

RIM TALES

RIM COUNTRY ON FILM: BEHIND THE SCENES

by Beth Counsellor
Lights! Camera! Action!

These exclamations, though not a routine component of Rim country lingo, have been heard amid the ponderosas and up the rocky canyons and creeks of the Mogollon Rim. As early as the 1920s when Zane Grey was filming "To The Last Man," on Tonto Creek and Oxbow Hill, Hollywood has recognized the rugged beauty this area has to offer the camera.

J. T. Stanley and Associates, a film consulting company in Payson, has been responsible for several TV commercials that have been filmed in the Payson area. One of them was for Nissan trucks that featured Donnie Haught loping alongside a pick-up that had busted out of a shoot at the rodeo grounds. The commercial was shown nationwide during the 1985 Superbowl game.

Film Producers Warehouse of Phoenix has also filmed several commercials here including one for Irish Spring soap at the Zane Grey Cabin and another for McCulloch Chain Saws in Christopher Creek.

But the Hollywood exploit most familiar to residents today was the filming of the "Grizzly Adams" TV series in the late 1970s.

Based on the adventures of a mountain man and his pet grizzly bear named Gentle Ben, the series starred Dan Haggerty in the title role and veteran actor Denver Pyle as his side-kick, Mad Jack. The stars and a crew of 15 to 20 stayed at the Swiss Village Lodge for up to four months during filming.

Sandi Neff, who owned the Swiss Village Restaurant at that time, catered their lunch to the various film sites including Tonto Creek, Christopher Creek, Flowing Springs, past Whispering Pines, and near Rye.

The local consensus is that Haggerty would never win a popularity contest in Payson. Denver Pyle, however, was very well-liked and appeared as the Grand Marshall in one of Payson's rodeo parades.

"He was a friend you would want to have for life," says Neff. She remembers that one of the waitresses was missing her purse which had about \$100 in it. Feeling sorry for her, "Denver handed her an envelope with \$100 in it. That's the kind of guy he was, the nicest person you would ever want to meet."

Roxanne Savage and her late husband Dan Cameron, owned a stable in Christopher Creek. They were stock coordinators for the show and provided domestic animals such as horses and cattle.

"Actors are hyper, buzzed up all the time," says Roxanne, "and they wanted everything to be done on schedule." But when working with animals, there are no guarantees. "It seemed that something went wrong every day."

She attributes some of the mishaps to the inexperience of the actors with horses.

"The actor who played the part of Nacoma, the Indian chief, was really an Italian from Chicago. He couldn't ride at all. There was this scene at the Tonto Campground where he was supposed to come loping,

bareback, through the snow on a red and white pinto. He had on buffalo robes and was carrying a spear. It was going to be so picturesque."

But he inadvertently lowered his spear and stuck it in the snow. Rather than letting go, he tried to hang on to the spear and was flung from his horse. A Chicago "Indian," buffalo robes flying, pole-vaulting from his pinto into the snow, was not exactly what the director had in mind.

Another actor made the mistake of mounting one of Roxanne's horses while wearing a formidable pair of spurs.

"You could tell by the way he mounted that he'd never ridden before," she says. "I warned him not to touch the horse with those spurs."

But when he squeezed his legs around the horse, the spurs made contact. That gentle horse took off like a shot, throwing the rider who broke his arm and was out of commission for the rest of the series.

The stock coordinators had to be creative at times. A scene called for Denver Pyle, bending over in his long, red flannel underwear, to be butted by a bull. The bull was then to be lead away by a six-year-old child. Hollywood may have found a gentle bull on Tonto Creek.

"So we got a Jersey cow, painted out the white spots, and tied horns on her," recalls Roxanne. "But the horns kept slipping sideways and we were always stopping to straighten out those horns."

They were in a mad scramble

more than once trying to locate animals the directors insisted upon.

"They wanted chickens in one episode but they wouldn't buy them. They wanted to just rent them. Who rents chickens?"

Another furious search was for two matching white mini-mules that were needed on a day's notice.

