



'White Fawn' and the lost history of James Young Deer

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'White Fawn' and the lost history of James Young Deer



The Roving Reader Files

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People disappear from history all the time. No written records, no treasured belongings handed down as heirlooms, no-one still around to remember... There are lots of reasons. But one of the most successful film-makers of his era? That's unusual...

Take a look at this:

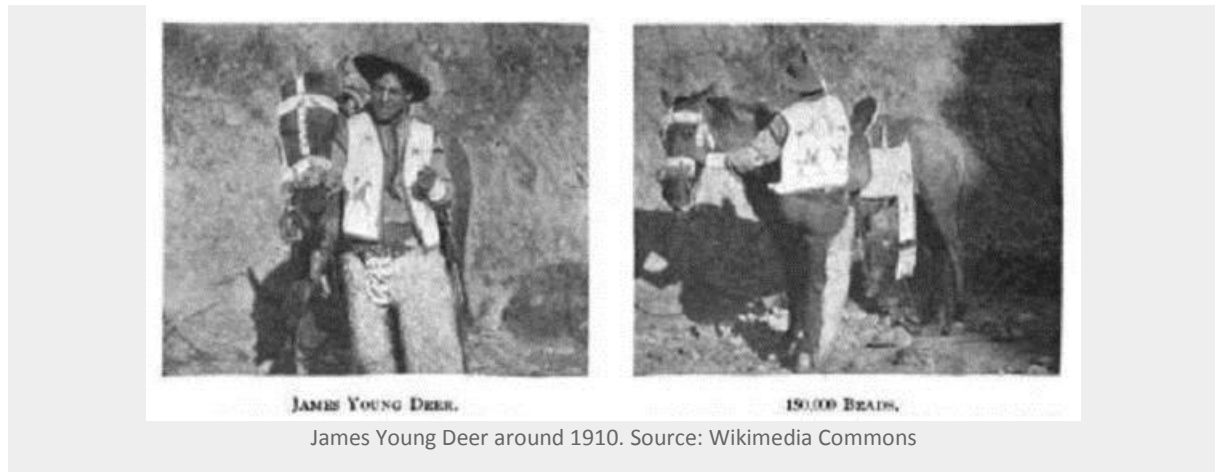
[Link to film 'White Fawn's Devotion' uploaded to YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDryiOULtZY>]

Okay, it's a bit scratchy and 'theatrical', but in its time this film was revolutionary. Why? Amongst other things, it was the work of the first Native American film director. Between 1910 and 1913, James Young Deer (otherwise known as James Young Johnson) made well over a hundred one-reel silent Westerns in America for French organisation Pathé Frères, then the largest production company in the world.

Active at the time the young Charlie Chaplin first arrived in the US, Young Deer (1878-1946) had worked previously with the likes of director D.W. Griffith (later of *Birth of a Nation* fame). A blaze of success for a few brief years, he lost favour when dragged into one of the infamous early Hollywood sex scandals. Interest in Western themes was waning, and after World War I five-reel feature films took over. He never regained his position.

To this day there have been very few Native American film directors. But in some ways, Young Deer's occupation is less surprising than other aspects of his life and work. Rumour had it he was a Black person trying to pass as a Native American, but was he 'genuine'? Much was shrouded in mystery until 2013, when scholar of American film history [Angela Aleiss](#) dug around to uncover information from dusty archives and scattered surviving individuals who'd known him. We've discussed the importance of [primary sources](#) and [oral testimonies](#) before. Without diving into these, Aleiss would have drawn a complete blank.

What was so extraordinary about James Young Deer? To me, there are two things. Firstly, the nature of the stories he told, and secondly, the tangled web of contradictions which obscured his real ancestry. What these reveal about the complex interracial politics and attitudes of his time has echoes right down to the present day.



What was it about his storylines? In early twentieth-century America, there was a fascination with all things Native American. Some individuals of Native American origin were able to make a living from this trend by appearing in live Wild West shows. Young Deer and his Winnebago Indian wife Lillian St. Cyr (otherwise known as Princess Redwing) were no exception, moving into film-making in the early days of the genre. Although he remained uncredited on screen, as director and scenario writer, Young Deer was also General Manager of the Pathé Los Angeles studio. He took the opportunity to oppose an emerging stereotype in popular culture of Native Americans as savage unreasoning killers to present 'Indians' as civilised, with a strong sense of right and wrong, capable of mercy, love and self-control.

Most of his work has been lost. *'White Fawn's Devotion'* (1910) is therefore a rare gem. It was radical in presenting a mixed-race marriage between 'Indian' and white settler as a viable, functioning option. The Indian wife was not forced to assimilate, and when faced with the choice of leaving to claim a large inheritance and staying to live with his family, the white husband chose to stay.

'White Fawn's Devotion' received acclaim, but when in the next year Young Deer produced *'Red Deer's Devotion'* (now lost), there were howls of rage. The spectacle of a white girl and an Indian boy falling in love violated deep-rooted taboos among whites, which caused a writer for 'Moving Picture World' to admit to a "feeling of disgust which cannot be overcome."

And what of Young Deer's ancestry? Angela Aleiss has discovered that, in his youth, Young Deer was classed as a 'mulatto' – a person of mixed white and African American heritage. Born in Washington D.C. in 1878, at twenty he was serving in the US Navy, where Black people could only become stewards or cooks. By the time of his marriage in 1906, he was identifying as a Native American, taking on his wife's Nebraska Winnebago heritage. As a film director he could only have been successful as an 'Indian'. Identified as a Black, he would have been listened to and obeyed by no-one.



RED WING. Born in Nebraska, 1895. Her father was chief of the Sioux Indian Tribe. Was educated in Nebraska and started her picture excursions with the firm of the New York Motion Picture Company under the direction of Chas. K. French, remaining there for one year. Her first picture was "The Cowboy's Darling Daughter". She then joined the Pathé Company, playing Indian leads and after remaining with them for three years joined the Lubin Picture, her latest success being in "The Squaw Man".

Lillian St. Cyr (otherwise known as Princess Redwing) in 1914. Source: Wikimedia Commons

But this scenario is not as straightforward as it seems. Washington D.C. in the mid-to-late nineteenth century was home to a small isolated community dubbed the 'Moors of Delaware'. Comprising whites, Blacks and Native Americans, individuals in this community had been categorised by external assessors as either 'white' or 'Black' depending solely on perceptions of shade of skin. A whole generation of Native American ancestry was lost. Aleiss found that in fact, most likely unbeknown to him, James Young Deer belonged to the small Nanticoke tribe of Delaware. The father he had never known had been classed as a mulatto, and knowledge of his actual origins had been all but lost.

So here, after one hundred years, we find the real James Young Deer. In life, he negotiated the gradations of discrimination suffered by Black, mixed race and Native American communities to become a highly-successful film director. In death, he has been uncovered as the unknowing victim of the racially ignorant judgements of an anonymous white record keeper.

As with Gladys Tantaquidgeon whom we met in a [previous post](#), the story of James Young Deer, pioneering Native American film director, sheds light on prejudices and assumptions, the consequences of which have reverberated far into the future.

You can find out more about Native American history as well as the history of the arts, film and music by dropping into the Resource Centre. If you'd like to learn more about Angela Aleiss's findings on James Young Deer, you can do so [here](#).