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UNO Native Film Festival

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UNO Native Film Festival

Abstract

This is the first year for the University of Nebraska at Omaha Native Film Festival. The Festival was presented Nov. 1-3, 2013, by the Native American Studies Program of the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Vision Maker Media. In addition to the movies reviewed below, the Festival included a program of children/family films, a program of short films, an acting workshop with Chaske Spencer (Lakota Sioux), and a workshop on how to use visual media in the classroom presented by Vision Maker Media. Vision Maker Media is a non-profit organization that shares Native stories with the world by advancing media that represents the experiences, values, and cultures of American Indians and Alaska Natives.

40 Years Celebrating Wounded Knee

(2013)

Directed by Christopher Marshall

Christopher Marshall's *40 Years Celebrating Wounded Knee* examines the commemoration of the seventy-one day pan-Indian occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. This film is not intended to showcase the issues surrounding the actual take over itself, but the power Wounded Knee continues to have over the hearts of many Native people. Held for a week in February 2013 in South Dakota, festivities included interviews with key players in the takeover, such as American Indian Movement (AIM) co-founders Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt. Another notable AIM co-founder, Russell Means, passed away before the observances began, but is given a touching dedication honoring his contributions to Native people. Along with these recollections, important developments leading up to Wounded Knee, such as the takeover of Alcatraz and the Trail of Broken Treaties, are discussed and reminisced over. Artist and activist Donel Keeler is also prominently featured throughout the documentary as he recounts his introduction to Native activism and experiences at Wounded Knee. His paintings and humble fortitude helped inspire several Native activists at Wounded Knee and his work continues to provide encouragement to Native people.

The American Indian Movement (founded in 1968 in Minneapolis) eventually came to understand its cause as predominately spiritual in nature moreso than political, and that reality is featured towards the end of the documentary. In a show of cultural sensitivity, the camera is temporarily turned off during moments of prayer and ceremony. Also reflected in the film is the belief of many AIM members that their mission followed in the lineage of other famous pan-Indian movements, and that their work should similarly be used to inspire younger generations of

Native people to focus on improving their communities through education, political engagement, and spirituality.

Wounded Knee will always hold a prominent place in the hearts of many Indian people as a place of sorrow and loss stemming from the massacre of 1890. The 1973 occupation maintains a similar level of emotional affection, but one of rejuvenation rather than angst. The 1973 siege came at a time in which Native people had been absent from the national stage for decades. By uniting across tribal lines for the purposes of reforming tribal governments and demanding the federal government abide by its treaty obligations, Native people ignited an indigenous cultural renaissance that continues to reverberate today. Christopher Marshall's *40 Years Celebrating Wounded Knee* is a good reminder of Wounded Knee's enduring impact on Native people today.

— Brady DeSanti

The Medicine Game

(2013)

Directed by Lukas Korver



A friend who attended the screening of *The Medicine Game* said she thought when it began, “Oh no, a sports movie!” It didn’t take long for her, and everyone else, to realize that this is much more than a film about the *sport* of lacrosse. *The Medicine Game* is about the traditional purpose and healing role that lacrosse has for two Onondaga Nation brothers and their family.

Director Lukas Korver’s documentary follows brothers Jeremy and Jerome Hiana Thompson over the course of seven years as they pursue their dream of playing lacrosse for Syracuse University. As we learn early in the film, lacrosse is much more than a mere sport on

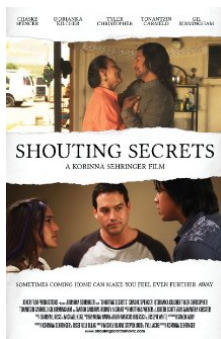
the Onondaga Nation reserve in New York State. It is a traditional Native American game that is viewed as medicine. From this perspective, lacrosse must be played with a “clear state of mind” because it was given by the Creator to provide entertainment, to bring people together and to nurture physical and spiritual health. Throughout the film we see how lacrosse fulfills all of these purposes in the brothers’ lives, from their triumphs and struggles in high school to Jeremy’s eventual, and hard-won, success at Syracuse and then the opportunity for both brothers to play professional lacrosse. Along the way we see the challenges the brothers face as they overcome educational barriers and negotiate rez/non-rez life. Neither brother makes it through these years easily or unscathed. Their honesty and the hard times though allow us to learn powerful lessons about how familial love, traditional spiritual practices, and passion for lacrosse, can lead to resiliency and recovery. All of this makes for an inspiring film from start to finish.

