

The Daughter of Dawn



An Original Silent Film with an Oklahoma Indian Cast

*By Leo Kelley**

The *Motion Picture News* reported on October 17, 1920, that a movie, *The Daughter of Dawn*, had received a sneak preview earlier that week at the College Theatre in Los Angeles. One critic even lauded the script, describing it as an “original and breath-taking adventure” which had “hardly been duplicated before.” That particular response to the film may have been overly optimistic, and the film was not nominated for any awards, but it is important in Oklahoma history for two reasons. First, it was one of

the earliest silent motion pictures filmed entirely within the Sooner State. And, more importantly, its entire cast was comprised of Native American actors and actresses.¹

Norbert Myles, an interesting character born in Wheeling, West Virginia, during the 1870s who was educated at Mount St. Joseph College in Baltimore, wrote and directed the six-reel melodrama. Myles's early career included a three-year run on the Shakespearian circuit and various roles in vaudeville. During the early 1900s Myles's acting talents were discovered, and he earned leading man status at Pathé Studios, and he later starred at one time or another with American, Capitol, and Vitagraph studios. His directing and writing career began in 1916 with *In the Web of Grafters*, *Nancy's Birthright*, and *The Stain in the Blood*. Myles's credits also included spine-tingling thrillers such as *The Soul of Satan*, *For Liberty*, and other low budget films.²

By the early 1920s Myles had butted heads with several of Hollywood's top brass. Black-balled by the industry, the irrepressible director looked elsewhere for a project. Richard Banks, who had started the fledgling Texas Film Company a few years earlier, had met Myles in 1916 on a movie set in California. Impressed with the vigor and expertise of the fiery director, Banks had asked him in 1918 and again the following year to direct an adventure film for his company.³

Banks's idea for the film involved an "old Comanche legend," he wrote Myles on August 20, 1919, "or at least it's a legend from one of the tribes around there such as the Apache." The location would be the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge near Lawton. Banks could provide Myles with "authentic" material because, as the director cited on the cover of his copyrighted script, "This story has been made possible by R. E. Banks, whose knowledge of the Indian, and of his traditions, was gained during the twenty-five years that he lived with them." Myles read Banks's material and suggestions, developed a rough script, then boarded a train and eventually steamed into Lawton. There, Banks and his one-man photographic crew met the Californian and transported him to the location.⁴

Unfortunately, very little knowledge of the actual shoot has been preserved, and even more heartbreaking, the film itself has probably been lost forever. However, thirty-six still photographs of the action-packed adventure have survived. Myles later wrote an article entitled, "My Adventures with the Oklahoma Indians," but he gave precious few details of the interplay between cast and crew. He did observe:

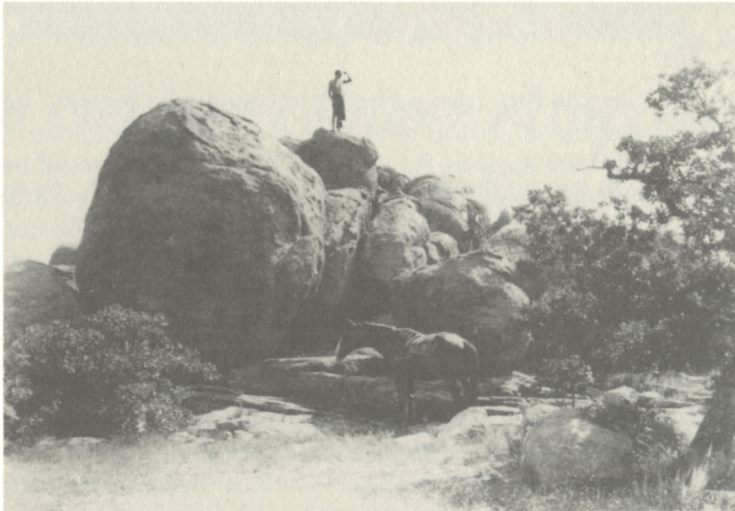
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[I] was quite surprised when [I] met the Indian actors . . . especially a young man named White Parker, son of the legendary Comanche chief Quanah. . . . Some people in Hollywood had joked that I'd probably lose my scalp . . . but they would be surprised to know that . . . the [Indians] spoke better English than they did.

