

## **Who Was the Real James Young Deer?**

The Mysterious Identity of the Pathé Producer Finally Comes to Light



Young Deer, 1909 at Bison.

"With his acting experience and technical know-how, Young Deer soon advanced to one of Pathé's leading filmmakers. His Indian identity served him well: no one in the cast or crew at that time would have taken orders from a black man."

### **By Angela Aleiss**

Few in Hollywood knew that James Young Deer, general manager of Pathé Frères West Coast Studio from 1911 to 1914, was really an imposter. After all, Young Deer had earned a reputation as the first Native American producer and had worked alongside D. W. Griffith, Fred J. Balshofer, and Mack Sennett. As one of Hollywood's pioneer filmmakers, Young Deer oversaw the production of more than 100 one-reel silent Westerns for Pathé, the world's largest production company with an American studio in Edendale in Los Angeles.



Young Deer (r) and Red Wing (l) Bison 1909. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

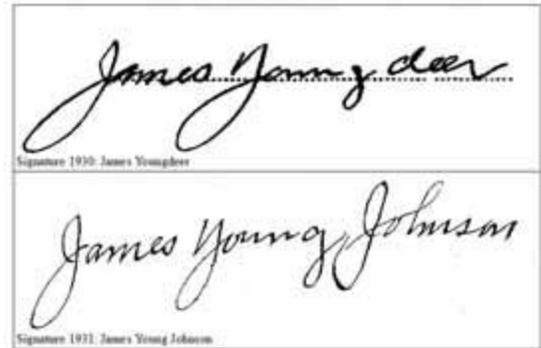
Young Deer was married to Lillian St. Cyr, a Winnebago Indian from Nebraska known as "Princess Red Wing" and star of Cecil B. DeMille's 1914 classic **The Squaw Man**. He boasted of a full-blooded Winnebago heritage similar to his wife: his birthplace became Dakota City, Nebraska, and his father was "Green Rainbow" from the Winnebago reservation. He claimed he attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, the first off-reservation Indian boarding school.

In a 2010 BBC Radio 3 segment, "James Young Deer: The Winnebago Film-Maker," no one — including this author — could unscramble Young Deer's murky past. Young Deer was elusive, and a search in his background leads to a maze of contradictions and discrepancies. But after ten months of poking through dusty archives and faded vital records and tracking down Lillian's relatives, the identity of this mysterious filmmaker finally came to light. His real name: James Young Johnson, born about April 1, 1878, in Washington, D.C., to mulatto parents George Durham Johnson and Emma Margaret Young.

"If Young Deer claimed to be Winnebago, he was lying to himself and others to promote himself," says David Smith, Winnebago historian, author, and former director of Indian Studies at Little Priest Tribal College in Nebraska. Smith has heard endless stories about Young Deer's supposed Winnebago heritage, and he's had enough. His reaction is understandable: Native American identity is an especially sensitive issue, and no Indian tribe wants their name appropriated by some wannabe.

Little did anyone know that Young Deer's true heritage lies hidden within the small mid-Atlantic community of whites, African Americans, and Native Americans once known as the "Moors of Delaware." So secluded were these people that the late historian Clinton A. Weslager referred to them as "Delaware's Forgotten Folk."

"The similarities between Young Deer and Johnson are more than coincidental," says Joseph A. Romeo, who's been tracing the Johnson family ancestry for three decades but had no idea that one of them was once a famous Hollywood producer. (See Romeo's "The Moors of Delaware" at <http://www.moors-delaware.com/gendat/moors.aspx>.) "Both men were born on April 1 in the late 1870s, and there's an overlap with the same month, year, and place of their deaths as well as their cause of death. Even their handwriting is practically identical," Romeo adds.



The community of Moors also includes Delaware's Nanticoke Indians, the largest and best-known tribe of the region. But for centuries the Nanticoke were invisible: early American records typically classified them as mulatto or Negro or simply "people of color." "A lot of it depended upon who was doing the identification," says William Davis, the 89-year-old historian of the Nanticoke Nation in Millsboro, Delaware. "If the census takers were from out of state and [the person] looked white, they were classified as white. If they looked black, they were classified as black. The effect was that in some families, a whole generation [of Indian ancestry] might be lost."

