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**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

A Race Divided: The Indian Westerns of John Ford

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/68n7n3fj>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

1994-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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## A Race Divided: The Indian Westerns of John Ford

ANGELA ALEISS

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No film director has created as enduring an image of the American West as has John Ford. During a career that spanned more than fifty years, Ford directed approximately 135 films, of which close to sixty were Westerns. His depiction of American Indians has been especially controversial: While his adversaries bemoan the savage portrayals of American Indians in *The Searchers*, his defenders counter with the sympathetic images presented in *Wagon Master*. Still others call attention to Ford's so-called reversal of Indian portrayals, pointing to the ferocious Apaches of *Stagecoach* and then to the Indian martyrs of *Cheyenne Autumn*. Any compromise between the opposing factions appears impossible.

Several scholars have attempted to explain the director's seemingly contradictory Indian portrayals. A few object to the description of Ford as a "cinematic racist": Jim Weigert's essay "John Ford and the Indians" argues that Ford actually pioneered a sympathetic attitude toward Indians long before it was fashionable to do so. Weigert cites, in particular, the more "humanizing" portrayals of Indians in *Fort Apache* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Michael Nathan Budd's dissertation develops a similar argument; he describes Ford's Indians as becoming more individualized from *Stagecoach* to *Cheyenne Autumn*. Kirk Ellis's article "On the Warpath: John Ford and the Indians" emphasizes the appar-

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ent intercultural conflict in Ford's Westerns and the director's inclusion of both noble and savage Indians.<sup>1</sup>

To categorize Ford's Indians simply as noble or brutal is an oversimplification. Difficulties emerge when, for example, Ford's complex, defiant Indians of *Fort Apache* appear twelve years later as faceless, shadowy figures in *Sergeant Rutledge*. Clearly, a consistent linear transformation is lacking here. Furthermore, Ford's twelve Indian-theme features—beginning with *The Iron Horse* in 1924 and ending forty years later with *Cheyenne Autumn*—reveal a variety of production companies, writers, and producers who worked with the director and occasionally exerted influence over his films. What exactly is or is not attributable to Ford can be rather murky.<sup>2</sup>

The director himself offers few clues. Ford was notorious for dodging questions concerning his personal and political beliefs, and he skillfully hid most of his correspondence from public (and scholarly) scrutiny. Only his movie scripts, personal letters, legal papers, and oeuvre of films remain. However, if we look beyond the written documents and the simplistic good-versus-bad Indian labels, a clear pattern begins to emerge. The director's Indian-theme Westerns—regardless of studios, writers, or national policies—show Native American characters holding firmly to a distinct identity and culture (although not necessarily an accurate one) and never fully embracing white society. Ford's movies celebrate racial differences; their emphasis on conventional portrayals suggests that Anglo-America will always remain aloof from its non-Anglo counterparts.

John Ford was born John Martin Feeny on 1 February 1894 in the small town of Cape Elizabeth overlooking the rugged coast of Maine. He was one of six surviving children (seven others had died) of Irish immigrant parents; his older brother Francis (born 1881), who had changed his name to Ford in 1914, lured John to Hollywood as a studio assistant that same year. The younger "Jack Ford" performed bit parts and stunt work (including an appearance as a Klansman in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915) and became an assistant director at Universal Studios in 1916. Ford earned his first directorial credit at Universal (for the two-reel short *The Tornado*), establishing himself as a Western "auteur"; in 1924, his most noteworthy silent feature was *The Iron Horse*, a Fox Film Corporation release.<sup>3</sup>

Ford's presentation of the intercultural conflict between Indians and whites begins with *The Iron Horse*.<sup>4</sup> Here Cheyenne and

Sioux warriors serve as a convenient mass enemy hindering railroad construction, but Pawnee scouts work closely with army troops, protecting them against the marauders. The film implies that Indians were thriving before whites arrived. Although progress is inevitable, it includes its share of corruption: The Cheyenne leader is really a disguised white renegade who hopes to profit by inciting the natives to attack the railroad.

The dichotomy between Indian and white cultures is readily apparent in *The Iron Horse*. In one scene, the Indians (on horseback) pursue a Pony Express rider; the camera follows the chase alongside a moving train, with the warriors galloping behind on the tracks. As the train gains speed, the rider hops aboard, and the Indians slowly retreat; they are no match for mechanical progress. In another scene, the Indians attempt to stop a train by roping its engine, but their primitive weapons are futile against modern technology.

*The Iron Horse* concludes with the joining of the Union and Central Pacific Railroads at Promontory Point, Utah. Neither white corruption nor Indian hostility can stop progress: The film's hero kills the white renegade, and the Cheyenne simply ride away, at least for the present. The story offers no resolution to Indian-white relations—only a setting for the conflict between civilization and savagery. Ford will develop the Indian-white struggle later.

The release of *Stagecoach* in 1939 established a far more separatist vision of American Indians. Ford bought the screen rights to Ernest Haycox's short story "Stage to Lordsburg" (appearing in *Collier's* magazine in 1937) and, with writer Dudley Nichols, created a script for a movie. Selling the story proved difficult, since major studios were skeptical of the Western's box-office potential during the 1930s. Producer Walter Wanger eventually agreed to finance the film for United Artists and signed a contract with Ford in October 1937.<sup>5</sup>

*Stagecoach* reduces Indians to civilization's obstacles and settlers' nightmares. Ford again offers no resolution to racial hostilities and seems to respect the distinct boundaries that Haycox's story establishes between Indian and white societies. Haycox describes the rugged land as fierce, raw, and inhospitable, with little sympathy for the weak: Blackened remains of ranch houses and grotesquely scalped victims are scattered across a countryside swept by the quick raids of Geronimo and his men. The stagecoach's perilous

journey across the uninhabitable desert symbolizes civilization's triumph over a savage wilderness.

