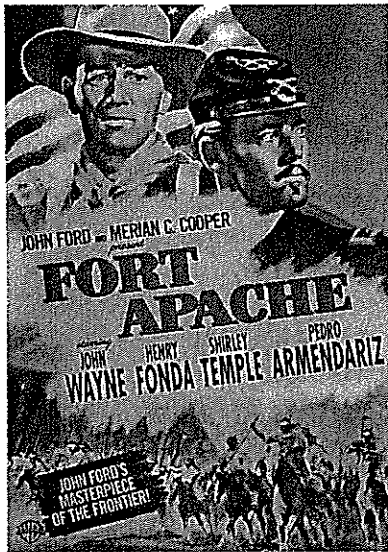


DEAR DIARY:

My heart soars like an eagle every time I see "The Duke" on horseback, prancing across wide, open spaces. And how I use to love little Miss Shirley Temple in The Good Ship Lollipop. Call me sentimental, but I wish John Ford could have found a place for her to tap dance up and down the fort's steps with Mr. Bojangles. Too bad there were only Indians on the set. They have no natural rhythm.

A bientôt, mon chéri,

HOLLYWOOD



Fort Apache



MATTHEW SAKIESTEWA GILBERT

The old black-and-white films take me back to my childhood. As a child living in northeastern Arizona, I remember spending Saturday afternoons with my dad watching John Wayne movies. My dad never referred to him as "John Wayne," but always "The Duke." In a time span of fifteen or so years, I must have watched every John Wayne film at least twice. We cheered when the Indians defeated or killed government troops, and became depressed when the opposite occurred. In our minds, the Indians never truly lost a battle in a fair and square way. Government troops had vast supplies of guns and access to myriads of horses, and often surprised the Indians in an attack. In our family, John Wayne's character was neither a complete villain nor a hero. "The Duke" seemed to understand and respect Indian people and served as a mediator between the Native and white world. But this did not mean that we always looked favorably upon his character.

When I set out to review *Fort Apache*, I originally planned to write a scathing commentary on the racist ways the film depicted American Indian people. Instead, I decided to watch the film with my oldest daughter, Hannah, and attempt to understand the film from her perspective as an American Indian child. "Hannah, today you and I are going to watch a movie called *Fort Apache*." "Oh," she said. "Is it a cartoon?" "No," I replied, "it's an old black-and-white movie that Daddy used to watch when he was a kid." She seemed utterly disappointed that *Fort Apache*

was not an animated show, but I told her that if she watched the movie with me, I would make her popcorn and she could have a few cookies. I don't recall my dad having to bribe me with popcorn and cookies to watch a John Wayne film, but four-year-old girls seem more interested in movies about princesses and ponies than in black-and-white Westerns.

With popcorn and cookies in hand, I started the movie, and Hannah said, "Honey, what is this movie about?" Since Hannah could talk, she has referred to me as "Honey" and rarely uses the name "Daddy." My wife calls me "Honey," and Hannah just assumed that was my name. Even my two-year-old daughter calls me "Honey," and I have no doubt that my youngest daughter will do the same. When Hannah asked "Honey" to explain the movie, I paused for a moment, and then endeavored to give her a brief synopsis of the film in a way that she could understand. But explaining a John Wayne Western to a four-year-old proved a challenge.

I told Hannah that the film was about a Civil War veteran named Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) who was stationed in a remote military fort in Arizona called Fort Apache. I mentioned to Hannah that Thursday graduated from a very special school named West Point, and that he was not happy to be working and living in Arizona. "Why was he not happy?" Hannah asked. "Because he did not like Indians," I answered, "and he did not like it when people such as Captain Kirby York (John Wayne) told him that the Indians (Apaches) threatened the safety of their fort." I also told Hannah that Thursday had a daughter named Philadelphia (Shirley Temple) who lived with him at Fort Apache. "Philadelphia was very pretty," I said to Hannah, "and she fell in love with a young soldier named Second Lieutenant Michael Shannon O'Rourke [John Agar]." "Was he a prince?" asked Hannah. "No, but Philadelphia and Second Lieutenant O'Rourke were very close friends and they cared about each other a lot," I told her. "They were married in real life."

