



BY ANGELA ALEISS

Celluloid Heroes

Native American Movies Filmed on U.S. Forest Service Land

Filmed on national forests and grasslands, these Westerns feature stunning landscapes and groundbreaking characters.

Several fine movies offer an alternative to the film industry's negative Indian stereotypes by presenting significant Native American characters, as well as actors. The six movies described contain scenes filmed on national forests and grasslands, according to their end credits and/or publicity material. All are readily available on popular streaming services like Netflix and Amazon or on DVD.

Broken Arrow (1950). Considered by many to be the first film made in the post-World War II era that treated Native Americans sympathetically, *Broken Arrow* calls for tolerance and understanding between Indians and whites. The film is based on the true story of the friendship between a U.S. Mail rider, Thomas Jeffords (James Stewart), and the Apache Indian leader Cochise (Jeff Chandler). Although the Apache wedding ceremony with Jeffords and an Indian girl, Sonseeahray (Debra Paget), is purely fictitious, the film's producers avoided having characters speak in the broken English of previous Hollywood Indians, and they alluded to several Apache customs, like the girl's coming-of-age ceremony. Canadian Mohawk actor Jay Silverheels (best known as Tonto on the television series *The Lone Ranger*) portrays Geronimo. Director Delmer Daves had previously lived among the Navajo and Hopi and employed more than 240 Indian extras from the Fort Apache Indian Reservation for this film. The film is set in the southeastern Arizona Territory during the post-Civil War years, but much of it was shot in the scenic red-rock landscape in and around Sedona in the Coconino National Forest.

Dances with Wolves (1990). This three-hour epic story of Lieutenant John J. Dunbar (Kevin Costner), a Union Civil War hero who takes up living among the Lakota Sioux, won seven Academy Awards, including best picture, director (Costner), and screenwriter (Michael Blake, who also wrote the novel the film is based on). The film features excellent performances by Rodney Grant, Wes Studi, Floyd Red Crow Westerman, and Graham Greene, who earned an Academy

Award nomination for best actor in a supporting role. The character of Stands with a Fist (Mary McDonnell), the white woman seized years before by the Lakota as a child who later marries Dunbar, is based on a historical figure, Cynthia Ann Parker, a white girl captured by the Comanche who became the mother of Quanah Parker, the last free Comanche leader. The movie's stunning cinematography includes scenes filmed in Spearfish Canyon in the Black Hills National Forest and the vast prairie of Fort Pierre National Grassland.

Dead Man (1995). Despite its surreal and psychedelic atmosphere, this Western written and directed by Jim Jarmusch shows Native American culture in extensive detail. A young accountant, William Blake (Johnny Depp), lost and badly wounded, travels across the remote western frontier and encounters an outcast Native American named Nobody (portrayed by a Canadian Cayuga actor, Gary Farmer). As Nobody leads the dying Blake from the physical to the spiritual world, the black-and-white cinematography and Neil Young's atmospheric electric guitar soundtrack create a dark, hypnotic world. Members of the Makah Indian Tribe participated in the penultimate scene, and they offered technical expertise about traditional longhouses and totem pole carvings. All the dialogue of the Makah is in their native language and, notably, not subtitled. Locations include the Coconino National Forest and the tall redwoods of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest.

The Last of the Mohicans (1992). Fans of James Fenimore Cooper's enduring *Leatherstocking* tales will see

