

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Apache 8 (documentary film). By Sande Zeig.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/098380v0>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 37(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Heil, Douglas

Publication Date

2013-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

she calls “oppositional representations,” mostly by Native agents, that seek to undermine colonialist power structures. This includes a succinct review of indigenous research methodologies and discussions of art, museum installations, literature, and mascot parodies by Natives. Her examination of the National Museum of the American Indian would be enriched by engagement with literature that presents more complex and nuanced views on these efforts, such as *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* by Amy Lonetree and Amanda Cobb-Greetham (2008).

For readers of the growing literature on race and representation of Native Americans, there are few conceptual surprises here. But Strong offers an engaging and readable synthesis and intriguing examples of the ways that racist representations of Indians underscore white American identity. The sections that are more historically driven would be useful for those readers with little or no knowledge of the history of Native political sovereignty, captivity narratives, and issues related to ethnography in Native communities. She opens with a concise survey of the scholarship on representations of Native Americans and each chapter includes an instructive “Bibliographic Note” at the end, which undoubtedly would be useful to undergraduate students or readers new to the topics. Overall, it is a useful and accessible addition to the literature on Native American representations. *American Indians and the American Imaginary* raises important and timely questions and readily lends itself to an undergraduate course in the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies, visual studies, Native American studies, and ethnic studies.

Mattie M. Harper

University of California, Santa Cruz

Apache 8 (documentary film). By Sande Zeig. Lincoln: VisionMaker (Native American Public Telecommunications, Inc.), 2011. 56 minutes.

Imagine a large firefighting camp out West in the mid-1970s. The place is thronged with an avalanche of firefighters. They come from all over and every single one is a man. Suddenly, a line of women firefighters materializes out of nowhere, filing into their midst. All heads turn in shock.

This is just one of the stories told in Sandy Zeig’s documentary *Apache 8*, which celebrates the crack all-female firefighting unit from the Fort Apache Reservation. The unit, initially called Apache 6, was the brainstorm of a man (unidentified in the film) who notes that Apache women seemed more dependable than the men. Eventually the unit fell under the leadership of Cheryl Bones, who shaped them into a disciplined force that won national

recognition. In particular, Apache 8 received acclaim for its heroism during the horrific 2002 forest fire that swept through Arizona.

Zeig skillfully maneuvers around two documentary filmmaking handicaps. One is the relative lack of sexism confronting the unit. Robert Lacap, forest manager for the BIA Fort Apache Agency, explains that given the male-dominated tribal culture there was potential for acrimony, but in fact the women were fully accepted as firefighters. Former crewmember Katy Aday does share two amusing anecdotes about errant male assumptions. Initially, a forestry director tells her she is too small and too thin to carry the forty-five-pound pack of fire equipment (00:08:27). But Aday converts his putdown into raw fuel: "You don't say that to me. You can't tell me I can't handle a job." She also relates an incident in which the unit is led to a fire by a man who assumes that they need to stop and rest after each mile.

The other handicap is that there were no dramatic fires while the documentary was being made. Zeig compensates by using NBC and CBS news footage of the 2002 fire, and also shows the crew snuffing out a "sleeper"—a tree that has been struck by lightning and pops up smoldering a couple of days later. Zeig partially fills the gap by showing some of the more mundane responsibilities of the crew in between fires, which includes thinning trees responsibly. Surprisingly, this segment is fascinating. We learn that the crew initially had to make do with rudimentary tools such as a double-bit axe. Leader Cheryl Bones shares her memories of learning how to operate a power saw; as she talks, Zeig cuts away to dynamic footage of Apache 8 women gunning their saws and cutting down trees. Another well-filmed segment centers on prospective hires trying to pass the "pack test," in which they must walk with those forty-five-pound packs on their backs for three miles. The walk is recorded with a mobile camera moving alongside the women, helping the viewer experience the challenge. Each woman has three chances to pass the test, and you're not allowed to fight any fires until you do.

The pivotal figure in the documentary is Bones. Approximately age sixty at the time of production, her sunny disposition and still-girlish voice belie the steely interior of a warrior. Multiple women attest to her drive, her discipline, and her leadership abilities, perhaps none as eloquently as Annette Hinton: "If she sees there's a lazy bone in you, she'll work it out of you: believe me, she did that to me a lot of times. There's no lazy bone in me to this day; I pull my weight, and I'm forty-three, and I can still work harder than these young guys. And it was through Cheryl's leadership that we did get recognized" (00:17:02).