Myles added that the Indians were "very shrewd" in their financial negotiations and the stars adamant in their demands.⁵

The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge was a perfect site for the filming of *The Daughter of Dawn*—lofty vantage points for the camera, open spaces for the chase scenes, and a proximity to Native Americans with their traditional dress and lodging. The stars of the film were Esther LeBarre as Dawn, White Parker as White, Hunting Horse, a Kiowa, as the chief, and Comanches Jack Sankey-doty and Wanada Parker as Wolf and Wanada. Wanada Parker was a daughter of Quanah Parker. Myles also used approximately 100 extras.⁶

The Daughter of Dawn, according to the script, contained 303 scenes. Myles called for a fade-in on scene 1 as White stands atop a large rock. As the Comanche youth scans the horizon in each



White (White Parker) spots a herd of buffalo in an opening scene (above). Among the Oklahoma Indian extras in The Daughter of Dawn (p. 290) were Slim Tyebo (standing, l), Old Man Saupitty (seated, c), and Oscar Yellow Wolf (standing, r) (All photographs courtesy Museum of the Western Prairie, Altus).

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In The Daughter of Dawn, Hollywood's version of an Indian love triangle involved White (White Parker), Dawn (Esther LeBarre) (top), Wolf (Jack Sankey-doty), and Wanada (Wanada Parker) (bottom).

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direction, he spots a large herd of buffalo. Then he shades his eyes and “looks again to make sure that his eyes are not deceiving him.” The director asked the cameraman in scene 2 to “shoot in an iris a long shot of the buffalo as White sees them, and then lap dissolve to a C[lose] U[p] of them.”⁷

As White hurries down to his horse, the camera shifts to the Comanche camp, where the chief and his elders are gathered in a circle discussing their severe food shortage. The first title, words appearing on silent screens, occurs when the chief says in stilted dialogue, “For many days we have looked [and] . . . my people are hungry. Go you and see if White has as yet not sighted them [buffalo].” The camera then turns toward Wolf and Wanada. Wanada loves Wolf, Wolf loves Dawn (the chief’s daughter), and Dawn loves White.⁸

The next title appears in scene 39 when White returns to camp. The chief states, “Tell us, son, have you seen that for which you looked?” White responds in scene 41, “Today I have seen that for which many moons I have looked, buffalo and many. We have to but go and take.” Reacting to the glorious news, the chief orders the men to prepare for the chase. Scene 51 fades in on some thirty Indians, including White and Wolf. The leader tells the others to “circle around the herd” and to drive “them to the far corner of the open place, where [I] . . . will be in hiding.” Myles ordered the camera to “shoot from a pit so as to have all the buffalo . . . and Indians . . . pass directly over the top of the camera.” The kill completed, the story shifts back to camp where the men are dancing and the women are preparing the shaggy beasts. Then, the audience sees views of White and Dawn together, with Wolf spying on them and Wanada spying on Wolf.⁹

Scene 68 shows a camp of Kiowas who have invaded Comanche territory and stolen many of their horses. The Kiowa chief explains to his people that the ponies are “really the property of the Comanches,” and he is certain “they [will] be looking for them.” The chief speaks the title, “Should the Comanches follow we will send the ponies ahead into our own country, where they will be safe, and then we can follow.” The chief next picks five of his braves who speak Comanche and sends them back to watch for any Comanche response.¹⁰

In scene 153 the chief tells Dawn that Wolf has asked to marry her, and that Wolf “has many ponies and . . . was considered one of the best men of the tribe.” Dawn insists that she has “no heart for him.” She then confesses it is White she wishes to marry. The old

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chief is faced with a dilemma, because White has only a few ponies. He reaches a decision, however, in the title for scene 160, "The one of whom you speak [White] is very brave but has nothing. Wolf has many ponies. Still, it is the brave whom you must marry, not his goods." Finally, the chief determines that White and Wolf must jump over a cliff to prove their courage, with the bravest winning his daughter's hand.¹¹

In scene 190, the chief, with White and Wolf beside him, tells the tribe, "These two young braves have each asked for my daughter's hand. I cannot decide between them. [To] the bravest of the two does she belong. Both of [them] shall jump from the top of that far cliff and he who lives shall take 'The Daughter of Dawn' to his teepee. I have spoken." Myles called for a close-up shot in scene 193 as White "looks at Wolf and smiles," while in scene 194 "fear creeps into [Wolf's] expression." The camera fades in at the cliffs in scene 200 as the chief tells the others to "back away from the edge." He holds up his hand and starts to speak to them. Later, the chief and two braves look over the edge, with Myles supplying a "shot of the depth of the scene."¹²

The chief gives a stern warning to the combatants, "Do either of you fail in this you shall no longer be worthy of the name Coman-



Dawn talks to her father, Chief Hunting Horse.



Chief Hunting Horse (top, l), White (c), and Wolf stand at the edge of the cliff over which the two must jump in an ultimate test of bravery. Following the jump, White lays on rocks at the bottom of the cliff (bottom).