The film's Apache Indians function to unite the whites in the stagecoach against them; they lack character development and are separate and outside of civilization's tamed forces. The final script begins with the Indians riding furiously, "to give an impression of the savagery and desperation that set the Apaches apart from all other Indian tribes in the southwest."<sup>6</sup> The titles state that no name struck more terror into the hearts of travelers than Geronimo—leader of a band of Apache who chose death over submission to the white man's will. These Indians desired no part of civilization, just as the whites wanted nothing of their world.

*Stagecoach* fulfills white prophecies and fears about Indians. It relies on negative stereotypes to demonstrate that Indians do indeed attack innocent settlers and burn families' homes: A scout in the first scene warns that the hills are full of Apache, and "they've burnt every ranch in sight." Predictably, the travelers encounter the ashen remains of ranch houses (and a partially scalped woman) during their journey. One passenger's invidious warning that the Apache "strike like rattlesnakes" becomes a reality when the warriors later swoop down on the vulnerable stagecoach.

The film's chase sequence represents the ultimate clash between savagery and civilization. The camera pans across the Apache lined up along a ridge (with Geronimo in the center), eyeing the stagecoach far below. An arrow pierces a passenger's shoulder, initiating the conflict. Indians zigzag down the ravine, whooping and yelling against the loud "chase" music. The script notes that one Apache "bites the dust," and his gun flies into the air; another Apache is shot, and several horses gallop over his body. As one Indian jumps onto the stagecoach's lead horses, his demise becomes one of the film's more powerful statements against savagery: The driver shoots, the Indian falls, the horses gallop over him, and the coach flattens him. The Indian scrambles to a kneeling position, and two more horses trample him.<sup>7</sup> This lingering image of a wounded warrior represents the lesson of civilization "rubbing out" savagery, leaving its tread marks to pave the way for the white frontier.

The scene's final moment, notably absent from Haycox's story, presents a comment on interracial contact. As Lucy huddles in the corner praying, Hatfield raises his gun to her forehead. Like Griffith's young mother in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1914),

Ford's heroine is protected from the horrors of miscegenation: For a woman, death at the hands of a white man is preferable to the fate the Indians would offer. (A bullet fatally wounds Hatfield moments before the cavalry sounds its bugle call, and Lucy is spared.) Forced relations between Indians and whites are a horror that society must prevent at all cost, including the death of the female victim. On the other hand, Chris, the Mexican station master, is married to Yakima, the Apache woman who signals to Geronimo's camp. Although the couple live in a sort of social limbo outside the boundaries of any town, their interracial marriage appears to be acceptable to Ford, because it does not violate his taboo against Indian-white relations.

Like *Stagecoach*, *Drums along the Mohawk* (also released in 1939) conveys the traditional American ideals of progress and expansion in a battle against formidable obstacles. The latter film was especially responsive to America's growing concern over world affairs: Europe was fighting another war that threatened to involve the United States. *Drums along the Mohawk* (Ford's first Technicolor film) is set in an agrarian community in New York State's Mohawk Valley during the early 1770s. The film is based on Walter Edmonds's rather lengthy historical novel (first published in 1936), which recounts the daily struggles of the settlers against the weather, the British, and the Huron Indians. Darryl Zanuck, vice president in charge of production at Twentieth Century-Fox, purchased the screen rights to the book in 1936 and personally supervised several screenwriters' revisions until he was satisfied with Lamar Trotti's final shooting script.<sup>8</sup>

The film's menacing Huron Indians present a sharp contrast to the friendly Oneida, Blue Back (portrayed by a Seneca Indian, John Big Tree). Although the Indians in the film are kept separate from white colonial society, Blue Back is (in Henry Fonda's words) "as good a Christian as you and me are." Still, Blue Back is a "tainted" Indian whose comical antics point to civilization's corruption. When he hands Henry Fonda a rod for whipping his wife, explaining that it "make fine woman," he is really mimicking what he perceives to be an acceptable social custom among white Americans. Blue Back later blurts out an "amen" during a quiet church service, and the congregation gawks at him; in another incident, he mockingly fastens a dead Tory militia leader's eye patch over his own eye.

*My Darling Clementine* (1946) continues the tension between Indian and white societies. The picture was Ford's last as a

contract director for Twentieth Century-Fox, and he took considerable liberties in adding character idiosyncrasies and comic moments.<sup>9</sup> The film's protagonist, Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda), displays noticeable restraint in confrontations with his Indian adversaries; he punishes them like naughty children. He chides "Injun Charles" (Charles Stevens) for causing a commotion in a saloon and disposes of the intoxicated Indian with a kick, a departure from a comparable scene in Allan Dwan's 1939 *Frontier Marshall* (in which Earp wounds an Indian in a gunfight). When Chihuahua conspires to cheat at poker, he dunks her in a water trough and threatens to send her "back to the Apache reservation." In his attempts to preserve law and order in a vulnerable town, Earp manages to avoid hostile clashes with the Indians, but he instead humiliates the offenders. The reminder that Tombstone ought not to serve liquor to Indians is a further indication that natives may not mingle freely with white society.