There are fascinating parallels between *Apache 8* and *Skydancer*, another recent Native documentary reviewed in this journal's preceding issue. Both documentaries center on well-paying, dangerous work that fuses with cultural identity and has led to tragic losses. In *Apache 8* we learn that Bones'

nephew—leader of the equally renowned male firefighting unit Apache Hot Shots—is burned to death. Both films also acknowledge the high unemployment and drug and alcohol problems infesting each reservation. In separate incidents in *Apache 8*, two of Aday's sisters have been killed by drunk drivers, and each has a son who has veered down the wrong path. The most wrenching story is the murder of Bones' daughter by several Apaches involved in the meth trade—including the son of her Apache 8 crewmember Dean Caldera. Her son is currently serving a life sentence without parole, and the murder has ruptured the friendship between the two women.

Similarities aside, there are differences between *Skydancer* and *Apache 8*. *Skydancer* pivots on the issue of resisting assimilation. In that documentary, principal character Jeffrey McDonald Thundercloud has been raised as a Catholic. After his mother dies, an uncle grounds him in Mohawk spirituality, and it is a transformative experience. The film also documents tribal efforts to sustain the reservation's Freedom School, in which children are provided with an assimilation-free Mohawk education. In contrast, *Apache 8* argues, principally through Katy Aday, that assimilation must be part of the educational process. Aday's upbringing was the reverse of Thundercloud's: raised with ten sisters in a three-room house and speaking only Apache, then Aday was bused to California by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and fostered by a Mormon family during high school. She relates how her father told her, "You have got to get an education; you've got to be able to walk in both worlds . . . I need you to speak English; I need you to come back here and be the voice of the people" (00:24:18).

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two films is tone. While *Skydancer* probes the cost of holding down a prestigious, well-paying job six hours away from home, *Apache 8* is more celebratory. Zeig clearly admires these women and makes sure that we will admire them as well. Some darker corners are not explored. One crew member, for instance, observes that in pushing her crew, Bones could turn mean. To her credit, Zeig leaves the comment in, but she also chooses not to follow up on it. Similarly, both firefighting and ironworking entail long absences from home, but while *Skydancer* details how ironworking has been a contributing factor to wrecked marriages and wayward adolescents, we do not learn whether similar problems have been triggered in *Apache 8*. The 2002 NBC story notes that Bones has been working twenty-one days without a break, with ninety hours of work per week. Later in the film, she relates that a work shift can run from ten to fourteen hours a day. Aday mentions that while she worked in Apache 8, she missed every one of her daughter's birthdays between the ages of one and seven. Bones acknowledges that when she started, she had to leave her three children behind at the ages of five, two, and one. Again, Zeig chooses not to examine

the consequences of those actions. It is unclear, for instance, whether Caldera's absences from home contributed to her son's involvement with meth, about which she had no inkling. Instead, Zeig singles out the family members who facilitate the demanding job of firefighting. Aday's husband, Nita Quintero's partner, and Bones' sister are all lauded for the unconditional love and support they have provided.

Of the two films, *Skydancer* is more closely integrated, with every one of its scenes pivoting around the challenges of living in two worlds to sustain a career in ironworking. The last half of *Apache 8* delves into digressions that seem only obliquely related to firefighting. We learn about the Apache Sunrise Dance Ceremony that takes place when girls come of age, for example, and how Nita Caldera's ceremony when she was fourteen led to a photo spread in *National Geographic*. Given that Katy Aday spent only about six years with Apache 8, she may have been given too prominent a place in the documentary. Zeig repeatedly returns to her as the "go-to" subject throughout the film, as we learn about her childhood, her career choices after she left Apache 8, and her future aspirations. It's hard to fault the filmmaker, however: Aday makes for a wonderful role model, combining strikingly good looks with keen intelligence, humor, and sincere emotion. She tears up twice when talking about her father and her husband, and she reliably lets fly trenchant sound bites.

If *Apache 8* does veer from seamless integration, the digressions do contribute significantly to the film's overall objective: to celebrate and inspire. This would be a smashing film to share with Native children in middle school. But truth to tell, anyone who screens *Apache 8* will be galvanized by its committed women.

Douglas Heil

University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

Bartering with the Bones of Their Dead: The Colville Confederated Tribes and Termination. By Laurie Arnold. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. 208 pages. \$60.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

This is a story about dysfunction—of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation and of the United States government—as they danced around the possibility of the termination of bands that were held together in a common reservation in Washington State. The road to reservation life for these confederated tribes was and is complicated because of the number of bands that the federal government placed on the reservation, a land traditionally identified with the Colville. The tribes included the Colville, Arrow Lakes,