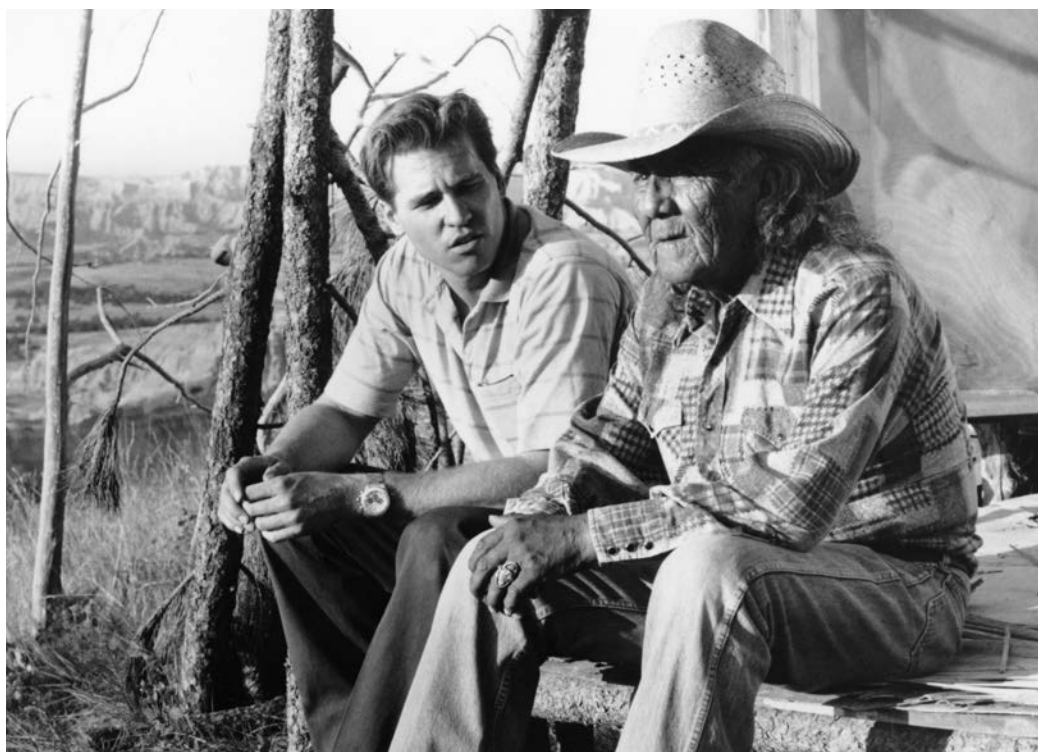
Wes Studi (front) had a small speaking role in *Dances with Wolves* but a large, significant role as Magua in *Last of the Mohicans*.

a modern-day twist on the villainous Magua (Wes Studi) in this retelling. The story takes place during the Seven Years' War in western New York and features Daniel Day-Lewis as the swashbuckling young Hawkeye trying to save his love interest, Cora (Madeleine Stowe), and her sister, Alice (Jodhi May), from Magua. In this version, directed by Michael Mann, who cowrote the screenplay, Magua emerges as a heroic symbol of Indian survival and autonomy against the imperialistic British and American forces. An unusually subdued Russell Means plays Hawkeye's adoptive father and adviser Chingachgook, whose son Uncas (Eric Schweig) develops an unspoken passion for Alice. The opening scenes were filmed along the Elk Pen Trail (TR 166) in the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina.

The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976). Perhaps Clint Eastwood's best Western, this movie is also a favorite among Native Americans I've spoken with. Josey Wales (Eastwood, who also directed) is a peaceful Missouri farmer who joins a Confederate guerrilla unit after Union soldiers murder his family. At the end of the war, he refuses to surrender and guns down the Union soldiers after seeing them butcher his unit when they attempt to surrender. As Union militia and bounty hunters pursue him, Wales traverses the countryside and along the way befriends the elderly Cherokee Lone Watie (Chief Dan George) and a Navajo woman (Geraldine Keams) named Little Moonlight, and several others, as they make their way toward a ranch owned by one of the group members. Once at the ranch, Wales makes peace with Ten Bears (Will Sampson), leader of the neighboring Comanche. The movie features scenes shot in the rugged Patagonia Mountains of the Coronado National Forest in Arizona.

Thunderheart (1992). As one of Hollywood's few movies about contemporary Native Americans, *Thunderheart*'s story about a part-Lakota Sioux FBI agent (Val Kilmer) assigned to investigate a murder was inspired by events on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation in

the 1970s. Strong performances are given by Native American actors Marvin Thin Elk, John Trudell, Graham Greene, and Sheila Tousey, who made a striking debut as a Dartmouth-educated teacher and activist. (Tousey's character was based on the Native Canadian activist Anna



Mae Aquash, who was murdered on Pine Ridge in 1976.) Screenwriter John Fusco lived among the Lakota Sioux and studied their language; for him, *Thunderheart* brought Hollywood Indians “up to date” for American audiences. The Buffalo Gap National Grassland in South Dakota,

with Badlands National Park in the background, was one of the movie’s locations.

Film historian Angela Aleiss received her PhD from Columbia University and now teaches at California State University—

Long Beach. She currently volunteers with the U.S. Forest Service Office of Tribal Relations. Her forthcoming book, Hollywood’s Native Americans: Stories of Identity and Resistance, will be published by Praeger. She would like to thank Marc Wanamaker of Bison Archives for providing the photos.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Broken Arrow, with Jeff Chandler, Basil Ruysdael, and James Stewart, broke new ground for Native Americans in several ways.

Chief Dan George, as Lone Watie, has the drop on Clint Eastwood’s title character in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. More than forty years on, the film remains popular with many Native Americans.

The Last of the Mohicans (1992) with Daniel Day-Lewis (right) and Eric Schweig, featured several Native American actors in prominent roles.

Thunderheart features Val Kilmer (left) and Marvin Thin Elk, one of several Native American actors in this contemporary film.