The attitude toward Indians in *Clementine* was especially ironic during America's postwar era. Indians had served admirably during World War II, and the United States was beginning to lean toward racial inclusion, but Ford's vision of a segregated society remained unchanged. This thematic pattern would continue in his "cavalry trilogy"—*Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Rio Grande*—three Westerns that celebrate military tradition while simultaneously questioning its values. All three postwar Westerns—produced by Argosy Pictures, a company of which Ford was a cofounder and major stockholder—offer a more complex view of America's Indians but continue to underscore Ford's apparent preference for a racially separate society.

*Fort Apache* (1948), the first film of the trilogy, elevates its military heroes to a plane distinctly removed from American Indians. Yet Ford's patriotism is not blind; he questions the cherished values that pervade our national ideology. The film was based on James Warner Bellah's "Massacre" (which appeared in a 1947 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*), the story of a Civil War brevet major general, Owen Thursday, and his problems at a frontier military outpost. Thursday's pompous, regimental mannerisms and arrogant character irritate Lieutenant Flint Cohill, a veteran Indian fighter whose men instantly dislike the general. Thursday's attitude is equally contemptuous of Indians: he insists that fewer cowboy manners and more military dignity would earn them his respect. The general refers to the warriors as turkey-

eating women and recalcitrant swines, and he orders Cohill to interrupt rudely when the Indian chief speaks.

Bellah's racist language was too offensive for postwar America; he sold "Massacre" outright and was not involved in the screenplay.<sup>10</sup> Ford chose to temper Bellah's prose with the assistance of former *New York Times* film critic Frank S. Nugent, whose idealistic vision of frontier life complemented Bellah's harsher portrait. The director subsequently sent Nugent "down into the old Apache country to nose around," requesting that he conduct extensive research on cavalry-Indian relations in the Southwest and compile a complete biography of every character in the picture.<sup>11</sup> Nugent's resultant summaries included descriptive passages about Thursday's ignorance:

Having spent so much time in Europe he has begun to think in terms of small maneuver[s] and small distances . . . . He goes to Arizona to fight against the Apaches whom he despises in his ignorance, not knowing he is up against the best light Cavalry that ever lived.<sup>12</sup>

In *Fort Apache*, Lieutenant Colonel Thursday (Henry Fonda) emerges as a true martinet who is more concerned with preserving his image than protecting his country. The lines separating white civilization and red savagery are permanently embedded in Thursday's vision of the American frontier. When advised by Captain Kirby York (the film version of Flint Cohill, played by John Wayne) to respect Cochise's word and honor the chief's offer to negotiate, Thursday denies that honor can exist between an army officer and an Apache. He considers it humiliating to fight "brech-clad savages," revealing his racism when he lifts an Indian headband with the end of his pencil to avoid touching it (the other officers pass it through their hands). At a meeting with Cochise, Thursday sits on a stool in the middle of the desert to show his disrespect; he compares a younger officer's behavior to that of an uncivilized Indian.

Thursday's inveterate racism is countered by York's ardent respect for Indians. York's meeting with Cochise is a friendly encounter; he addresses the chief in Spanish and stands facing him in the desert. York's respect extends beyond mere cordiality.

Kirby is a great admirer of the plains Indian, as a soldier and as a man. He believes they have been badly treated by dishonest Indian agents, Carpetbaggers, and Politicians . . . .<sup>13</sup>

*Fort Apache's* Cochise (portrayed by Mexican actor Miguel Inclan) is a tough negotiator. He refuses to concede to the army and demands that the corrupt Indian agent be removed. Cochise is skillful and adroit in war, compassionate and just with his people, brutal and relentless to his enemies.

In our story his name will strike terror and dread into the hearts of men, but when we meet him, he will prove to be an impressive and dignified man, no more vengeful fighter, but a man who has suffered much at the hands of the whites and has in fact, right on his side.<sup>14</sup>

The film's conclusion offers a multifaceted vision of Ford's Indian/white attitudes. Thursday and his men embark on a suicide mission; they are alone on the open range, a small circle of desperate men. In one long shot, the Apache, who have been waiting for them in the shadowy crevices of the canyon, race through the troop—the horses' hooves thundering their arrival—and leave Thursday and his troop dead amidst a cloud of dust. As Cochise and his warriors approach York, the captain unbuckles his gun belt and walks toward the Indians. Cochise plunges the cavalry's flag into the ground and defiantly departs. In this victorious gesture, the chief demarcates racial boundaries and reasserts Indian autonomy.

In *Fort Apache*, Ford ridicules the military's thirst for glory. The parallel to Custer's defeat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn is obvious: Thursday's blunder, like Custer's, transforms him into a legendary hero who sacrifices himself for his country's welfare. When York tells two reporters later that Thursday died gallantly in a heroic charge, the chauvinist prig, whose stubbornness and ethnocentrism have caused a military disaster, is suddenly transformed into a national martyr.<sup>15</sup> *Fort Apache's* uncomfortable tone forces the audience to confront this simple truth: The system perpetuates these legends in order to obliterate America's sense of remorse for annihilating its natives in the name of civilization. Ford's conclusion is a painful reminder that traditional American history has been written at the Indians' expense.