When the Kiowas attack the Comanche camp, Wolf captures Dawn (l), as a Kiowa takes Alice Apekaum (c).

che, and shall be turned out of the tribe to live among the coyotes, if even they will have you.” Holding up his hand, he then drops it, signaling to White and Wolf to begin their approach. Scene 218, which Myles hoped would cause the audience to gasp, focuses on White as he “rolls into the scene at the foot of the cliff.” His injuries are apparent when he “tries to get to his feet but falls back.” The next scene shows the tribe looking over the edge of the cliff where they can see the “cowardly” Wolf “hanging by a limb.” Seeing White at the bottom, Dawn begins a frantic trek toward him. Much to her delight, White survives the suicide jump, proving he is the braver of the two. In scene 234, the chief orders Wolf to leave the Comanche camp and to “keep [his] face toward the rising sun and go.” All the men turn their backs on the disgraced Wolf as he leaves, and a few scenes later an old woman calls him a coward.¹³

Feeling much hatred for the chief and White, Wolf goes to the Kiowa camp and asks to be accepted as a member of their tribe. When the Kiowa agree in scene 244, Wolf speaks this title, “You have taken me into our tribe, and I see very few young women. There are many in the camp of the Comanches. Do you but say, and I shall lead you to where they are.” The Kiowa chief accepts his offer and orders his braves to prepare for the raid. Their attack comes while

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the Comanche men, including the chief, are out on an elk hunt. Myles noted at scene 248 that the photographer must make “sure that there is something very noticeable in this scene to distinguish the Kiowas from the Comanches.” The Kiowas come into the Comanche camp with a yell, killing a few of the old men who had been left behind. They also capture all the young Comanche women, including Dawn, and take them back to the Kiowa camp. Later, a surviving Comanche boy finds the Comanche hunting party and tells them of the savage attack.¹⁴

Scene 275 reveals Comanche medicine men prodding the braves to attack the Kiowas and reclaim their captives. The chief wears his magnificent war bonnet and later participates in a war dance. As the dance ends, the tribesmen mount up and head out for their confrontation with the Kiowas. Learning of the imminent attack by the Comanches, the Kiowa chief orders his braves to ride out and meet the enemy in battle. Ferocious warfare erupts at the foot of a hill, and Myles directed, “Get as many angles to this battle as it is possible to get.” When it is clear that the Kiowas have been thrashed, Wolf tries to escape, but White catches the traitor and after an extended struggle kills him. When Wanada finds the body of her beloved, she takes her own life.¹⁵



After he kills Wolf, White rescues Dawn from Old Lady Sunrise.

During the final scenes, White frees Dawn from her captives. Scene 302 fades in on the "sacrifice" dance. The chief then calls White and Dawn and after placing their hands together tells them to go. During the closing scene, the two lovers arrive at the shore of a lake, where White helps Dawn into a canoe. He then pushes the craft into the lake, and as they move away from the camera, Myles made his final direction, "fade out."¹⁶

The evidence of many interesting and historic events that have occurred in Oklahoma have been lost or forgotten over time. *The Daughter of Dawn* could have followed the same path. However, a collection of still photographs, a script hidden away in the Library of Congress, a seemingly insignificant letter, and a brief article have shed light on the extraordinary event that transpired near Lawton in 1920. Though the motion picture was produced by whites for white audiences, the scenes do provide insight into Comanche and Kiowa customs, lodging, warfare, and dress.

ENDNOTES

* Leo Kelley, a resident of Allen, Oklahoma, received the M.Ed. from East Central University, Ada. For several years he was curator at the Oklahoma Historical Society's Museum of the Western Prairie in Altus, and he is a frequent contributor to *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. Currently he is an Oklahoma history teacher at Harrah (Oklahoma) High School.

¹ *Motion Picture News*, October 16, 1920, 2972.

² *The American Film Institute Catalog, Feature Films 1911-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 158, 192; *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1920, 310.

³ Robert Banks to Norbert Myles, August 20, 1919, Film and Television Archives, University of California-Los Angeles.

⁴ Norbert Myles, "My Adventures with the Oklahoma Indians," 1921, 1, unpublished manuscript, Margaret Herrick Library, Center for Motion Picture Studios, Beverly Hills, California; Norbert Myles, "The Daughter of Dawn," 1921, movie script, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Myles, "My Adventures," 3-7.

⁶ For a complete list of Quanah Parker's wives and children see Zoe A. Tilghman, *Quanah: The Eagle of the Comanches* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Harlow Publishing Corporation, 1938), 195.

⁷ Myles, "Daughter of Dawn," 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.