And for nearly a century, Young Deer's Indian heritage was indeed lost. He and his family would instead surface on vital records and census rolls as black, mulatto, or even white but never American Indian. His Native American roots actually trace back to his father's side of the family in 1881, when the Delaware General Assembly recognized the Nanticoke's descendants as an Incorporated Body or a "special class" with their own schools and churches. The group's original 31 members (a link to Nanticoke heritage) included Young Deer's great uncle, Whittington Johnson, born 1812 in Sussex County, Delaware. Whittington was the brother to Young Deer's grandfather, Major Clark Johnson, born 1809 in Sussex County but relocated to Philadelphia and died there in 1891. Major Clark married in 1832; he managed a restaurant and had 12 children including Young Deer's father, George Durham Johnson.

Johnson's Chapel in Millsboro was named after Whittington; it was constructed in 1881 and is the forerunner of what is now the Indian Mission United Methodist Church.

In 1922, Delaware recognized the Nanticoke Indian Association as an official state tribe, although the Nanticoke never received the federal recognition that entitles Indians to education, health care, job training, and other benefits. Today, the tribe owns the Nanticoke Indian Museum in Millsboro and celebrates their annual powwow in September; its 1,050 members live and work not on reservations but among society.

"Young Deer was a little too early to have the benefit of a tribe everyone would recognize," says Davis, who recently discovered that he's related to the filmmaker through his great, great maternal grandfather Whittington Johnson.

Young Deer may never have known that he was Nanticoke. (His wife Lillian once identified him as Delaware, a tribe historically and linguistically related to the Nanticoke.) He barely knew his father; George died when Young Deer was not even a year old. George married Emma Young back in 1867 in Washington, D.C., and had five children: Marie, George Durham, Jr., Annie (or "Minnie"), James, and Harry. The Johnson family lived in Washington's "Old Southwest" District, a vibrant community of Eastern European Jews, Italians, West Virginia migrant workers, and African Americans. Fishing vessels and steamships regularly sailed along the Potomac River, and to the south stood the Washington Arsenal and the first federal penitentiary. **The Jazz Singer's** Al Jolson spent his boyhood in that neighborhood after his family emigrated from Lithuania in 1894.

The 1870 U.S. census showed that George worked as a clerk in the Freedman's Bureau, and his mulatto family resided with their 17-year-old black servant, Susan. The Johnsons lived near the bustling intersection of Fourth and F Streets; today, Interstate 395 cuts right through their former residence.

"Young Deer's uncle James LeCount Johnson (1837-1907) was listed as quadroon on his death certificate, yet he was light enough to pass for white," says Romeo, who believes that Young Deer's racial heritage could be a mixture of Native American, white, and possibly black. But Romeo also points out that Young Deer's paternal great grandparents, Elizabeth Munce and James LeCount, were born in Kent County, Delaware, and may have been associated with the Lenape Tribe of Delaware. (The Lenape are closely related to the Nanticoke.)

In the 1900 census, however, Young Deer is clearly black. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy on October 8, 1898 during the Spanish-American War, nearly half a century before the military would end racial segregation. The transition to a military lifestyle must have been difficult: the Navy restricted the roles of blacks (or anyone labeled as colored) by encouraging them to become officers' stewards and cooks. Young Deer began his tour aboard the USS *Celtic*, a supply ship that traveled around South America and to the Philippines with provisions for U.S. troops. Century-old military personnel files buried within the National Personnel Records Center describe Young Deer as mulatto with brown hair and brown eyes. He had a short 5-foot 3¼ inch frame at 114 pounds with defective lower teeth and a scar on his right wrist and right neck.

Not surprisingly, Young Deer resented the Navy's disciplined lifestyle and its lily-white regime. His dark skin meant he could serve only as a landsman or mess attendant, cooking meals for the officers and the ship's crew. When this short mulatto guy spoke up, his commanding officers complained that he was insolent to his superiors and slow to obey orders. The regimentation may have been too much, for Young Deer went AWOL in March 1901 and landed in solitary confinement with a diet of bread and water, although the Navy later overturned the sentence. He spent five months in sick bay and received a medical discharge on October 7, 1901, for epilepsy — a condition he had mysteriously concealed prior to his enlistment. A year later, Young Deer practically swore to the newspaper *The Colored American* that he would never reenlist because of the Navy's "great prejudices."

