

Tim McCoy:

The Real/Reel Life of a Wind River Cowboy

Tim McCoy (1891-1978) lived a good, long life and he is remembered in various ways.

Some folks think of him as the hero of nearly a hundred Hollywood Western films, silent and talkie adventures made during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

Others remember him as a Wyoming cowboy, perhaps as the state's adjutant general.

I knew him as a father, and we talked often about the pathways he followed in pursuing his dreams. During the course of his eighty-six years Tim believed in several large dreams, and it was his good fortune to actually realize them all. Yet, when, during the mid-1970s, as we worked together on his autobiography, it was clear that his fondest memories focused on the years he spent in Wyoming, and especially his experiences in the Wind River country. As an early-20th century cowboy poet he once wrote of that place:

These are the Mountains of the West
Where the Sun God seeks his slumber
Where the West Wind goes a-whooping
And Evil Spirits lurk. . .

Even the "Evil Spirits" reference was a positive for Tim, who felt that the Wind River country was the universe in miniature—leastwise, the universe in which he was most comfortable—and that while heartache might be found there, all that was good also dwelt

within its boundaries. Whenever he pronounced it's name, "Wind River," he seemed able to conjure spirits from the depths of canyons and down from the sides of mountains.

Above all else, Tim valued beyond measure his experiences among the Arapaho and Shoshone peoples of Wind River.

Tim's road to Wyoming began in Saginaw, Michigan, where he was born on April 10, 1891, a year after the Superintendent of the Census somewhat prematurely declared America's frontier closed, and only four months after the tragedy at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Both of Tim's parents were Irish immigrants. His father, after whom he was named, served as a policeman in the town and eventually became chief of the force. Catherin Fitzpatrick, his mother, worked as a homemaker and raised six sons and daughters.

In looking back on Tim's early years, it seems clear the catalyst that propelled him to Wyoming was probably triggered on July 16, 1898, the day William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Show performed in Saginaw.

Tim remembered that Saturday for the rest of his life. Buffalo Bill more than lived up to his reputation as an utterly incomparable showman by providing a fantastic spectacle, featuring 650 cowboys, Cossacks, Bengal lancers, and Plains Indians. For Tim, the riders' shouts, the bright colors of their costumes and the stirring music paled into insignificance when the star of the show, Buffalo Bill, rode into the open-air arena sitting majestically atop a prancing white stallion.

The high point of that day came after the performance ended. That was when Tim's father exercised his prerogative as chief of police and took his seven-year-old son

to the renowned showman's dressing tent. There, young Tim beheld the great man himself, a figure cut from a heroic mold, a Westerner who had been transformed—both by his own efforts and the imagination of a public that saw history and its actors in heroic terms—into a living legend.

Thereafter, Tim and the playmates of his youth played games of “Buffalo Bill and the Indians,” riding wooden broomsticks across the front yards and along the back streets of Saginaw. The time was not far off when Tim would embark on his own Western adventure and exchange his wooden broomstick for a real horse. Buffalo Bill had established the standard by which Western heroes were measured, and his influence remained with Tim the rest of his life. Indeed, much that Tim would do during his own career was in conscious imitation of Cody's example.

Tim loved the study of history, which he saw as a fantastic cascade of interesting stories. In 1903, when he was twelve, he was made an honorary member of the drum corps of the Saginaw chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, the association of Union Civil War veterans. Thereafter he marched with the old soldiers of the GAR in Decoration Day parades and other events, playing both the drum and bugle. Two years later, when he was fourteen, Tim enlisted in the Michigan Naval Militia and sailed the Great Lakes on the U.S.S. *Yantic*, a bark-rigged training ship that saw active service during the Civil War.

Tim was, at heart, a romantic. He read, reread, then read again the books of historical adventures that he found in his father's library, mostly notably Alexandre Dumas's classics: *The Three Musketeers*, *The Viscomte de Bragelonne*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. (Later, he would be drawn into Kenneth

Roberts's American sagas, including *Oliver Wiswell* and *Northwest Passage*.)

