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*Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.
Lillian St. Cyr as Nat-U-Ritch in the 1914 silent film 'The Squaw Man.'*

100 Years Ago: Lillian St. Cyr, First Native Star in Hollywood Feature

Part One of Three

By Angela Aleiss
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One hundred years ago, Winnebago actress Lillian St. Cyr became the first Native woman to star in a feature film.

Cecil B. DeMille's *The Squaw Man* was released to American audiences on February 23, 1914, and marked the first time a feature Western was made in what is now Hollywood. Lillian St. Cyr, known by her stage name "Princess Red Wing," played a leading role as a Ute woman caught in an ill-fated marriage with an Englishman.

"She talked about DeMille a lot," says Louis Mofsie (Winnebago) by phone from his New Jersey home. Mofsie, 77, was born in Brooklyn and lived near Lillian when she later settled in New York City. His grandmother Minnie was Lillian's sister. "I think [Lillian] was very proud of her work there. She had a good time. I think she really enjoyed what she was doing," he adds.



Lillian's older sister Julia St. Cyr (sitting, right) with two Winnebago friends, 1898. Photo Courtesy David Lee Smith.

Lillian's Hollywood career spanned approximately 15 years, but she worked hard to promote Native culture throughout most of her 90-year life. Relatives recall Lillian as short and stout with dark brown-black hair and a real warmth about her.

Lillian was born on February 13, 1884, on Nebraska's Winnebago reservation. Back then, tribes had lost much of their land to white settlers, and government agents forcibly removed Native children from their homes to boarding schools.

Lillian's parents were Julia De Cora (ca. 1846-1885), a Winnebago, and Mitchell St. Cyr (ca. 1834-1888), a farmer whose father was reportedly French Canadian and mother a Sauk.

"Mitchell's mother remarried Mitchell St. Cyr, Sr. (Winnebago), who adopted her son and renamed him Mitchell St. Cyr, Jr.," says Winnebago tribal historian David Lee Smith.

According to the 1887 tribal census, Lillian had five siblings: David, Julia, Annie, Minnie, and Louis. Smith says that another sister, Pauline, died at a young age. Lillian's two half-brothers, Levi and Abner, were from Mitchell's marriage to another woman.

Three of Lillian's siblings had attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. She entered Carlisle in 1894 and was graduated in 1902.

Mofsie recalls that while Lillian didn't like being confined to a boarding school, she understood the benefits of an education.

"But Carlisle was very strict. That she didn't like," he explains. "I always remember her as a very feisty woman. She wanted to be her own person."



Lillian St. Cyr (center) at Carlisle late 1890s with her brother Louis and half brother Levi. Photo Courtesy Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, PA.

Both the De Coras and the descendants of Mitchell St. Cyr left a legacy of talent. Older sister Julia (ca. 1857-1947) was a champion of Indian rights and had graduated from Virginia's Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University). Lillian's mother was a cousin to the renowned artist, teacher, and author Angel De Cora (1871-1919). One of Lillian's relatives, Vincent or "Vince" St. Cyr (1930-1997), acted in Hollywood movies and television for nearly 20 years.

Mofsie recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, a New York-based dance troupe he helped found.

Lillian would also leave her own legacy. For a while, she lived in Washington, D.C with Kansas Sen. Chester I. Long and his family. Her life changed in 1906 when she married James Young Johnson (Nanticoke), who grew up in Washington, D.C. and had completed a three-year tour with the Navy in the Spanish-American War. James Young Johnson eventually became James Young Deer, and would make a name for himself and his wife in the budding movie industry.

Part Two to follow: Lillian's Hollywood Years



*Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives
Lillian St. Cyr as Nat-U-Ritch in a detail of a cast photo for the 1914 silent film 'The Squaw Man.'*

The Lillian St. Cyr Story, Part 2: 'Squaw Man' and the Hollywood Years

By Angela Aleiss

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The Squaw Man opened a century ago -- February 23, 1914, to be exact -- and became a financial success. For Lillian St. Cyr, her role in the 90-minute film would make Hollywood history.

The Squaw Man was co-directed by Cecil B. DeMille and Oscar C. Apfel and based upon the successful stage play by Edwin Milton Royle. The movie's story of an Indian woman who married a white man and tragically killed herself exposed the problem of social prejudice surrounding Indian/white unions.

"And I was hired mainly because I was a real Indian rather than an actor," Lillian told the *New York World-Telegram* in 1935. (It should be noted that Lillian St. Cyr is not related to the burlesque star Lily St. Cyr.)

But her performance stunned veteran actor Dustin Farnum when she so convincingly broke into hysterics for a scene. "In all my years on the stage I never saw anything like it," he told *The Moving Picture World* in 1914. "It was absolutely the reverse of everything we have been taught about Indians."

Lillian's acting career began years earlier. In 1906, she married the business-savvy James Young Deer (Nanticoke) who discovered that during an era of dime novels and Wild West Shows, he and Lillian could entertain audiences and "pass" for Plains Indians.



Lillian (standing left) with husband James Young Deer at Bison, 1910. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.

So the couple joined 100 or so (Lakota) Sioux Indians at New York City's enormous Hippodrome Theatre as part of the "Pioneer Days: A Spectacle Drama of Western Life." Together they reenacted stagecoach battles and performed the Ghost Dance against a breathtaking orange moon.