— Michele Marie Desmarais

Shouting Secrets

(2011)

Directed by Korinna Sehringer



Characters in the film *Shouting Secrets* don’t so much shout their secrets as reveal them gradually in hospital corridors, on back steps, in bedrooms and beside a hospital bed. Director Korinna Sehringer’s movie was originally going to be about a European family; however, setting the story on an Apache reservation and portraying a Native American family allows her to explore family dynamics, betrayal, racism, divisions over religion and, ultimately, love.

Chaske Spencer (*The Twilight Saga*) portrays Wesley, a star writer who, having made it off the rez, almost never makes it back home. He doesn’t even plan to come home for his

parents' 40th anniversary but when his mother June (Tantoo Cardinal) suffers a stroke, Wesley returns. Given the circumstances, and since Wesley's first and only novel, *Shouting Secrets*, was rather closely based on his own family, the reunion isn't an easy one. Wesley remains in denial about the severity of his mother's condition until the end of the movie, while family members and friends expose their resentments, heartaches and significant troubles. Gil Birmingham is brilliant as the grief-stricken husband of June, coping with a pregnant daughter, battling sons, and memories of his own failings as a husband. All of this would make for a heavy film, but the seriousness is liberally dosed with humor, usually at the expense of the white boyfriend of Wesley's sister Pinti (Q'orianka Kilcher).

Although the mother, June, is comatose for most of the movie, she is the central figure. As a mother and wife she holds together the otherwise fragmented family members. Her presence and influence, right to the end, allow each character to move forward from personal struggles. In her life she practiced traditional ways, but still loved her evangelical Christian sister (Sheri Foster), whose loud hospital prayers and bible readings are in stark contrast with the Street Chief's (Rodney A. Grant) quiet smudging and presence. Even Wesley, by the end, can take his place within a circle created and maintained by his mother. *Shouting Secrets* doesn't offer easy solutions to any of the issues it raises, but the hard work of love and the honor paid to a mother's strength make for a good film about one Native American family confronting the universal human experiences of grief, hope and personal redemption.

— Michele Marie Desmarais

Spirit in Glass: Plateau Native Beadwork
(2012)



“Beads are our art form,” but they represent so much more than art in this visually stunning documentary about pictorial bead working among contemporary Tribal peoples of the Plateau. For the peoples of Warm Springs, Yakama, Nez Perce, and Umatilla, their beadwork is the “new way to keep spirit alive.” Plateau Tribal cultures are still known for their beautiful horses and expert beading—this film showcases both. As the Mimbres Fever website promises, this “film provides a rare opportunity to experience Plateau culture through the eyes and hearts of artists, who share their history, motivation, and the beadwork that plays an important role in binding their culture together.”

Beading is an integral part of “traditional Plateau culture” but this tradition is a fairly recent innovation, developing after the 1855 Treaty days when access to glass trade beads increased during the early reservation years. Pictorial beadwork is representative art, literally “beading a picture.” Plateau bead artists are widely recognized as some of the finest working in this medium. Most bead artists are women, but Plateau men also bead. The artists believe their “handiwork” binds them to their ancestors and is a vehicle to express their spirituality. Intention is paramount and as one artist observed, artists should “always make sure you have a good heart, no bad thoughts, or whoever wears your work will feel the bad energy.”