Looking back, it now seems clear that Buffalo Bill's appearance in Saginaw the year Tim was seven appealed to the two controlling elements in the youngster's life: an interest in matters historical, as well as a consuming passion for discovering the romantic side of life.

When he was seventeen, Tim went to live with relatives in Chicago, where he attended St. Ignatius, a Jesuit college preparatory school. It was 1908, and the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch show, an Oklahoma-based Western theme extravaganza that rivaled Buffalo Bill's operation, opened in Chicago. Tim attended the 101 Ranch show several times and found himself dreaming more and more of the West that lay somewhere over the horizon.

As Tim's thoughts moved beyond the city limits of Chicago, focusing increasingly on the West, his reading habits changed. Now, instead of visiting Alexandre Dumas's European world Tim immersed himself in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, the first Western novel. Published six years earlier, its captivating story took place near a Wyoming town with the almost unimaginably evocative name of Medicine Bow. The phrase "Go West, young man," words of advice written forty years before Tim's birth by Indiana newspaperman John Soule, reverberated in his mind.

In late spring 1909, without revealing his plans to anyone, Tim decided to make his way to the West. The U.S. Bureau of the Census may have declared the frontier closed nearly a generation earlier, but the young man believed adventure awaited him somewhere toward where the sun sets. Clutching a small satchel that held little more than a change of clothes and a toothbrush, he made his way to the railroad station.

“When the ticket seller at the station asked me my destination, I was at a loss for an answer,” he later recalled. “Would it be Nebraska, Arizona, Oklahoma, Montana or Wyoming? I decided on Omaha, Nebraska, feeling that before I actually got there, something would occur to influence my direction.”

There was one vacant seat in the day coach of the train Tim rode from Chicago to Omaha. Tim took it and sat down beside a tall man with an auburn moustache. The stranger wore a black Stetson hat, dark frock coat, string tie and polished leather boots. His name was Jim Aminette and he came from Lander, Wyoming. He made his living by rounding up wild horses in the Red Desert, breaking the broncs and shipping them East for sale.

Aminette suggested that when the train reached Omaha, Tim should buy a ticket for Grand Island, Nebraska. “You can come along with me,” Aminette offered. “The biggest horse and mule marked in the country is at Grand Island. You’ll get a chance to see plenty of the wild West there, if that’s what you’re hankerin’ for.”

Tim and Jim Aminette stayed in Grand Island for three days, during which the young man worked in the corrals for a dollar a day roping wild horses fresh from the open range. Then, one evening, Aminette and Tim boarded a train bound for Lander, Wyoming. The journey brought Tim into direct contact with the West of his imagination, for the train’s passengers included a pair of Lakota men, Oglalas from Pine Ridge. They were dressed in dark blue woolen suits with matching vests, white shirts, somber ties, and wide-brimmed black hats. They wore moccasins on their feet, and their hair was plaited in long braids wrapped with red and yellow cloth.

When the train pulled into Arapaho, a town on the southern edge of the Wind

River Reservation about twenty-five miles from Lander, Tim stared in amazement at a delegation of long-haired Arapahos wrapped in red and blue blankets. They had come to the station to greet their Lakota visitors. He also saw fifteen or twenty cowboys lining the station platform and lounging on wooden benches. They wore tall hats, colorful bandanas, silk shirts, and Angora wool chaps.

That evening, the train reached the end of the line: Lander, where, as locals said, “rails end and trails begin.” Aminette showed Tim to a rooming house before making his way to his own home. Years later, Tim would write in his autobiography:

“I felt an overpowering rush of excitement as I stepped out of the rooming house onto the wooden sidewalk and began wandering up the main street. With its unpaved streets, cowboys sauntering in and out of saloons from which came gay dance hall music and flickering light, which illuminated the hitchracks where horses were tied, patiently waiting, and a few Indians making restrained tours of inspection, this western town was an adventure. . . .As I went back to the rooming house and climbed into my bed, I could hear the wooden sidewalks clumping with the reverberations of high-heeled cowboy boots and, occasionally, the jingle of a spur. . . .I was a long way from Saginaw.”