Ford's attitudes toward Indian-white relations, as presented in *Fort Apache*, are the antithesis of Delmer Daves's views in *Broken Arrow* (1950). The latter film also takes place in the 1860s and recounts the peace agreement between U.S. mail rider Thomas Jeffords and Cochise. Unlike Ford, however, Daves embraced the

concept of Indian assimilation into white society as a solution to interracial hostilities. In *Fort Apache*, Cochise is defiant against white encroachment and steadfastly insists on Indian autonomy. In *Broken Arrow*, he is more willing to compromise; he makes concessions to the U.S. Army and banishes those warriors who disagree (namely, Geronimo). Furthermore, Cochise's eloquent English in *Broken Arrow* rivals the language of his white counterparts. Ford's Indian leader converses in Spanish. In Daves's film, the white hero's young Indian wife must die as a "sacrifice" for peaceful coexistence, but, in *Fort Apache*, the troopers perish and the Indians march off victoriously.

*Fort Apache* closes with a rendition of Custer's Last Stand; *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) opens with the words "Custer is dead." The year is 1878, and ten thousand Sioux and Cheyenne are united in a war against the U.S. Cavalry. Captain Nathan Brittles (John Wayne) will retire from his officer post in six days, and the current Indian-white conflict weighs heavily on his mind as he reads aloud a list of acquaintances killed at the Little Big Horn. Like York in *Fort Apache*, Brittles respects the Indians (he freely seeks a sergeant's advice on Cheyenne customs and traditions), yet he retains a sense of patriotic duty toward the cavalry and its mission against the natives. In *Yellow Ribbon*, Ford explores how the U.S. Cavalry, embittered by Custer's defeat, must terminate Indian aggression while attempting to recapture its dignity and heroism.

*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* is based on James Warner Bellah's "War Party" and "The Big Hunt," both stories that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In "War Party," Brittles expiates the cavalry's previous blunders in a shrewd attack: He does not kill Indians but stampedes their nine hundred horses off a cliff. The company then proceeds to escort one thousand or so Cheyenne men, women, and children on foot to the Wind River Reservation. The victory hurts Indian pride at the same time that it restores the U.S. military to a more honorable position. Ford seems to decry the cavalry's treatment of American Indians by questioning the necessity of war and creating a bond between the Indian and white protagonists.

The Indian characters in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* are more complex and individualized. Red Shirt (Noble Johnson), leader of the Arapaho, is a recalcitrant warrior who obtains supplies from white gun runners and defies the chief's desire to abstain from war. When Brittles enters the Indian village, Red Shirt shoots an

arrow near the officer to express his contempt. His opposite is Pony-That-Walks (portrayed by John Big Tree), an elderly chief who has held Brittles's sincere respect and friendship for many years. Ford implies a strong bond between the two men, extending beyond that between York and Cochise in *Fort Apache*. (The friendship between the chief and Brittles is absent in Bellah's stories; Ford himself wrote the dialogue between them.<sup>16</sup>) In this particular scene, the director seems to comment wryly that youthful men like Custer (who died in battle at the age of thirty-seven) possess nothing but naive and chimerical visions of victory.

*Brittles*

We must stop this war.

*Pony-That-Walks*

Too late, Nathan. Young men do not listen to me. They listen to big medicine . . . . We are too old for war.

*Brittles*

Yes, we are too old for war. But old men should stop war.

When Pony-That-Walks declares, "Hallelujah! I am a Christian" and invites Brittles to remain with him so they can "hunt buffalo, get drunk together," the chief's antics resemble those of Blue Back in *Drums along the Mohawk*. The message is the same: Civilization, in the form of alcohol and Christianity, corrupts Native American culture. Its victims are neither "authentic Indians" nor accepted members of white society.

The chief's departing words, "Nathan, my brother, go in peace," are a hopeful echo of the concept of eternal brotherhood. This post-World War II ideal of different races sharing a common bond anticipates the Cochise-Jeffords relationship in *Broken Arrow*. The later film, however, expands the brotherhood theme into an interracial society in which Indians and whites remain together and even intermarry. No such message exists in *Yellow Ribbon*; Ford's preference for racial segregation is unequivocal. Brittles's troop stampedes the Indians' horses and then escorts the humiliated tribe back to their reservation, because "walkin' hurts their pride." His desire to avert war is clear, but he obviously believes that the two races should remain separate.

*Rio Grande* (1950), the last film of the cavalry trilogy, lacks the compassion and comprehension of its two predecessors. Critics have denounced the film as needlessly brutal in its portrayal of

Indians, and some consider it a less significant Ford Western. This response is understandable, especially considering the film's lack of leading Indian roles and its re-creation of mass-scale Indian attacks that recall those of *Stagecoach*. James Kevin McGuinness's screenplay of Bellah's *Saturday Evening Post* story, "Mission with No Record," adds little to the writer's superficial Indian characters.<sup>17</sup> McGuinness offers no dialogue between a cavalry officer and an Indian chief, and his native characters lack the dimensions of those in other Ford Westerns.

*Rio Grande* omits most of the gruesome atrocities from Bellah's story but reinforces the racial barriers in American society. When the film's protagonist, Lieutenant Kirby York (John Wayne), arrives at the fort with his Apache captives, the tone is set immediately for racial conflict. An Indian woman's eerie singing during the night portends an attack against the fort; the howling of coyotes soon reveals itself to be Indian cries, and warriors materialize out of the darkness. Equally important is the final attack in the church: When troopers shoot at Indians through a cross-shaped opening in the wall, they are symbolically excluding Native Americans from the town's Christian community.