When the pair teamed up with Chief [Sherman] Charging Hawk, they posed as "authentic" Sioux Indians from the Pine Ridge Agency and regularly entertained at Manhattan's social clubs. Lillian, now "Princess Red Wing," became Charging Hawk's 16-year-old niece and serenaded audiences with "My Navajo" and "Arrowana."



Lillian (center, left) at Bison with husband James Young Deer, 1909. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.

Back then, these performances were one way for Native people to assert their own cultural identity. Both Young Deer and Lillian knew white America's expectations and adapted as a means of survival.

The couple soon captured the attention of early filmmakers who capitalized on the Western formula and churned out one- and two-reel "shorts" every week. Kalem's *The White Squaw* (1908) was possibly Lillian's first short film. A year later, D.W. Griffith hired the pair as actors and technical advisors for two of his Indian tales.

In November 1909, Young Deer and Lillian were among the small company of Bison's stock players that headed to sunny Los Angeles. (The couple now identified themselves as Winnebago.) Lillian rose to prominence as she and her husband starred in many Bison movies actually named after their characters, Young Deer and Red Wing.

But Young Deer got his big break in 1910 when became head of production for Pathé Frères, a French-based company that opened a studio near Los Angeles. As director and scenario writer for nearly 150 Western shorts, Young Deer delivered quirky stories with thrilling stunts and often cast his wife as the female Indian lead.



The Squaw Man cast and crew on location (in Hollywood), 1913. Lillian St. Cyr is standing (profile) second row, fourth from left. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives (note the movie was released in 1914 but shot in 1913)

The Squaw Man was the highlight of Lillian's career and her first feature film. She also had a small role in *Fighting Bob* (1915) and played an Indian woman who fell in love with cowboy star Tom Mix for *In the Days of the Thundering Herd* (1914). The 1916 version of *Ramona*, based upon the Helen Hunt Jackson novel, featured Lillian as Ramona's mother.

In 1921, she had an uncredited role in *White Oak* starring silent Western hero William S. Hart.

Her last feature was a Richard Barthelme film, *Soul Fire* (1925), in which she reportedly played a minor role as a South Sea maiden.



Cast of *The Squaw Man* (1914). Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

Young Deer and Lillian eventually separated, and tribal records show that by 1920 she was single and living with her brother Louis in Omaha.

But movie offers dwindled, and Lillian retired from acting. Meanwhile, her sister Julia and her niece had made a home in New York City with its thriving urban Indian community. By the mid-1920s, Lillian made up her mind to join them.

Part Three to follow: Lillian after Hollywood



Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.
Lillian St. Cyr with co-star Dustin Farnum in the 1914 silent film 'The Squaw Man.'

The Lillian St. Cyr Story, Part 3: New York City

By Angela Aleiss
March 6, 2014

Nearly ten years after *The Squaw Man*, Native actress Lillian St. Cyr left Hollywood and headed toward New York City.

“We all knew each other,” says Lillian’s great nephew Louis Mofsie of the city’s then-growing Indian population.

Mofsie’s older sister Josephine was a close friend to Muriel Miguel of the Spiderwoman Theater, a group of three urban Native women who continue to perform using storytelling mixed with humor and personal experience.



Lillian St Cyr with Cecil B. DeMille at a 'Squaw Man' reunion, 1953. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.

But except for a sizable Caugnawaga Mohawk population of steelworkers who had settled in Brooklyn, the city's Indian people lacked a unified presence. Initially, only two groups in the city, the Indian League of the Americas and the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, offered Natives a community.

Years later, the American Indian Community House would emerge as the leading urban Native resource in the New York City tri-state area. Mofsie was one of its founders. "Lillian was actively involved in helping us start it," he explains.

Lillian eventually settled in Manhattan's Upper West Side, and Mofsie's family lived nearby. He recalls that she remained active and "would keep herself quite busy" making Indian outfits and entertaining children. For a while, she worked on Indian costumes for FAO Schwarz and Eaves Costume Company.

"My impression of my aunt is she would take on things. She wasn't held back by herself. She wasn't shy or anything," Mofsie says.

A 1931 Universal Newspaper Newsreel shows [Lillian performing a short skit in which she sits inside her tipi high atop a New York City skyscraper](#). She later dons an elaborate Plains war bonnet and waves graciously to the construction men.

"Far out," says tribal historian David Lee Smith of the video. "Our women didn't wear feathers in their hair, and they didn't live in tipis."



Louis Mofsie, Founder of Thunderbird American Indian Dancers. Photo courtesy Simon Lewis.

But Linda M. Waggoner, a scholar of ethnic studies, says that beneath the showmanship and costumes there's still a resistance. "She really tries to educate people wherever she goes about Native culture," explains Waggoner, who is currently working on a biography of Lillian St.

Cyr. “She knows how to play the game but makes damn sure they learn something about Native culture.”

Lillian continued to lecture and perform in New York City until her death on March 13, 1974. She was buried in St. Augustine Cemetery in Nebraska.

“There’s not a lot of Indian women who were movie stars. [Lillian] was a kind of pioneer the way she kept adapting herself to the situation,” Waggoner adds. “I feel she was never a victim.”

For Mofsie of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, Lillian’s legacy was personal. “She had a great influence on me,” he says. “She gave me inspiration beyond a performer.”



Lillian St. Cyr in a rare still from a post-'Squaw Man' film, 'Ramona' (1916). Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.

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