I then told Hannah that the people at Fort Apache did not like the Indians, especially the Indian leader named Cochise. "Why didn't they like Cochise?" Hannah asked. "Because he was a brave man," I replied, "and he did not allow Philadelphia's father to tell him what to do." "Like when you tell me to go to bed and I throw a fit?" Hannah asked. "Or when I want you to buy chocolate milk at the store, and you say 'no!' and then I get very upset and cry and I get a time-out when we get home?" "Yeesss," I replied slowly, processing her assessment, "except that Cochise did not cry and throw a fit. He stayed true to what he believed and what was right." I even explained to Hannah that the film's director, John Ford, made the film to glorify the U.S. government and dehumanize American Indian people. I told her that *Fort Apache* was the first of Ford's "Cavalry Trilogy," which was based on James Warner Bellah's *Massacre*, a book that praises and honors Custer's Last Stand. Of course, my daughter was not interested in the film's background. She was happy and content with her popcorn, cookies, and having her father by her side. But she wanted me to stop talking so that we could watch the "show."

The film begins with a one-carriage convoy racing through Monument Valley in Utah. Hannah pointed at the screen and said with much excitement, "Look, Hopi!" "You're right, Hannah," I said to her, "that certainly looks like Hopi." Hannah sees Hopi in everything. Shortly after we moved to the Midwest, we passed by a Methodist church and Hannah called our attention to a Hopi-looking design on the church building. Since that day she has referred to the church as the "Hopi church." Hannah's comment made me contemplate my father's enjoyment of watching John Wayne films. Part of me thinks that it was because the films' images reminded him of home. For a brief ninety minutes on Saturday afternoons, he escaped the stress of work

and was taken to a familiar place—a place that reminded him of growing up on the Hopi and Navajo reservations. As the buttes of Monument Valley dashed across the screen, Hannah saw the landscape of the Southwest and also made the connection to home.

Although the producers include a brief scene of a Navajo woman weaving a rug near the beginning of the film, the Apaches do not make their appearance until one hour of the movie has passed. When I asked Hannah to point out the Indians in the film, she asked me, “What is an Indian?” I replied, “You are an Indian; you are a Hopi Indian.” In our home, we seldom use the term “Indian” to refer to ourselves or other people. We are Hopi or Hopitu-Shinumu, and our Native friends are Chickasaw, Choctaw, Diné, Nambé Pueblo, Osage, Creek, Maricopa, and Chamorro. My daughter understands what it means to be Hopi. She can tell you about the Hopi mesas in northeastern Arizona, she knows the significance of corn and the butterfly in Hopi culture, and she uses some Hopi words in her everyday speech. But it took a John Wayne movie for her to realize that she is an “Indian.”

I have a responsibility to show Hannah that she and other Native peoples are not like the ones depicted in the film. At several places in the movie, government troops use the word “savage” to describe the Apaches. I told Hannah that people once referred to Hopis as “savage Indians” just like in the movie, and that this term was intended to harm our people. “Like being not nice to us?” Hannah replied. “Yes, not nice and very mean,” I said to her. It was difficult for me to talk about the term “savage” with my daughter. In our culture, fathers have always considered their young daughters to be corn sprouts. Just as a Hopi farmer protects his sprouts from the wind, sun, and animals, so Hopi fathers are similarly called to care for and protect their daughters. As a father, I know that my daughter will encounter the term “savage” again in life, and she will feel the cruelty behind racial stereotypes. But while we sat eating popcorn and cookies, I chose to shelter her from this conversation until my corn sprout was a little taller, a little older. Instead, we talked about the many beautiful horses in the film, and which ones were her favorites. We talked about how pretty the dresses were that the women wore, and Hannah especially liked it when the military men and their wives danced at the fort.

After we finished the movie, I asked Hannah if she liked the film. “Yes,” she replied, “but I didn’t like it when the people fell off their horses.” “Maybe we could watch another black-and-white movie together one of these days,” I said. “Maybe,” she replied, “but I think I would rather watch one of my princess shows.”