*Wagon Master* (1950) continues the separation of Indian and white cultures, but its outlook is clearly optimistic. The film was released through Ford's own Argosy company, and his personal style is evident in the original story, which he himself wrote (although Frank Nugent and Ford's son Patrick developed the script).<sup>18</sup> The story of Mormon pioneers crossing the desert in search of the "promised land" presents Ford's postwar ideal of racial harmony; he exalts his native characters while showing how two incompatible communities exist simultaneously—though separately—within American society. *Wagon Master's* tolerant view of Indians and Mormons is the antithesis of *Stagecoach's* racial clashes. In the pluralistic society of *Wagon Master*, different communities respect each other's culture and traditions.

The opening of *Wagon Master* contrasts the two communities and their methods of survival in a harsh wilderness. The setting of Monument Valley provides a stark backdrop for the traveling party of two horse traders and their Mormon companions. "There isn't anybody made for this kind of country . . . not even the Navajos," muses Travis (Ben Johnson) as he scans the inhospitable land in which only barren, jagged rocks seem to survive. But the Navajo are the guardians of this rugged land, and their appearance is a reminder that, despite civilization's progress,

they continue to reign over the desert territory. Whites are the outsiders in Navajo country (a reversal of the manifest destiny theme of *The Iron Horse* and *Stagecoach*), and travelers soon learn to tread lightly while trespassing on Indian land.

The initial encounter of whites and Indians opens communication between them. Deletions and additions in the screenplay's first draft illustrate the travelers' dialogue with the Navajo (who, for once, speak their own language) during their initial meeting. Wiggs (Ward Bond), the elder Mormon leader, orders the travelers to put away their rifles; then he dismounts and raises his right arm as he and Travis approach the Indians. Script changes show that Wiggs turns to his escort and asks, "Travis, you talk Navajo?" It is Sandy (Harry Carey, Jr.), however, who addresses the chief in the Navajo language. This subsequent dialogue appeared in the final film, and it suggests that the Mormons must abide by Indian customs while passing through their territory.

The "squaw dance" celebrates a common bond between Mormons and Indians. A Navajo girl pulls the stuffy Brother Perkins out to the dance area, and Sister Ledyard joins the tribe's chief (portrayed by the famed Sac-Fox Indian athlete, Jim Thorpe) in a merry romp around the circle. Mutual respect has developed into friendship between two groups of social pariahs. These gestures speak to the fellowship between Indians and Mormons, and, for a short time, the two groups create their own idyllic community in a desolate wilderness.

The attempted rape of a Navajo girl (Movita Castenada) disrupts the celebration. A young Navajo holds a struggling Reese Cleggs (who belongs to a family of outlaws) in an arm lock, while an Indian girl with a torn blouse shouts angry accusations. A Navajo warrior points from Reese to the girl, and the Indians respond with an uneasy murmur. Wiggs orders his Mormon brothers to tie Reese to a wheel and whip him; when the elder Cleggs objects, Travis reminds him that "a whippin's better than a scalpin'." The Mormons emerge as arbitrators in this dispute, administering punishment while reestablishing their trust with the Indians. Ultimately, the travelers move on to their promised land and the Indians return to their own community; both will continue to exist as separate societies within America, but with no loss of identity or sacrifice of culture.

While *Wagon Master's* Indian-white relations represent a model of interracial tolerance, *The Searchers* (1956) is a study in modern savagery. The year is 1868, and the place is a stark and primitive

Texas. In this film, Ford's vision of a stable community with strong familial ties typically remains hopeful, but his focus is on the fanatic racism of his protagonist, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). Ethan, who is an otherwise noble individual, possesses a blind hatred toward the Comanche for killing his family and abducting his niece. His racism first becomes apparent when he remarks derisively that his nephew, Martin Pauly, who is part Cherokee, could easily be mistaken for a half-breed. The brutal murder of Ethan's family unleashes his fury: He shoots out the eyes of a dead Comanche; he slaughters the buffalo to deplete the Indians' winter food supply; and he scalps the Comanche chief Scar (Henry Brandon), who murdered his family. Worst of all, Ethan is determined to kill his niece Debbie (Natalie Wood) for becoming the chief's wife.

*The Searchers* acknowledges that, although differences exist between Indians and whites, savagery is innate to both races. From *Stagecoach* to *Wagon Master*, Ford's Indians have grown more complex; his white heroes, however, reveal considerable racism and brutality. Production notations indicate that Ford planned to "portray the Comanches with as much barbarism as possible"; associate producer Patrick Ford, however, added similar comments about the movie's white protagonists: "They [Ethan and Martin] are only a shade less barbaric than the savages they follow."<sup>19</sup>

Ethan Edwards is an eerie mirror image of Chief Scar. Each man has witnessed the brutal slaying of his family by the other race, and each is determined to avenge his family's death. Chief Scar is "tall, savage, with a hatred for white people because they have killed his sons"; Ethan is "relentless in his hatred of Indians, and of all things pertaining to them."<sup>20</sup> Ethan whistles like a bird before attacking Scar's camp, just as the Indians had done before descending on the Edwards's ranch. The resemblance between Ethan and Scar is also evident in their initial meeting:

*Ethan*

You speak good American. For a Comanche . . . Someone teach you?