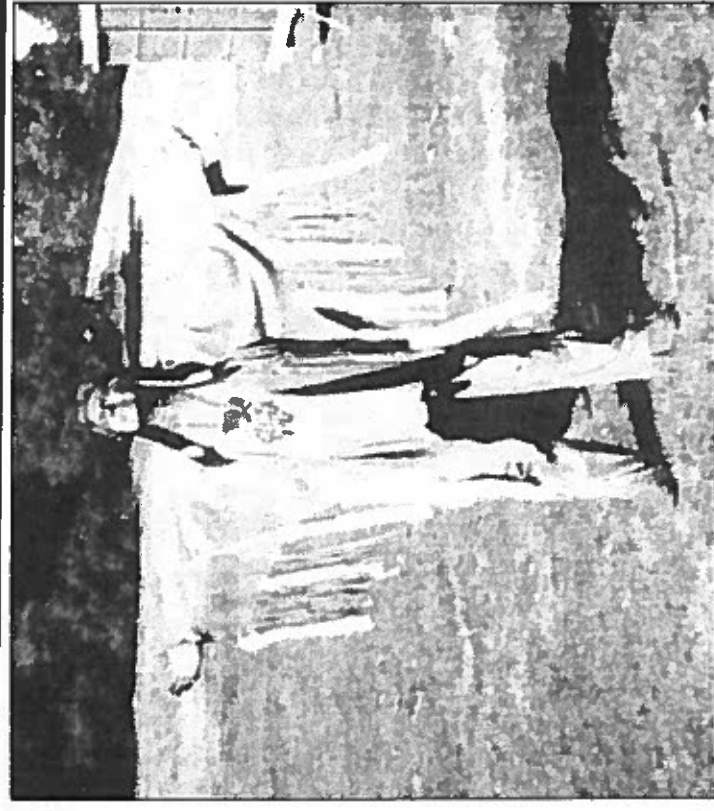
"We did find two, but they were so inbred they were nuts!" she recalls. The scene called for a pair of wolves to frighten the mules. Instead, the mules attacked the wolves. The wolves ran off into the mountains around Christopher Creek.

Heber White of Christopher Creek also had an animal that made an appearance in the series. In one episode filmed near Kohl's Ranch, the Indian chief's young daughter was lost in a snow storm and her pony was let loose to find her. White's pony "Mucho" played the part and according to its proud owner "put on quite a show."

Wild animals such as the wolves and bears were supplied by the Olympic Game Farm. These animals at times had minds of their own.

Gentle Ben, the bear, was actually a female bear named Bozo, cranky Bozo to be more specific. Because much of the filming was done in winter, Bozo had hibernation on her mind and was not pleased to be woken up from her frequent naps. To appease her she was given marshmallows, her favorite snack.

Her trainer had left a trail of the sweet treats for her. But she overtook the trainer, knocked



Italian Ed Romero found it difficult playing cowboys and Indians in the filming of the "Grizzly Adams" series.

him down, sat on him and commenced eating the marshmallows out of the bag. The assistant trainer was beside himself, fretting, "What do I do? What do I do?"

"Let her finish the marshmallows, that's what you do," insisted the highly compromised trainer.

There are few reminders of the TV series in the Rim country today.

The Grizzly Adams cabin on Colcord Road past Christopher Creek was donated to the Northern Gila County Historical Society. It was moved to the old jail on McLane and Main Street and became part of the Society's first museum.

When insects infested the bark, the cabin had to be dismantled. It is preserved, however, in a

pencil drawing by Historical Society member Ray Schmidt.

Having spent time at the Creekside Restaurant in Christopher Creek, Denver Pyle lent his name to his favorite sandwich now listed on the menu as the "Mad Jack."

Film and commercial productions have contributed an economic and entertaining boost to the community. Whether residents appeared as "extras," worked on the sets, or benefited from the increase in local business and fund raising, they all have special memories of Hollywood's presence here. And the film-makers now have special memories of what residents have known all along: that the Mogollon Rim country possesses an aesthetic and unique beauty all its own.