Instead, Young Deer began to create a new identity and in his own way "discovered" his Indian roots. After all, "going Indian" might open the door to other opportunities, especially in an era of

dime novels and Wild West Shows. With dark skin, a braided wig, a feathered war bonnet, and a name like Young Deer, he could easily "pass" for a Plains Indian and entertain audiences with thrilling stories of the Old West or dance to the beat of a tom-tom. His marriage to Lillian St. Cyr (1884-1974) would give him that chance.

The St. Cyrs were an established family from Nebraska's Winnebago Indian reservation. Lillian's mother, Julia Decora, was Winnebago and a distant cousin to the renowned painter Angel Decora. Three of Lillian's siblings had attended Carlisle; older sister Julia was a champion of Indian rights and had graduated from the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia. Lillian herself had graduated from Carlisle in 1902 and later lived in Washington, D.C., with Kansas Senator Chester I. Long and his family. The *Washington Post* announced her marriage to J. Younger Johnson (often misspelled Johnston) in Washington, D.C., on April 9, 1906. Together, the couple created an ideal venture: she knew Indian culture and heritage, and he knew how to sell it.

The newlyweds were soon busy. From November 1906 to August 1907, New York City's enormous Hippodrome Theatre dazzled audiences with the "Pioneer Days: A Spectacle Drama of Western Life." Young Deer and Lillian (Red Wing) St. Cyr joined the show's 100 or so (Lakota) Sioux Indians bedecked in feathers, face paint, and war bonnets. The troupe battled soldiers, attacked stagecoaches, and reenacted the Ghost Dance against a breathtaking orange moon.

By 1908, the pair had teamed up with Chief [Sherman] Charging Hawk from South Dakota's Rosebud Indian Reservation and posed as "authentic" Sioux Indians from the nearby Pine Ridge Agency. New York newspapers followed the trio as they regularly entertained at Manhattan's Gotham Club, a women's elite social and philanthropic organization. Red Wing became Charging Horse's 16-year-old niece, who serenaded audiences with "My Navajo" and "Arrowana." Meanwhile, Charging Horse told stories of Custer's last battle and denounced the white man while Young Deer translated.



Early filmmakers soon took notice. In the summer of 1909, D. W. Griffith hired the couple as actors and technical advisors for two of his Indian tales while the New York Motion Picture Company (or, "Bison" Life Motion Pictures) received praise for choosing a "genuine Indian and his wife" for their weekly staple of one-reel Westerns. In November 1909, Bison headed to sunny Los Angeles with its small company of stock players including Young Deer and Red Wing. *Moving Picture World* labeled the pair as "perfect types of their race," noting they were "two genuine Indians" apparently now of Winnebago descent. With Fred J. Balshofer at the helm of Bison's productions, the couple appeared in movies actually named after their characters, Young Deer and Red Wing.



Young Deer (standing) and Red Wing (l) in *Young Deer's Return*, 1910, dir by Fred J. Balshofer. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

Young Deer got his big break in directing when he returned east to join Pathé Frères. The French-based company decided to strengthen its American market and in 1910 opened a studio in Jersey City. The New Jersey facility was under the direction of Louis J. Gasnier, a former French stage director and photographer who created thrilling pictures with dangerous stunts. (Gasnier's 1936 anti-marijuana film **Reefer Madness** later became a cult classic.) Gasnier had a knack for spotting talent, and his influence on Young Deer became apparent: the rookie filmmaker soon dazzled audiences with his own daredevil stunts. For **The Maid of Niagara** (1910), Young Deer sent a (miniature) Indian maiden in a canoe over the roaring Niagara Falls, and in **The Red Girl and the Child** (1910), he cast his wife as the swashbuckling Indian heroine who scaled steep cliffs and bounded across canyon crevices.

With his acting experience and technical know-how, Young Deer soon advanced to one of Pathé's leading filmmakers. His Indian identity served him well: no one in the cast or crew at that time would have taken orders from a black man. Instead, the weekly trade paper *Film Index* proudly elevated his Native American stature when **White Fawn's Devotion** was released in June 1910: "Produced under the direction of an Indian chief, who was most careful to comply with all the little details."