That night, upon returning home, Jim Aminette found a telegram calling him back East on business. He was gone by five the next morning. Tim never saw him again. “That was too bad,” he reflected late in life. “After all, I owed that man a great deal. Because of him, I went to Lander. From there I became a cowboy. Through cowboying I made my association with the Indians. And that took me to Hollywood. I would’ve liked to have told him how profoundly grateful I was to him.”

Tim got a job with the Double Diamond Ranch, and spent the summer of 1909 working in hayfields on Wind River a two days' ride from Lander. After that apprenticeship he signed on as a \$40-a-month cowboy, joining the Double Diamond's fall roundup as a horse wrangler. Cowboys were expected to provide their own hat, bandana, chaps, spurs, rope, bedroll and saddle. The Wyoming cowboys insisted on wearing either Hyer or Justin boots, which could be purchased in Lander for about \$9.50. The only acceptable hat was a Stetson. Pants were denims, manufactured by Levi Strauss, and cost a dollar a pair. The cowboys often splurged on their saddles—although Tim's first one was a broken down affair he picked up at a Lander livery barn for \$5—so that it was often said about a man that he was riding on a \$40 saddle atop a \$20 horse.

The wild and woolly era of the West's history had not yet drawn to a close. The year Tim arrived in Wyoming the Ten Sleep Raid took place: cattlemen attacked a sheepherders' camp, killed three men and either scattered or shot their sheep. There were cowboys with whom Tim shared the campfire who remembered the gunslinger Tom Horn, and the legendary robbers Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. And then there were the Indians, with whom Tim came into contact while working for different ranches in the Wind River country.

The eastern side of the Big Horns was home for both Shoshones and Arapahos. Pony Hayes's trading post at Arapaho was a favorite haunt of the tribe for which it was named, while J.K. Moore's place at Fort Washakie catered to a Shoshone clientele. As he rode out in search of stray cattle and horses, Tim often came upon members of both tribes. Usually the men wore tall, dark, reservation-style hats with a conical crown and a broad, flat brim. Held in the beaded hatband would be a single eagle feather or a white

breathfeather plume from the eagle's tail, sometimes dyed orange or red. The oldtimers invariably wore moccasins, while younger men sported boots.

One of the cowboys with whom Tim worked was an Arapaho called George Shakespear. Known to his own people as Buffalo Lodge, Shakespear was about ten years older than Tim. George's long hair was braided, and he told Tim that when he had been sent to school as a boy the white men cut his hair short.

"How did that make you feel?" Tim asked his Arapaho friend.

"It made me cry," Shakespear replied sadly.

Part of the early reservation experience for the Indian peoples Tim came to know so well involved the bestowal of "white man names." Red Turtle, George's brother, became William Shakespear. White Antelope's son was known as Faustinus White Antelope. Drives Down Hill was transformed into Mr. D.D. Hill. White Bull became Charles W. Bell. Lone Bear, last of the Arapahos' great council chiefs, was known to the government as Lon Brown. Red Pipe was carried on agency rolls as Ralph Piper. Row of Lodges was altered to Mr. Rowlodge. Wolf Elk became Wolf Elkins. Runs Behind was renamed Behan. Ice Man became C'Hair. And on and on.

Tim enjoyed telling about the time George's brother, William Shakespear—who was also a cowboy—came to visit. The other cowboys noticed that he was missing the first joint of his left thumb. Some years before, William inadvertently let it slip between a rope he looped over a charging calf and his saddle horn with predictable results.

"How'd you lose part of your thumb?" one of the cowboys asked.

"Well, a long time ago," William explained, "I used to interpret up at Fort Washakie. And whenever the white man wanted to make a new treaty with my people I

had to tell them what the white man was saying. Of course, all the white man wanted was to take away some more land. But, you know, after the treaties were made they always asked me to put my thumbprint on the paper to make it legal. And there were so many treaties that, after a while, my thumb just wore away.”