*Scar*

You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?<sup>21</sup>

Despite these shared qualities between its two protagonists, *The Searchers* severs all possible bonds between Indians and

whites. Driven by fierce determination, Ethan's search for his niece is obsessive: "Whatever it took, wherever it took him, he had to find her."<sup>22</sup> Ethan eventually finds his niece living among the Comanche and even speaking their language; Debbie has become Scar's wife, and she declares that the Indians are now her people. During the film's climactic moment, the cavalry surrounds the Comanche village, and Martin kills Scar. Ethan pursues Debbie relentlessly, vowing to destroy her Indianness by killing her. But blood ties prove stronger than hatred: Ethan suddenly abandons his quest for revenge, lifts his frightened niece off her feet, and says, "Let's go home, Debbie."

It is fitting, then, that Debbie returns to civilization and the cavalry destroys the Comanche village. The rampant slaughter of innocent lives, *The Searchers* seems to say, will cease only when one race exterminates the other. The vision that Ford created in *Wagon Master* of a racially tolerant society has been shattered; clearly, whites and Indians cannot coexist peacefully. The outcome of *The Searchers* is undeniably racist, but one message is disturbingly true: Beneath the veneer of civilization lies a terrifying savagery.

Racial bigotry is the subject of *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960). The Indians in this Western, however, serve merely as a catalyst for exploring Black-white racial tensions; they are little more than faceless, shadowy figures who resemble the Apache warriors of *Stagecoach*. Based on "Captain Buffalo," an original screenplay by James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck, *Sergeant Rutledge* is dedicated to the Ninth and Tenth U.S. Cavalry officers and their all-Black volunteer units. Braxton Rutledge (Woody Strode) is a first sergeant in the Ninth Cavalry, a top soldier and a gallant fighter. The story is told in flashback, while Rutledge is on trial for the murder of his white commander and the rape-murder of the officer's daughter. (The trial reveals that the white sutler, and not Sergeant Rutledge, is guilty of the crimes.) The setting is Ford's familiar Monument Valley, inhabited by Apache Indians who terrorize innocent settlers and wage a relentless war against the army.

The Apache Indians of *Sergeant Rutledge* emerge as a collective menace. Their ominous presence is frequently signaled by rising smoke signals, flitting shadows, or even grotesque remains of murdered human beings: "Man staked out—an' awful dead . . . His own mammy wouldn't know him—porcupined with all them arrows."<sup>23</sup> Severed telegraph wires spell doom to the stranded

party (a similar scene occurred in *Stagecoach*), and the railroad conductor unexpectedly collapses with an arrow in his chest. When individual Indians do appear, they often lie dead, face down, viewed detachedly through a long shot.

Although it praises Black troopers, *Sergeant Rutledge* portrays Indians as civilization's worst nightmare. Black and white, men and women, must unite against the frontier's common enemy, the American Indian. According to Rutledge, the word *Apache* means "the enemy—of everyone." Rutledge reminds us that the fight against the Indians is indeed everyone's battle: "[It] ain't just the White man's war! It's ours! We're fightin' for us!" He later plays upon white fears of Indian-white miscegenation when he shoves a rifle into a white woman's hands at a deserted train station, declaring, "They'll [the Apaches] have no mercy on you lady. They'll have no mercy."

Ironically, Rutledge's acquittal reinforces Indian-white racial barriers. The model soldier, the dedicated cavalryman, ultimately returns to his home and his real freedom—the Ninth Cavalry—taking an honorable position in his nation's history. As he joins his white counterparts in helping to pave the road to Western settlement, he, too, will remove the Indian obstacles from America's frontiers. In *Sergeant Rutledge*, Indians are unwelcome in both Black and white American society.

*Two Rode Together* (1961) exposes the insidious effects of social and communal bigotry. Based on *Comanche Captives*, a novel by Will Cook, *Two Rode Together* follows Marshall Guthrie McCabe (James Stewart) and Lieutenant Jim Gary (Richard Widmark) in their efforts to rescue several white captives from a nearby Comanche camp. The story raises some disturbing questions about a stable, all-white frontier community in which social proprieties are but a thin disguise for racism.

*Two Rode Together* again confronts the perpetual tension between civilization and savagery and asks who really is the more savage. McCabe agrees to recapture the white prisoners, for a price of \$500 each; one desperate woman pleads for the return of her brother, captured nine years ago. McCabe's harsh warning that the young boy has "turned savage" beyond recognition suggests that Indian culture debases white civilization, leaving the victims perpetual social pariahs on the frontier.

That kid has braids, stiff, stinkin' braids filled with buffalo grease . . . forgot English. He just grunts Comanche now. Just grunts. And given the chance, sister, he'd rape you!

