

White Fawn's Devotion

By Scott Simmon

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This sympathetic portrayal of an Indian woman married to a British man was far ahead of its time. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

“White Fawn’s Devotion” is probably the earliest surviving film directed by a Native American. Released in June 1910, it is also among the first films made in America by France’s Pathé Frères, then the world’s largest film production company.

U.S. motion picture trade journals, in a battle both cultural and economic, had ridiculed the English saddles and gingham-shirted Indians in Pathé’s European-made Westerns. Pathé’s answer was to open a studio in New Jersey and hire as director of its Westerns a Native American, James Young Deer. After Pathé opened a Los Angeles branch, Young Deer would be promoted to its general manager.

Born in Nebraska of Winnebago ancestry, James Young Deer (whose name may be a pseudonym) had trouped the country with Wild West shows and circuses before landing roles in film Westerns sometimes alongside his wife, Lillian St. Cyr (likewise a Winnebago, with a long career under the name Princess Redwing). For Kalem, Lubin, and other early companies, Young Deer also penned Western scenarios. In part because he was never given credit on-screen for any of the approximately 120 films he directed for Pathé between 1910 and 1913, James Young Deer has become a completely forgotten figure, and his films are impossible to attribute with certainty. Only about six are thought to survive in U.S. archives.

“White Fawn’s Devotion,” like almost all American Westerns before it, was shot in the East. As with

several other Young Deer films (to judge from their plot description), it draws from the popular 1905 stage melodrama. “The Squaw Man” — about a Briton whose Indian wife sacrifices herself by suicide — but alters the outcome significantly. In “White Fawn’s Devotion” a Briton named Combs, his Indian wife, White Fawn, and their daughter live in a Dakota log cabin. When Combs makes plans to claim “an unexpected legacy,” White Fawn fears he is leaving forever with their child and attempts suicide. The daughter, finding her father bent over her mother holding a bloody knife, mistakenly reports murder to her Indian grandfather. After the chase by the tribe, Combs is set for execution at the hands of his reluctant daughter, until White Fawn — who has only wounded herself — arrives to set things straight.

For all its simple pantomime style, “White Fawn’s Devotion” arrives at a conclusion almost unknown in the era’s film or fiction: The interracial couple live happily ever after. The surviving print, preserved by the Library of Congress, is missing a few feet at its end, and Pathé’s publicity fills in the resolution: “The Combs take their departure and return to their home, for he feels he will be happier with his family on the plains than if he goes east and claims his legacy.” It was only when Young Deer reversed the sexes of the interracial couple that reviewers were outraged.

About (the unfortunately lost) “Red Deer’s Devotion,” which Young Deer shot in the West in 1911, “Moving Picture World” said: “Another feature of this film will not please a good many. It represents a white girl and an Indian falling in love with each other. While such a thing is possible, and undoubtedly has been done many times, there is still a feeling of disgust which cannot be overcome when this sort of thing is depicted as plainly as it is here.”

Between 1908 and 1912, Native American images were seen more widely on movie screens than ever again. In 1913, “Moving Picture World” reported that “Indian dramas ...are played out” and that film companies were hanging NO INDIANS WANTED signs. That is also the year that James Young Deer — who surfaced briefly in the British and French film industries — essentially vanished from the American movie business.

About the Preservation

A nitrate print of “White Fawn’s Devotion” was located in the New Zealand Film Archive and repatriated through the American Film Institute to the Library of Congress.

Further Reading

A chapter is devoted to James Young Deer’s film career in Andrew Brodie Smith’s “Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood” (University Press of Colorado, 2003).

Editor’s Note

Recent research shows James Young Deer was a member of the Nanticoke Nation of Delaware and born in Washington, D.C. See Angela Aleiss’s article in “Bright Lights Film Journal.” <http://brightlightsfilm.com/who-was-the-real-james-young-deer-the-mysterious-identity-of-the-pathe-producer-finally-comes-to-light/#.VuGMDEY3J7I>

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Scott Simmon is Professor of English at UC Davis. His books include The Films of D.W. Griffith (1993) and The Invention of the Western Film (2003). Simmon’s informative essays have accompanied the NFPF Treasures DVDs as well as the Foundation’s free online release of Orson Welles’ recently discovered and preserved film “Too Much Johnson.”