

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Legendary outlaw's tragic story persists

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Part "Romeo and Juliet" and part "Bonnie and Clyde," a movie based on the tragic life of Willie Boy, a Paiute Indian in Banning, was filmed in the desert in July 1969. The story upon which the movie was based unfolded in 1909 over three intense weeks and sold quite a lot of newspapers. In 1960, a Riverside Press-Enterprise newspaperman named Harry Lawton tried to reconstruct the story from accounts told by those who had lived through it half a century before.

The story of Willie Boy starts ordinarily enough. He was living in Victorville at the turn of the century with his family and was reportedly "a quiet, hardworking cowpuncher with a good, sober reputation," according to a Los Angeles Times article a century later. He worked at ranches in the Morongo and Yucca valleys and Joshua Tree before moving to Twentynine Palms.

In 1909, he fell desperately in love with his 16-year-old distant Chemehuevi cousin Carlota Boniface. Her father was a shaman of the tribe and would not allow the couple to marry. Despite the prohibition, the couple ran off and spent the night together before being brought back. Soon, Carlota moved with her family to the Gilman Ranch in Banning to pick fruit and Willie Boy followed.

There are multiple tellings of the fateful events that came next. Overcome by powerful "firewater" or just distraught and in a struggle with her father and a weapon, Willie Boy shot Carlota's father dead. Their "marriage by capture" was recognized. The couple now had to try to escape through the barren desert ahead of the posse deputized to bring the "murderer" to justice. Willie Boy knew the desert terrain and where every drop of water could be found. He and Carlota backtracked, circled around and covered as much as 50 miles each day trying to outrun the law. Eventually their 600-mile trek would traverse much of the Mojave and was characterized by Lawton as the "last great man-hunt" of the Old West.

The newspapers carried daily accounts of the pursuit. There was a handsome bounty for Willie Boy, wanted dead or alive. One of the men of the posse



"Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here" starred Robert Redford, Robert Blake and Katharine Ross. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and several horses were killed in an "ambush." Then Carlota was inexplicably found dead, and Willie Boy was purported to have shot her, too.

The newspapers wanted to keep the story alive. The news speculated about renegade Indians menacing white settlements, a plot to assassinate President Taft, who was scheduled to visit San Bernardino, and the threat of a full-scale Indian revolt if Willie Boy was not brought to justice.

Most likely the posse accidentally killed Carlota mistaking her for Willie Boy, who, in one account of events upon learning she was dead, took off his shoe, pointed the barrel of the rifle at his chest and pulled the trigger with his toes. When the posse found his body days later, they burned where it laid stretched out on the boulders of Ruby Mountain. Indian accounts maintain that part of the story is a fiction. They say Willie Boy got away.

The movie changed the story even more to fit Hollywood convention. The sheriff, played by Robert Redford, chases Willie Boy and Carlota, played by Robert Blake and Katharine Ross, until the inevitable shoot-out and triumph of the law. That classic Hollywood ending is surprising given that in 1969, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," also starring Redford and Ross would shock audiences by ending in a decidedly un-Hollywood fashion. The stereotypical movie characterization of Indians was

being upended, the nobility of Indians and the universality of the suffering of the human condition was invading the western genre.

Julia Sizek, writing for the Mojave Project, noted: "The film took a different tack on the events. It told a story that was at once archetypal and mythic — a battle between two men: Willie Boy and 'Coop,' a fictional composite character who leads the posse. Willie Boy, an Indian despoiled by the alcohol of the civilized whites, is a classic outlaw in the style of James Dean. Coop is a reluctant lawman who has the tools to defeat Willie but would rather leave the Indians to settle the case. The film builds during the prolonged chase — lawman and civilization against the somewhat noble savage — and the viewer is meant to feel conflicted while watching the Old West end as Coop kills Willie in a shoot-out deep within Pipes Canyon."

"Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here" was filmed on location in the very desert where Willie Boy and Carlota had momentarily eluded the law. A story in the Los Angeles Evening Citizen noted that "the moviemakers spent five weeks flying a high-powered helicopter over the Southern California desert and mountain vastness tracing Willie Boy's route. And locations used in the movie include the actual ranch house where the historic murder-kidnaping took place in Banning."

Katherine Siva Saubel, then Presi-

dent of the Malki Museum in Morongo and co-author of a number of technical papers on the Cahuilla people, consulted on the movie, and with a team of Indian singers she recorded background music and a song for one scene. She also had a small speaking part.

The movie was an important happening in the Banning Pass. An editorial in January 1969 in the Banning Record-Gazette was titled "Mount Up, Men!" Exhorting the community to spring into action, "Banning Chamber of Commerce officials had better get on the ball or Yucca Valley chamber officials are going to ace them out of what could be a bonanza of publicity for the Pass. At stake is the movie premiere of 'Willie Boy' about Banning's own legendary outlaw. Yucca Valley chamber members have already held a meeting with ... Universal-International Pictures' production department on the ... premiere possibility. Banning is supposed to be in the running for the showing of the film, for which scenes were shot this summer at the old Gilman Ranch ... Other cities under consideration apparently are Riverside, home of Harry Lawton, the author of the book from which the photoplay was derived; Palm Springs and Yucca Valley."

"Points of consideration by the studio for the premiere are an indoor theatre, which Banning has; a large enough restaurant to accommodate a great number of visiting celebrities, studio officials and press, also available; and ample parking facilities (surely the whole downtown area will do). But in view of the aggressiveness of the competition Banning's official posse, men had better mount up and get going, or Willie Boy (the motion picture, that is) is liable to escape this time."

Released a few months after "Butch Cassidy" in December 1969, "Willie Boy" would get mostly good notices and earn respectable box office receipts. "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," though, eclipsed "Willie Boy" the movie, becoming the highest grossing film of 1969. But the legendary tale of the tragic Indian outlaw persists.

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