Tim is often associated with Plains Indian sign language, a system of gestures that allowed people who spoke different languages to communicate with one another. Nobody knows when this sign language originated, but it eventually became the *lingua franca* of Plains Indians. His first sign language teacher was George Shakespear. Tim asked him why so many of the older Arapahos and Shoshones he saw while out searching for strays always seemed to be talking with their hands.

“That’s sign language,” George explained. “That’s how the oldtimers talk.”

Tim learned from George that when approaching someone along the trail it was common practice to extend an open right hand in front of the body. He found out that the sign for the Arapaho tribe was made by tapping the fingers of the right hand against the left breast. The meaning of that gesture remains in dispute. Some say it means the Arapahos are the mother of all tribes. But others maintain that gesture goes back to the days when Arapahos tattooed themselves with coal rubbed onto the ends of sharp porcupine quills. Showing, with the index finger of the right hand, the zigzag path a snake makes as it wriggles across the ground, Tim learned how to make the sign for the Shoshone tribe, known as the Snakes.

Under George Shakespear’s tutelage, Tim was soon able to greet non-English speaking Indians with their own sign language. Most of these folks were Arapahos, because Tim usually worked closer to their part of the Wind River Reservation than the

areas inhabited by Shoshones. Instead of trying to make himself understood by speaking a foreign tongue, Tim could now ask the old warriors if they had seen a black horse, or a stray cow.

He sensed that the oldtimers were fascinated that a young, green cowboy had not come galloping up in a cloud of dust and insulted them by calling them “John” and demanding information. Tim sensed that his respectful attitude made them curious, since they seldom encountered that sort of behavior from white men. “Soon,” as he reflected late in life, “the melt began.”

What Tim meant when he used that phrase was this: he could never explain exactly how or why he was able to break through cultural barriers and become a friend of so many of the Wind River Indian people. “The Mexicans have a word for it: *simpatico*,” he said, attempting to offer some sort of explanation. “You know, sometimes you meet people and there’s no need to make a fuss, to analyze what’s happening, but the chemistry is just right. That’s what happened: *simpatico*, we were people who fit together. It was like we’d always known one another. I was fascinated by the oldtimers, treated them with respect, and they repaid me by allowing me entry into their world.”

As near as Tim was able to reckon, years after the event, it was in July of 1912, while riding across Wind River country with George Shakespear, that he met a man who would exert a profound influence over his life. His name was Goes In Lodge and he was an Arapaho the two cowboys encountered one hot summer day.

George Shakespear, who knew Goes In Lodge well, hailed him from a distance. Goes In Lodge, riding bareback on a pinto, guided his horse towards the pair. He was dressed in a cream-colored muslin shirt, black vest and dark, threadbare trousers. On his

head he wore a high-crowned brown Stetson with a red-tipped eagle feather that stood straight up from the left side of the beaded hatband. Silky brown otter skins were wrapped around his two black braids. His moccasins were soft from wear and unadorned by decoration. Tim would remember the expression on Goes In Lodge's face as one that displayed steady resolve coupled with a sense of detached bemusement.

George told Tim this was a good chance to try out his sign language, because Goes In Lodge, who was born in the 1840s, did not speak English.

“You Arapaho?” Tim asked, making the correct gestures.

“Ahhh-h!” Goes In Lodge grinned, before unraveling a string of signs Tim did not recognize. George interpreted: “He's invited you to come to a dance, three suns from now. You gotta go, Tim. It'd be very bad Arapaho manners if you say no.”

When the three riders shook hands in parting, Tim could not know that he had met the man he would come to call “brother.”

It was Goes In Lodge who introduced Tim to his own contemporaries, men such as Little Ant, Ice Man, Red Pipe, Yellow Calf, Painted Bear, Rising Buffalo, Wolf Elk, Left Hand, Sage, Yellow Horse, White Horse, and Broken Horn. Though them he came to know such members of the younger generation as Mike Goggles, Charlie White Bull, and Jack Shavehead. He would also become friends with Shoshones—among them Dick and Charlie Washakie, sons of the great Shoshone chief Washakie—although he worked and would eventually live closer to Arapaho country.