But even under Young Deer's imaginative direction, Pathé's Westerns could not escape the critics' complaints. Newspapers groaned that the French studio simply lacked cultural knowledge of the American West, with New Jersey's serene woods woefully out of place. By late 1910, Gasnier was determined to quiet his critics: he sent his promising filmmaker to Edendale in Los Angeles to head up Pathé's West Coast Studio and produce Indian-themed movies.



Bison actors on location in Coytesville, NJ. Young Deer sits (r) with Red Wing standing (r). Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

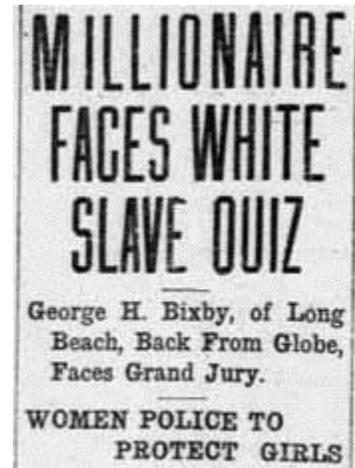
Young Deer immediately went to work. He hired a troupe of actors and expanded Pathé's West Coast complex, which featured its own "wild and woolly" frontier town. He invented an ingenious photographic process for scenes lit by fires or the moon and traveled to Orange County in Southern California, Santa Catalina Island, and Southwestern Arizona to film his Indian and Spanish-themed pictures. He chose Swiss actor George Gebhardt to play Pathé's Indian leads; Pathé's female Indian lead was Young Deer's wife, Princess Red Wing. The studio's flamboyant and sometimes racy French comedic style may have sparked the quirky storylines and acrobatic stunts of Young Deer's films. Nevertheless, his movies gradually earned more favorable reviews for Pathé; his Indians were often the heroes or figures of moral authority that upheld the law and sent villainous whites to prison.



Young Deer (behind wheel) with Red Wing (standing behind him) at Pathé West Coast Studio, circa 1911. Photo Courtesy Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

"Young Deer is not just a director. He's also the scenario writer for many of his films," says Romeo, who's compiled a lengthy list of Young Deer's approximately 150 movies that he's identified at Pathé's West Coast Studio. "There was an incredible burst of creativity over his three-year period at Pathé that puts him at the top of the line. No one can take that away from him."

Young Deer basked in his newfound social stature: he owned a fancy 60-horsepower Thomas Racer and attended dinner parties with the Who's Who of Los Angeles. But in May 1913, his prolific career came to a halt. The trouble began when the *Los Angeles Examiner* (a Hearst-owned newspaper) announced that Evelyn Quick — later known as actress Jewel Carmen — claimed that he introduced her to two co-conspirators of a white slave ring. Apparently, a Los Angeles grand jury had indicted the ring's millionaire leader and prominent bank officer, George H. Bixby, for "contributing to the delinquency" of many young ladies at the city's notorious Jonquil apartments. Months of testimony eventually exploded into a sensational trial of bribery, prostitution, and blackmail. Bixby managed to escape conviction by explaining that he frequently visited the Jonquil and gave money to the girls for "charitable" reasons. Young Deer too was free — but not for long.



Six months later, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that another woman stepped forward and claimed Young Deer took money "under a false promise to give her work." Worse yet, a 15-year-old girl accused him of statutory rape. Once again, Young Deer's Indian heritage served him well: he jumped his \$1,500 bail and headed for New York, then blamed the whole affair on "the vengeance white man meted out to Indians." He later wrote to Judge Frederick Harris Taft that he promised to return to face trial. Luckily for Young Deer, the judge quickly sympathized with his heritage: "When an Indian pledges his word, he keeps it," Taft said.

Young Deer fled to England and again reinvented himself. He found work as a director and writer in the sleepy East Finchley suburb of London with the British Colonial and Kinematograph Company. There he traded his skills with Westerns for urban thrillers like **The Black Cross Gang** and **The Water Rats of London** (both 1914), replete with pyrotechnic blasts and fiery explosions. Attractive leading lady Lillian Wiggins had also worked with Young Deer at Pathé (she later appeared in the 1921 **Adventures of Tarzan** series as Lillian Worth). His last film was a patriotic nod to England: Motograph's **The World at War** was a 1914 thriller featuring spies and German Zeppelins.