The ugly remark signals the bigotry of the entire community. The young boy violently protests his return to society, kicking, biting, and finally stabbing an elderly white woman who befriends him. Almost predictably, the tragedy unleashes anti-Indian hysteria in the community, but the target is one of their own. The boy's tragic lynching by an all-white mob becomes the film's most powerful statement against civilization's hypocrisy. One studio memo explains,

The climax can be all the more powerful by having the screenplay capitalize on the fact that a savage who cannot be civilized is being hung by civilized people who have turned savage.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the white community wants no part of Indian society, just as the former white captives want no part of white society. (Even an elderly white woman loudly protests when she's returned to civilization.) The town's hatred toward Indians again surfaces when McCabe brings Elena (Linda Cristal), an attractive Mexican woman and former captured wife of the Comanche warrior Stone Calf (Woody Strode), to a social dance. (McCabe had previously killed her husband in self-defense.) Elena stands like a young debutante at her first ball; clothed in a white gown, she appears most uneasy among the white guests. The "taint" of her Indian past haunts her: Several cavalymen refuse her invitation to dance, and one person asks contemptuously if she bore any children by her Indian husband. Elena is distraught, but McCabe angrily rises to her defense: "She was treated much better by the Comanches than she's been treated by some of you." Not surprisingly, Elena concludes, "I do not belong with these people."

The racial lines have been clearly drawn, and *Two Rode Together* holds firmly to those boundaries. Elena is Mexican; although she may have some Indian ancestry, McCabe alludes only to the white Mexican in her, the part that most strongly attracts him. Indeed, McCabe shares the community's distrust of Indians; his descriptions of white captives are unflattering. He has obliterated Elena's Indian past by killing her warrior husband, and, ultimately, he chooses to join her in a stagecoach bound for California, where both may live safely removed from the narrow-minded Anglo community. Again, Ford's vision of separate Indian and white societies remains intact.

*Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) was Ford's last Western and, by many accounts, his most problematic. Critics were sharply divided over

whether his Indian portrayals were sympathetic or merely patronizing; some praised Ford's painstaking attention to cultural and historical details, only to be assailed by experts who balked at the movie's gross inaccuracies. Perhaps the most decisive question is, Had Ford's Indian images really changed since *Stagecoach*? The director's interview with writer/filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich in 1963 seems to imply that some transition had occurred:

I had wanted to make it for a long time. I've killed more Indians than Custer, Beecher, and Chivington put together . . . There are two sides to every story, but I wanted to show their [the Indians'] point of view for a change.<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, *Fort Apache* and *Wagon Master* also gave glimpses from the Indians' point of view, and even *The Searchers* forced us to understand Chief Scar's revenge in terms of Ethan's own racism. Showing the Indians' "sympathetic" side was certainly nothing new in Ford's Westerns. But at the heart of *Cheyenne Autumn* lies the real crime committed against the country's native people, an ugly blotch in American history. This was the first time Ford actually admitted that manifest destiny was a mistake.

*Cheyenne Autumn* rewrites history, but, ironically, Ford's Indians have not changed. They remain either noble, proud people (Little Wolf and Dull Knife) protecting their land or untamed, irrational creatures (Red Shirt) who opt for war instead of peace. Some attack and kill whites, while others agree to compromise (Chief Tall Tree). But as the Cheyenne stand pathetically in the hot, barren land awaiting the congressional committee and its many promises (the committee never arrives), it becomes obvious that these two races are unable to communicate, much less live together. "White man's words lie," announces one Indian leader and vows never to teach his children lies. A kind-hearted Quaker schoolteacher runs to aid the dying chief, but an Indian blocks her way. A group of warriors dart in and out of the desert sage, cleverly camouflaged from their non-Indian enemies. These Indians belong to a separate world, incompatible and far removed from white society.

During the Cheyenne's arduous fifteen-hundred-mile trek to their northern homeland, the gap between Indians and whites only widens. Indeed, *Cheyenne Autumn* reveals that civilization—through religion, education, and the military—destroys Indian culture and corrupts its members. The list of atrocities quickly adds up: One thousand Northern Cheyenne are removed to Okla-

homa, but only 286 survive; the Bureau of Indian Affairs fails to deliver much-needed food, supplies, and medicines; one cowboy kills and scalps a hungry Cheyenne for sheer pleasure; and the army opens fire on starving Indian men, women, and children who have been detained at Fort Robinson. Perhaps Dull Knife (Gilbert Roland) best summarizes his people's plight: "Even a dog can go where he likes. But not a Cheyenne."

But the Indians of *Cheyenne Autumn* do prevail. Little Wolf (Ricardo Montalban) and Dull Knife unite the two Cheyenne bands at Victory Cave, where they will live together as one nation. The Cheyenne are now on their own land and obey only their own laws and traditions. They will thrive as an Indian nation, outside the boundaries of white society. Even the Quaker schoolteacher, who taught the Indians English and nursed a wounded Indian girl back to health, must cast aside her idealistic dreams of assimilating the Cheyenne. "Home," she tells the Indian girl in the film's final scene, then sends her back to the Cheyenne. Noticeably, the girl and her people have abandoned Western attire in favor of traditional Cheyenne clothing, a symbolic triumph over white aggression and cultural genocide. Nothing in Ford's vision of separate Indian and white societies has changed.

The dominant theme in Ford's dozen Indian-theme Westerns, then, is cultural and political autonomy. Whether the natives are the hostile Apache Indians of *Stagecoach*, the benevolent Navajo of *Wagon Master*, or the ominous Comanche of *The Searchers*, these characters must be viewed in a nonlinear, nonevolutionary way. Ford's Indians have become more individualized (Pony-That-Walks in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* and Dull Knife in *Cheyenne Autumn*), and his non-Indians have demonstrated their racism (Ethan in *The Searchers* and the townsfolk in *Two Rode Together*), but little change has occurred in the director's portrayal of Native Americans as a people, separate and distinct from white civilization.