Goes In Lodge and the other older men taught Tim how to dance, and eventually dressed him up in some of their fancy clothes, painted his body, and entered him in pow wow competitions. They used him to encourage their own children and grandchildren to

try and preserve some of the ways the government wanted to stamp out. If this white man can dance well, they were saying, you should be able to as well.

Tim did not pry into their private lives, asking the kind of questions that were regarded as personal. And because he did not probe, because he did not seek knowledge he had no right to possess, sometimes the elders revealed a good deal about themselves, as Goes In Lodge did when talking about why his heart sometimes seemed to jump a beat, or he found himself a little short of breath.

Many years before, when he was a young man, Goes In Lodge and several friends journeyed to the land of the Crows. One night, they entered a Crow village. As Goes In Lodge was untying a nice horse from in front of its owner's tipi, his friends rode through the camp taunting their enemies: "Wake up, you lazy Crows!" they shouted. "Brave Arapahos are stealing your ponies!"

The pony bolted, and Goes In Lodge took off on foot, running from the Crow village, the cries of angry people pushing him on. He ran and he ran and he ran. "It was as if I had eagles under my feet," he told Tim. He ran through the night and did not stop until daylight, when he hid behind some large rocks, blood running from his nose and mouth. Soon some Crow warriors rode by, searching for the Arapahos. But they did not see Goes In Lodge.

"My Medicine was good," Goes In Lodge explained, although he was convinced all that running, done on a night more than fifty years before, now gave his heart an irregular beat and sometimes left him winded.

In 1915, Tim homesteaded along Owl Creek and created a ranch he called the Eagle's Nest. When World War I broke out he enlisted in the U.S. Army's horse cavalry.

(Goes In Lodge suggested that if people wanted to inflict severe punishment on Germany's leaders, they should be sent to live on an Indian reservation.) When the war ended, he was mustered out as a lieutenant colonel. He returned to Wyoming, where Governor Bob Carey appointed him adjutant general: a one-star officer at the age of twenty-eight. As adjutant general—Arapahos named him Soldier Chief—he tried to influence the federal government to end its ban on the Sun Dance.

It was in the early 1920s that Tim received another name from the Arapahos. “A man's name should be like an arrow that strikes on the target,” Goes In Lodge explained. “Soldier Chief is not such a good target anymore.” Tim had traveled widely among other Plains tribes, often in the company of General Hugh L. Scott, who he met during World War I. So his friends believed a new name was appropriate. It was given to him by the holy man Yellow Calf, during a nighttime ceremony held outdoors beside a campfire.

Yellow Calf explained that Tim had traveled far, gone to many places, met people from different tribes. He had moved like the eagle that flies high above the earth. So his new name would be *Nee-hee-cha-ooth*, High Eagle. Yellow Calf took an eagle feather warbonnet borrowed from Painted Bear for the occasion, and placed it on Tim's head. Then he brought his hands down slowly on either side of Tim's body in a broad, sweeping motion.

Suddenly, Charlie White Bull, a young man, ran out from the crowd of spectators, bent down, seemed to pick something up from the ground and clutched it to his chest. He turned to Yellow Calf and the two Arapahos spoke to one another. Then Yellow Calf addressed the onlookers in Arapaho, the older men who were present nodded, and Charlie ran off into the night a happy man.

Yellow Calf explained that when brought his hands down along Tim's body the name Soldier Chief fell to the ground. But before it died, Charlie White Bull scooped it up and kept it alive by placing it against his chest. He asked Yellow Calf if, since Tim would no longer be using the name, he could have it for his own. He wanted what he called "a real Arapaho name," and the elders agreed.

In 1922, an employee of Famous Players-Lasky, one of the great pioneering Hollywood film companies, approached Tim. Famous Players-Lasky wanted to produce an epic movie based on Emerson Hough's western novel *The Covered Wagon*, and believed Tim would be the ideal person to obtain five hundred Indian extras. *The Covered Wagon* would be shot in Utah, and the producers wanted to make it as authentic as possible. Tim's role would be to communicate, through his mastery of sign language, with the older Indian extras.