Young Deer kept his word and returned to Los Angeles. Fortunately, his female accusers had left town, and the case against him disappeared. But his lucrative movie career also faded: Pathé sold its American facilities and moved into distribution, while feature films of five reels or more began to replace the short one- and two-reelers. Young Deer's Westerns may have been popular short subjects, but they couldn't compete against feature-length dramas.

The famed producer now drifted in and out of movie studios. His marriage to Lillian began to fall apart (the couple never had any children), and "being Indian" was no longer fashionable as

Hollywood Westerns temporarily fell out of favor. Young Deer renewed his passion for boxing and staged a match between Leach Cross and Joe Rivers to benefit the Seventh California Infantry of the Spanish-American War. Otherwise, he made few features: **The Stranger** (1920) bombed at the box office, while several others never found a distributor. As an actor, he rejoined director Fred Balshofer in **Under Handicap** (1917) and again teamed up with George Gebhardt in **Man of Courage** (1922). He wrote nine scenarios for "king of comedy" producer Mack Sennett; one satirized race relations when a "half-breed" chased a general's daughter, and as punishment the military forced the Indian to marry her "darky" maid. None of these Sennett stories were ever produced.

When movie offers dried up, Young Deer ventured to San Francisco to teach acting. In July 1930, he skipped to the remote Cochise County in Arizona to marry Helen Gilchrist, a Scottish immigrant 20 years his junior. The couple settled in Los Angeles, but *Variety* reported that in 1932 Helen's curling iron sparked a fire in her hair that somehow spread to their downtown apartment. Both filed suit in the Los Angeles Superior Court against the property owners, each demanding \$25,000 for injuries and loss of employment (she was a "dancer and bathing beauty") and \$10,000 for the loss of their "trained film dog." The judge dismissed the case.

Tragically, Helen died of breast cancer in 1937; she was barely 38 years old. Her grassy unmarked grave lies in a secluded section of Inglewood Park Cemetery in Los Angeles. Years later, the reason surfaced behind the couple's mysterious Arizona marriage: Lillian's family records revealed that although she and Young Deer separated in 1915, they never divorced.



With little money and no career, Young Deer retired to New York City to share an apartment on West 67th Street with his widowed sister Minnie. His wife Lillian lived nearby; her great nephew Louis Mofsie (Winnebago) resided on the same street and occasionally ran errands for the two elderly siblings. On April 6, 1946, Young Deer died of stomach cancer in New York's Bellevue Hospital. "Lillian really had nothing good to say about him," recalls Mofsie, now 76. "I had a sense that he got into Hollywood and found that being American Indian was profitable. He wasn't a very good person. She was glad to be rid of him, to say the least."

Like many silent film artists, Young Deer's movie identity simply vanished: no one seemed to remember his prolific career as one of Hollywood's leading film pioneers. His death certificate, with his wife Lillian as the informant, made no reference to his screen career. Instead, the former producer of the world's largest movie company was buried in the Long Island National Cemetery as James Young Johnson, veteran of the Spanish-American War.

But James Young Deer the pioneer filmmaker would make his comeback. In 2008, the Library of Congress added **White Fawn's Devotion**, one of Young Deer's few surviving pictures, to its National Film Registry. His heritage has long puzzled film historians, but admittedly his choice to identify as Native American — albeit with the wrong tribe — offered opportunities that as a

black man he never would have obtained in the early motion picture industry. "For years, Young Deer has been a big mystery," says Marc Wanamaker, founder of Bison Archives in Los Angeles. "Now he can assume his rightful place in film history. His amusing life should be the subject of a motion picture."

**Angela Aleiss** received her Ph.D. in film history from Columbia University and is the author of *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Praeger, 2005). She recently appeared in the Canadian documentary *Reel Injun* (PBS 2010). She teaches Native Americans in film at UCLA.

**May 2013 | Issue 80**

Copyright © 2013 by Angela Aleiss

|