Was John Ford a racist? The director's Indian characters indeed were restricted to the stereotypes of either the hostile warrior or the noble savage, and in this way they reflect the film industry's conventions and codes of the era. But Ford's Indians differ from those in other films of his time because they resist the loss of cultural identity and refuse to join the "melting pot" of the dominant Anglo-American society. Even when the idea of Indian assimilation became popular, Ford's Native American characters remained outside civilization's boundaries. In *Fort Apache*, when

Cochise victoriously plunges the cavalry flag into the ground, he simultaneously defeats the white invasion of Apache land and refuses to sacrifice Indian heritage. The gesture is untimely, but it is quintessentially Fordian. By rejecting any compromise with white civilization, Ford's Indians have become contemporary symbols for Native American autonomy and survival.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author is grateful for the research and financial support from the staff of Lilly Library, Indiana University, and the many perceptive comments from John Belton of Rutgers University.

### NOTES

1. Jim Weigert, "John Ford and the Indians," *Media Educators Association Journal* (1979): 10–13; Michael Nathan Budd, "A Critical Analysis of the Western Films Directed by John Ford from *Stagecoach* to *Cheyenne Autumn*" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1975); and Kirk Ellis, "On the Warpath: John Ford and the Indians," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 8:2 (Spring 1980–Winter 1981): 34–41.

2. For example, Jack Warner (head of production at Warner Brothers studio), ordered that *Cheyenne Autumn's* final print be reedited and that his changes be kept strictly confidential. Memo from Rudi Fehr to Walter McEwen, 24 June 1964, pp. 3–4, Warner Brothers Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. All production materials from the Warner Brothers Archives will be noted hereafter as WBA.

3. Dan Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 12–18. Dan Ford is John Ford's grandson.

4. In 1919, Ford had directed a two-reel film *By Indian Post* for Universal. The story involves a jeopardized romance, which the Indian character inadvertently saves by exposing the culprit's letter to the town. The film presumably is lost.

5. D. Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford*, 122–23. Nichols had also collaborated on the screenplays for other Ford films: *The Hurricane* (1937), *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (1935), *Judge Priest* (1934), and *Pilgrimage* (1933). He received an Academy Award for his adaptation of *The Informer* in 1935.

6. John Ford and Dudley Nichols, *Stagecoach* (Classic Film Scripts), (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 144.

7. Ford and Nichols, *Stagecoach*, 123–25. One particular point of criticism in the film's chase sequence was the fact that the Indians did not shoot the horses pulling the stage. Ford admitted that he broke conventional rules because, if the Indians had shot the horses, "it would have been the end of the picture, wouldn't it?" Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 72.

8. D. Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford*, 140. Screenwriter Lamar Trotti had also worked with Ford on *Judge Priest* (1934), *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (1935), and *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939).

9. D. Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford*, 211.

10. *Ibid.*, 215, and taped interview of James Warner Bellah (n.d.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, John Ford Manuscripts, Lilly Library). All materials from the John Ford Manuscripts will be noted hereafter as JFM.

11. Frank S. Nugent, "Notes Taken at the Southwest Museum": Helen S. Griffin and Andrew Woodward, *The Story of El Tejon*; Lansing Bloom, *Bourke on the Southwest*; and Elizabeth Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, box 5, folder 8, JFM. These materials include citations on U.S. Cavalry as well as Apache Indian customs. In a letter to Lindsay Anderson dated 3 May 1953, Nugent mentions Ford's insistence that he travel to the southwest and prepare character summaries for *Fort Apache*. See Anderson, *About John Ford* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 242.

12. [No Author] Notes on "Brevet Major General Owen Thursday, U.S.A.," p. 1, box 5, folder 8, JFM. The notes were most likely recorded by Nugent, although there is no indication of the author's name.

13. [No Author] Notes on "Capt. Kirby York," box 5, folder 8, JFM. Although some critics have faulted the film because the Indians speak Spanish, the Apache had learned the language centuries earlier from both the Mexicans and the Spaniards.

14. [No Author] Notes on "Cochise," box 5, folder 8, JFM.

15. Message in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962): "When legend becomes fact, print the legend."

16. Taped interview with Harry Carey, Jr., January 1990. Carey appeared in several of Ford's Westerns, including *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Three Godfathers* (1948), *Rio Grande* (1950), *Wagon Master* (1950), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Two Rode Together* (1961).

17. McGuinness had worked on a number of screenplays for Ford's films at Fox studios, including *Salute* (1929) and *The Black Watch* (1929), the director's first sound film.

18. Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, 88. In his interview with Bogdanovich, Ford mentions that *Wagon Master*, along with *The Fugitive* (1947) and *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953), were among his personal favorites.

19. Interoffice memo from John Ford, 26 January 1955, p. 1; memo from Patrick Ford, 1 February 1955, p. 1, box 6, folder 21, JFM.

20. "Synopsis for *The Searchers*" [n.d.], p. 4, WBA. The description of Ethan's character is from Patrick Ford's interoffice memo, 1 February 1955, JFM.

21. *The Searchers*, revised final screenplay by Frank Nugent, 2 July 1955, pp. 104-105, WBA.

22. Publicity materials for *The Searchers*, WBA.

23. "Captain Buffalo," revised estimating script, 11 June 1959, pp. 83, 85, box 7A, folder 11, JFM.

24. Interoffice memo from *Two Rode Together* [No author, no date], box 7A, folder 11, JFM.

25. Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, 104.