"How much will the Indians be paid?" was one of Tim's first questions. His position as adjutant general gave him access to War Department files, and he spent a good deal of time trying to rectify past injustices. He discovered, for example, that Goes In Lodge and some of the other Arapahos who served as scouts for the army had never been told they were eligible for pensions. Eventually, they received their decades-in-arrears checks, some as much as \$800, a large sum at the time. Soon after, a delegation of Arapahos asked him to become their reservation's agent. He refused, because as an agent he would have been required to enforce the government's policies and he did not want to do that.

The reply came from Famous Players-Lasky: On a seven-days-a-week basis, the daily wage would be \$5 to each adult, fifty-cents for every child, \$1 per horse, and \$1 per

tipi. That meant that an adult male and woman with one child, a horse and tipi would earn \$87.50 per week, more than most of them probably saw in a year. And the production company would provide them with the same food everyone else working on the picture received.

Tim resigned his position as adjutant general and went to work for Famous Players-Lasky for \$50 a week. In his efforts to find five hundred extras Tim received immense help from Ed Farlow—a Lander pioneer whose wife was the daughter of Woman’s Dress, as sister of the Lakota chief Gall—and his son Jules.

There was considerable discussion as to whether it would be possible to get the Arapahos and Shoshones to travel together. In the old days, the two tribes warred against one another. But Tim always thought the feelings between the two peoples were less based on pure hatred than a kind of rivalry. He had, after all, heard the story of the Battle of Tabasco Sauce.

Soon after the Arapahos arrived at Wind River Agency in 1878—“Our moccasins were broken,” Goes In Lodge said in describing their defeated and impoverished state—the commander of the military garrison arranged a kind of summit meeting between leaders of the two tribes. He invited Washakie and Otai of the Shoshone and Sharp Nose and Black Coal of the Arapaho to a feast in the officers’ mess at Fort Washakie.

Words of good cheer passed between the delegates during the meal. But then a young lieutenant mischievously reached for a bottle of Tabasco Sauce which stood with other condiments in the center of the table. He held his thumb over the spout and pretended to take a swallow. Then he offered the bottle to Washakie.

Washakie grasped the bottle and took several quick gulps. As he put the bottle

down, tears came to his eyes.

“Why does Washakie weep?” Sharp Nose asked.

“I was thinking of my brother,” Washakie replied. “He was killed a long time ago by the Blackfeet. Whenever Washakie thinks of his brother, Washakie weeps.”

Washakie pushed the bottle across the table to Sharp Nose who, not to be outdone, swigged from it. Soon he, too, was crying.

Washakie, with a slight grin, asked, “Why does Sharp Nose weep?”

Sharp Nose waited for the fire within to die before replying. “I was thinking it is too bad Washakie did not die with his brother at the hands of those Blackfeet.”

More recently, in Tim’s time, the agent at Fort Washakie, hoping he could serve as a bridge between the two tribes, gathered the headmen from each group together.

“Every Fourth of July the Arapahos go to Riverton,” he said. “On that holiday, the Shoshones go to Lander. They celebrate at opposite ends of the reservation. This time, let’s have both tribes come to Fort Washakie for an All-Indian celebration.”

Yellow Calf, the Arapaho holy man, rose and agreed to this for his people.

Then Dick Washakie, son of old Washakie, got to his feet. “For too long we fought these Arapahos,” he said. “Now all Indians must live in peace. I think we should do just as you ask. So here’s how we’ll do it. The Arapahoes will camp at the east end of Fort Washakie and we’ll camp on the west side. The first day, the Arapahoes celebrate. Next day, Shoshones celebrate. That’s an All-Indian celebration!”

In fact, Tim had no trouble convincing both Arapahos and Shoshones to work on *The Covered Wagon*, as well as Bannocks from Idaho.

