wolves* or *Little Big Man*, in terms of their portrayals of Native Americans. Are there still stereotypes in these films?
- View the movie *Jim Thorpe, All-American*, then discuss how its portrayal of Jim Thorpe differs from the documentary you've just seen. Also consider how the film *Jim Thorpe, All-American* is different from or similar to other Hollywood movies of the 1930s in which Indians play a role.

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Land of the Spotted Eagle, by Luther Standing Bear, first published in 1933, University of Nebraska Press reprint, 1978. A member of the first class of Indian students at Carlisle, an author and an influential "Hollywood Indian" during the early twentieth century, Standing Bear tells his own story in this classic of American Indian autobiography.

Making the White Man's Indian, Native Americans and Hollywood Movies, by Angela Aleiss, Praeger, 2005. A book that deals quite well with the complicated picture of American Indians as depicted in Hollywood films, not only describing the stereotypes that characterize most movie depictions of Indians, but also going behind the scenes to show how and why Hollywood has created its Native American characters.