Yakama artist Vivian Harrison prays with eagle feathers because she believes the eagle flies high to take her prayers to the Creator. These prayers are, in turn, reflected in the eagle feathers depicted in her bead work. Plateau Natives bead everything from cradleboards and

dance regalia to full ensembles for their beloved horses. Many of the favorite pictorial designs represent power animals, like Eagles, Swallows or Salmon, or culturally significant plants like huckleberries, wild strawberries, and roses. Most of the pieces are produced for Native use, not for the commercial market. As one artist commented, the pieces in museums do not carry the same “vitality” as the ones still carried in the families. This quality resonates in the visually stunning sequences of parades featuring fully beaded regalia for horses and their riders, further reflecting the vitality of contemporary culture, spirit, and art in the Plateau region.

Much of the beading becomes exquisite dance regalia. As artist Brigette Scott noted, “if you want to dance, you need to bead.” Heirloom beaded pieces are lovingly handed down in families or given to non-family members as a symbol of their acceptance. Yet, this art form is also evolving with artists experimenting with new, vibrant colors and designs. One of the favored subjects of these bead artists are their horses and treasured rodeo culture. Many patriotic symbols, like the American flag, are also prominent.

Many Native women, who are themselves accomplished bead artists from the Great Plains, attended this screening. Viewing this documentary in their company yielded an even greater appreciation for the complexity of the designs and the mastery of the medium.

— Beth R. Ritter

Winter in the Blood
(2013)

Directed by Alex Smith and Andrew J. Smith



“Coming home’s not easy,” especially when you wake up bloodied and hung over in a ravine, face to face with the frozen body of your father who died ten years ago. *Winter in the Blood*, adapted from the iconic novel

of the same name by James Welch (Blackfeet and Gros Ventre), is a haunting and powerful film that features an outstanding cast and the stark and stunning landscape of the Northern Montana Hi-Line. *Winter in the Blood* is a film that will resonate strongly with Native audiences, but the story is universal. Set in the 1970s, film makers Alex and Andrew Smith lovingly and painstakingly returned home to the locations depicted in Welch's novel to capture an authenticity and honesty truly rare in adapted films. Place matters. Masterful storytelling matters.

The Smith brothers got so much right in this film that you are moved to go back and re-read the novel. The screen play (written by the brothers and Ken White) rings true. After all, what would be the point of trying to improve on Welch's dialogue? Beautiful cinematography and exquisite dialogue are wasted unless you have actors who have the depth to bring these characters to life. The remarkable cast was led by Chaske Spencer ("Virgil"), who appeared in nearly every frame and also co-produced the film. Best known for his roles in *The Twilight Saga*, *SKINS*, *Dreamkeeper*, and *Into the West*, Spencer is mesmerizing and surprisingly sympathetic as the emotionally paralyzed Virgil. Through a series of flashbacks and "dissolves" we learn that Virgil has experienced multi-faceted tragedy, losing his beloved older brother Mose in a senseless accident, and then his father, First Raise (Richard Ray Whitman). Virgil yearns for his father, yet feels little when he discovers his body a decade after his brother's death. Taunted as a "half breed," Virgil self-medicates and stumbles numbly through bizarre encounters with women, including his "wife" Agnes (Julia Jones) who leaves him, taking his rifle and electric razor. There are fanciful, drunken scenes with the "Airplane Man" (David Morse), "Two Suits," and a stuffed bear set in the border towns of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

Despite the grim details, this film has some moments of true "Indian humor." Virgil's mother Theresa (Casey Camp-Horinek) up and marries an ambitious rancher, Lame Bull (Gary

Farmer). When Virgil's ancient grandmother passes away, Lame Bull feels moved to say a few words and delivers Welch's line as only Gary Farmer could. In flashbacks, we learn how central Virgil's grandmother has been in his childhood. Like the time she quietly served him a soup made from the hawk he and Mose thoughtlessly shot and killed. The hawk becomes achingly symbolic of Virgil's spirit, soaring, crying, and reappearing throughout the film. The young Native actors who play the brothers (Alex Escarcega and Yancy Hawley) are excellent.