During the filming of the movie, which took place near Milford, Utah, a

snowstorm hit the location site.

“The only comfortable people in the entire outfit were the Indians,” Tim recalled, “who were ensconced inside their tipis, where, quite content, they sat beside warm fires, eating, visiting and playing their shield drums. The Hollywood people and extras, however, were in army-style tents, where they were cold, damp, thoroughly miserable and never much less than ankle-deep in drifting snow.”

Goes In Lodge suggested Tim seek out Yellow Calf and see if he could change the weather. “Yellow Calf has Turtle Medicine,” Goes In Lodge explained.

Not knowing what Goes In Lodge meant, Tim sought out Yellow Calf.

“Been a long time since I used that power,” Yellow Calf said. “Maybeso, we give it a try.”

Wrapped in a blanket, carrying an axe in one hand and a shield drum in the other, Yellow Calf left his tipi and walked into the howling wind, accompanied by about twenty Arapahoes and Tim. Using the axe’s handle, he drew a large circle, about fifteen feet in diameter, on the ice-encrusted snow. Inside the circle he drew a four-foot-long turtle. After singing some songs, Yellow Calf took the ax in both hands. “Now we try Turtle Medicine,” he told Tim.

Yellow Calf marched into the center of the circle, raised the ax over his head and brought it down with a crunch into the back of the ice turtle.

“Pretty soon, now,” he said to Tim.

Within five or ten minutes, the wind and snow stopped, the sun came out from behind the clouds for the first time in days.

“Soon the ice turtle melted and vanished,” Tim remembered. “We were all

believers.”

The Covered Wagon opened at Grauman’s Egyptian theater in Hollywood on April 10, 1923, Tim’s thirty-second birthday. Those who attended the silent film—its action accompanied by a score played by the in-house orchestra—first beheld the prologue, which consisted of Wind River Arapahoes appearing on stage with Tim, who communicated with them in sign language.

Thirty-five men, women, and children, with nine tipis, had traveled from Wind River to Hollywood. They set up camp in Cahuenga Pass, a mile or so from the theater—an area now swallowed by the Los Angeles freeway system. Among them was Goes In Lodge, who, when shown the Pacific Ocean remarked, “Big lake...can’t see across.” Left Hand was there, too. He was one of a small group of Arapahoes who fought at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, was present. So was the six-and-a-half-foot-tall Red Pipe. Also Charlie Whiteman, captured by Utes from a wagon train in the 1860s and later captured from the Utes by the Arapahoes. Old Sharp Nose had described him as “one-half Ute, one-half Arapaho, and one-half white man.” And Lizzie Broken Horn, old Broken Horn’s wife, was part of the prologue. As Lizzie Fletcher she was captured in 1865 from a wagon train by Arapahoes, along with her sister. The sister was eventually repatriated to her own people, while Lizzie became Kills In Time, a redheaded Arapaho.

In 1923, Tim took the prologue, and most of the Arapahoes who appeared at Grauman’s, as well as some others—including Charlie White Bull and Jack Shavehead, George Shakespear’s nephew William, Francis Sitting Eagle and his wife Alberta—boarded a ship in New York and sailed to London, England, for the opening of *The Covered Wagon*. They remained in London for about eight months. In 1925, Tim was

still in the prologue organizing business, this time escorting would both Arapahos and Shoshones, including old Washakie's sons Dick and Charlie, to Hollywood to promote director John Ford's *The Iron Horse*.

In 1926, impressed by Tim's stage presence, the legendary Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production signed Tim on as one of its seven stars, the others in the M-G-M stable being John Gilbert, Lillian Gish, Mae Murray, Ramon Novarro, Lon Chaney and Buster Keaton. At M-G-M, Tim worked for a studio that could put together a reasonable budget for its films, and one where he exercised far more control over the content of movies in which he appeared than he would ever even dream of in years to come.

Working with director W.S. "Woody" Van Dyke, Tim helped write the script for three films which he convinced M-G-M to shoot in the Wind River country with Arapaho and Shoshone extras. These films were *War Paint* (1926), *Spoilers of the West* (1927), and *Wyoming* (1928).

Between 1926-1942 Tim starred in nearly a hundred Hollywood Westerns, but he was able to convince studio executives to bankroll only one more location in his beloved Wind River country: *End of the Trail* (1932), a Columbia production in which Tim's character is condemned as a "known Indian sympathizer" and court-martialed out of the army. Interestingly, this film had two endings. When it was originally screened, Tim was killed after bringing peace between the Indians and the government. But audiences reacted with shock, so an alternate ending, in which Tim survived, was edited in when the movie was released. Today, even with its dated techniques, *End of the Trail* is often cited as a classic because it was one of the few films of that time which portrayed Indians in a sympathetic light.

During the 1930s, Tim performed as the featured act in the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. In 1938, following in the wake of his mentor Buffalo Bill, he took all the money he had made as a showman and created Tim McCoy's Wild West and Rough Riders of the World. But it was the time of the Great Depression, the spectacle's tour was brief, its life short, and this last of the great wild west shows soon folded. During World War II Tim reentered army life, this time as a colonel, and served overseas in England, France, and Germany with the army's air wing (although he still wore the cavalry's crossed-sabers insignia on his uniform). Afterwards, he was a pioneer in early-1950s television in Los Angeles and won an Emmy for one of his programs, which mixed history with showmanship. In the late 1950s he again went touring with circuses, and was making personal appearances until he was in his eighties. And every step of the way, he never forgot his Wind River experience.

We often sat together in the patio of the Spanish territorial-style home he built just north of the Arizona-Mexico border, and to which he finally retired in 1974. I especially remember evenings spent under an adobe archway, listening to a fountain softly playing, and looking out at the stars. He often told me how proud he was when Goes In Lodge, told him, in signs, "Long time ago, you and Indians—the same."

And on those evenings he occasionally spoke of the time, over half a century earlier, when he and Goes In Lodge visited in the older man's room in London. They sat, smoking Goes In Lodge's pipe. Tim had just given him a photograph that showed the Arapaho with Buffalo Bill. "*Ethiti* (good)," the Arapaho said, staring at it. Then he spoke in his own tongue and sign language.

"When I was a young man, my brother, I fought in many battles," Goes In Lodge

said. “The bullets went around me but I was never wounded. I was strong and brave. But now, I am getting old and my journey is almost over, while yours has just begun.

“Pretty soon, High Eagle, I am going to die and go way off. I will leave my moccasin prints across the sky, in what the white man calls the Milky Way, where they will shine with those of all the people who have traveled the trail to the Great Mystery. When I cross that trail, I will be in the Happy Hunting Ground and then I will sit down.

“You are a young man, my brother, and you are going to stay here. Maybeso, a long time. And one day you, too, will be an old man and then you will also cross that trail.

“Do not be afraid, for I will be there, waiting for you.

“All the time, I will be looking down that trail. Then, one day, way off, I will see you coming. I will smile to myself and say, ‘*Ahhhh-h*, it is my brother, Nee-hee-cha-ooth!’

“You will come closer and I will say, ‘My brother is coming!’

“I will get on my horse, go out and hunt. When I find a fat young buffalo, I will take my arrow and kill him, cut him up and bring him in. I will make a good fire, take those big buffalo steaks and put them on the coals. Then I will look up and see you are there with me.

“We will hug and I shall say, ‘Oh, my brother, it has been so lonely. But you are here now. Sit down!’ You will sit here, I will sit there. We will take those fine buffalo steaks and eat until we are filled up to our throats.

“Then I will reach down, get my pipe, load it, smoke and give it to you. You will smoke the pipe and then we will put it away. We shall sit there together and have a good

visit.

“Our hearts will be big, and everything will be *ethiti*. . .”

If there is anything after this life, and if Tim could will it to be the way he would like best, then that once gawky kid from Saginaw, Michigan, and that oldtimer from the Plains Indians’ buffalo culture, are sitting there...visiting...now...and forever.