Virgil's encounters with Yellow Calf (Saginaw Grant) are deeply moving. Virgil seeks out the old man at his lowest point, remembering when he accompanied his father to visit Yellow Calf as a small child. Ever the consummate Blackfeet elder, Yellow Calf serves him coffee and cryptic stories. One story in particular is the same one Virgil's grandmother told him about the hungry days after her husband Chief Standing Bear died. Through Yellow Calf, Virgil finally learns that the old man is actually his grandfather and that he wasn't a "half breed" after all. Everyone, including Virgil's grandmother, believes Yellow Calf is dead, so the scenes may well be a vision. Either way, Virgil is transformed by the experience.

Winter in the Blood is a film about redemption. When Mose dies, something inside Virgil dies with him. He literally wastes the next two decades but as the film unfolds, he slowly gathers the pieces of his spirit and begins to thaw his frozen heart. As Yellow Calf tells him, "Sometimes you have to lean into the wind to stand straight." — Beth R. Ritter



Yellow Fever: The Navajo Uranium Legacy
(2013)

Directed by Sophie Rousmaniere

Director Sophie Rousmaniere's *Yellow Fever: The Navajo Uranium Legacy* examines the devastation to Dine (Navajo)

communities due to mining activities throughout their homeland. Extending throughout parts of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, the Navajo Nation possesses the largest reservation in the United States. Much of their homeland continues to show visible signs of uranium contamination in the ground water, housing developments and building projects, and newborns, who suffer birth defects in high numbers. Prior to their homeland becoming a repository for radioactive waste, the Navajo showed hardly any traces of cancer, making them a medical anomaly and the subject of journal articles. Given the current rates of cancer and other health maladies directly associated with exposure to uranium, this makes the situation all the more devastating.

The scramble by the United States military to outpace the Soviet Union in developing nuclear weaponry after World War II was responsible for much of the uranium mining in the American Southwest. Private companies and contractors enjoyed massive profits supplying the government with uranium at the expense of a community's health and infrastructure for generations to come. Rousmaniere relies on the testimony of Navajos that worked in the mines and the descendants of deceased workers to illustrate the crisis that continues to face their community. Much bitterness and grief are shared by survivors and relatives of casualties of the mining activities. This is understandable, given the fact that the federal government admitted to withholding evidence during the decades following World War II of just how deadly repeated exposure to nuclear material could be. Many individuals and families adversely impacted by nuclear contamination continue to wait to be adequately compensated as of the release of this documentary.

Much attention is focused on Tina Garnanez, a young Iraq combat veteran suffering from PTSD, who conducts the majority of the interviews. Garnanez is not only intimately tied to her

culture and land, but related to several individuals that succumbed to cancer after years of working in the mines. Her chronicling of mining's insidious legacy possesses a sense of urgency, as demand grows to resume mining operations in the area. Corporate and governmental interests are once again aligning in the name of economic development and increased reliance on nuclear energy. Despite possessing every reason to remain hostile to the idea of uranium extraction, Garnanez investigates the merits of arguments from mining proponents, who claim that operations are vastly safer than in previous decades.

However, given the frequency of disasters involving nuclear material, such as the Funakoshi incident, and the fact that many Navajos must travel 30-50 miles to enjoy safe drinking water, she ultimately decides the risk is too great to allow uranium extraction to take place again in her homeland. A particularly powerful testimony against mining comes from a medicine man Garnanez interviews near the end of the documentary. While never mentioning the term specifically, the man invokes the Navajo concept of *Hozho*, the idea that everything in the universe is interrelated. Impact on any single aspect of reality influences the whole, causing a ripple effect throughout the natural world. This individual makes it clear that the Navajo environment and way of life are out of balance due to radioactive contamination.

Engaging and pertinent, *Yellow Fever* is an important documentary that showcases the history of the Navajo Nation's experiences with uranium mining in their sacred lands. The damage to their infrastructure, health, and quality of life is a sad legacy of unscrupulous corporate and governmental interests at the expense of a community already devastated by centuries of mistreatment through colonialism. The most powerful aspects of this documentary are shown in the resiliency of the Navajo people and their struggle to prevent any further contamination to their homeland.

— Brady DeSanti