**IKWIK**

Forty-five miles Northwest of Los Angeles is a settlement bearing absolutely no resemblance to its neighboring communities. Stashed away in the rugged Tehachapi Mountains, Crow Flats is a throwback to times that never were - not even in California. About the only way you can get to Crow Flats is to take a wrong turn to somewhere else and keep going. The nearest Chamber of Commerce denies its existence and by mistake the Department of Highways pushed three-quarters of the town into a rock-strewn gorge in the process of building a super highway to link Heavenly Acres with Cinerama Falls, two utopias that fortunately went belly-up before the first foundations could be poured. The highway project was abandoned in the middle of Crow Flats with the bulldozer resting lightly against city hall.

The day that the bulldozer came to Crow Flats, most of the citizens were down at Zenith Ranch attacking (for the third time) a wagon train filled with squealing pubescent schoolgirls and their ripened missionary mothers. The first attack had been aborted after Abraham Running-Goat led his braves onto the Ventura Freeway against on-coming traffic sending vehicles careening in all directions. The incident led to twenty-five separate collisions accounting for the untimely demise of seven people including a prominent Southern California politician returning to his august civic duties after a weekend of depravity with two under-aged campaign workers and a prize winning Afghan hound. The dog was charged with vehicular manslaughter.

The second attempt went smoothly until an F-102 fighter from Oxnard Air Force Base made a low pass just as the wagons were drawing into a circle. Obviously the pilot had been intrigued by what he thought he had seen, because no sooner had he gone by the first time than he was back in a gut-wrenching high-g turn for a second look. Throttle stuffed to the afterburner stop, the sharp-angled airframe nibbling at the edge of supersonic flight, the fire-belching behemoth proved more than a match for the Indian nation. All that remained in the wake of the second overflight was a cloud of dust and a herd of riderless ponies heading for Hidden Valley and the wildlands beyond. So complete was the rout that the event became known as Custer's Revenge and it fell to Manfred Liebowitz of Screen Epic Productions the thankless task of tracking down and coaxing the quavering Indians out of burrows and shelters extending radially as many as five miles from the wagon train.

"Things aren't bad enough that I should have to shell out fifty bucks a buck to get these savages to make a third charge," he implored of a deity who was obviously ignorant of the trials of movie making. Last week Valery Vain had seen her own shadow as she emerged from her dressing room and, thinking it an ill omen, retreated back up the steps to lock herself off from the world for two full days, resisting the entreaties of everyone on the lot until Stanley Stud (flown in from location in Florida at no small expense) succeeded in getting her to return to the set.

Actually, it was John Little Foot who summed up the Native American Concern when he pronounced archly, "white man break treaty. Nowhere in contract authorize long-knives to use close air support. Mebbe injun go on warpath - wipe out plenty thunderbirds - then attack wagon train."

While Liebowitz was forking over a great deal of straight tongue (the universal green balm of Novus Ordo Seclorum), Little Horn Toad was back at Crow Flats sitting dejectedly in the community six-holer smoking his pipe. More specifically, he was getting lots of practice lighting it and sending dyspeptic smoke signals into the shimmering sunlight that pierced the gloom through the ventilation shaft. Normally, he would have been leading the attack against the wagon train, but he had been suspended the previous week for making an obscene gesture to Marshal Mort Drillye instead of falling off his horse as called for in the script. It wouldn't have been too bad if something had been said on the spot, but unfortunately the shooting schedule was so badly behind because of an unseasonable rainstorm that the film was rushed to the studio for incorporation into the weekly episode of The Gunslugger and shown unedited the next night to its audience of Honeybee Coffee lovers. What surprised network officials nearly as much as the increased ratings, was that there were so many pious old biddies watching the show who knew enough to complain.

Unfortunately, none of this provided Little Horn Toad's situation with the slightest mitigation, so for the twelfth time in the last forty-five minutes, he repeated his nationwide performance for the benefit of those in his imagined audience who might have missed the original. The fact that all of this happened to coincide with the arrival of the Highway Department bulldozer did nothing to change his opinion as to the never-ending treachery of the white man whose sole aim in life seemed to be the pursuit, intimidation, and eradication of the Indian race.

If anyone in the tribe should know about this treachery, it was Little Horn Toad, who at fifty-five was one of the few in the tribe who really remembered the man who shepherded the tribe in its rendezvous with destiny. The Ikwik, 'Follower of the Southern Sun', whose ancestors (kin to the Kwakiutl, a proud and settled people of the Pacific Northwest) broke away from their ancestral home in about the time of Moses and drifted South through what is now Oregon and finally in more recent times, California. Some legends recall that they were chasing the tail of a comet, others that their chief was after tail of another sort, but neither account explains the logic that led them to settle at Crow Flats. No one knows for certain when they arrived, but Big Paw (who was thought to be in excess of 150 years old) could remember nowhere else, so it is with some assurance that the elders could claim that the tribe predated the Los Angeles Rams by at least two centuries.

Like the Kwakiutl, the Ikwik lived off the land, which is not to suggest that they farmed or hunted or herded like most of their settled brethren. From time immemorial they had collected nuts and berries that made their sojourn to Southern California so appropriate. There is a legend about one mighty ancestor who felled a giant bear with a stone that gets great play in the waning hours of tribal parties, but aside from this there is not much to suspect the Ikwik of a more than passive role in their own preservation. Given this, Crow Flats becomes even more of an enigma because, aside from cacti, sagebrush, and Indians there is not another living thing within a mile of the city limits. Yet less than three miles away at the site of the aforementioned Heavenly Acres, the land blooms with a richness and diversity of flora as to suggest Eden itself.

While it is not given to outgroupers to sit in judgment of their fellow man, one still must wonder about the Ikwik. Not only is Crow Flats barren, it sits over no rich oil deposit, guards no major route of travel necessitating the erection of a bingo parlor, has no healing waters, and houses no Ikwik deities whose desecration by the white man could occasion a substantial lawsuit. Crow flats' only distinguishing feature (aside from the fact that its rocks welled up in a shallow lagoon off the coast of Bolivia some 200 million years ago and charged northward at the geological speed of heat through a rift in the Pacific oceanic plate to slam headlong into the upthrusting Tehachapi Range on whose Southern flank they became sutured in what is one of the greatest epochal anomalies of all time) is that the Ikwik for reasons known but to themselves settled there.

Little Horn Toad had been in the process of obliging his father Big Horn Toad by not throwing rocks at the beehive in the ledge above their house, when two white men (in those days they were called 'funny eyes') rode into town on horseback. They weren't quite sure what they were looking for, but it seemed to them an omen of sorts when from the rocky land broken by rude hovels, silent figures arose as if by spontaneous generation, eventually to wall them in. If the taller of the two felt his scalp crawl at the sight of so many Indians, it was understandable for he was none other than Lance Adonis, hero of nineteen epics of the old west and victim of no less than eleven scalpings prior to his ascendancy at the box office that more or less guaranteed the permanence of his pate. His companion, if no less frightened, was infinitely more reasonable. Having learned to read in his youth, he knew that scalping was a more regional phenomenon, and besides, he was bald. This was the renowned director Brute LeForce of whom it was rumored around various salons of tinsel town that he secretly favored the savages during their gallant charges into celluloid oblivion. "Noble," was the term he most often used.

For several minutes nothing happened, each camp somewhat taken aback by the unexpected confrontation. Little Horn Toad found it harder and harder to observe his obligation. Finally it was Big Paw who broke the silence.

"Wadda ya want, pilgrims?" To a brave, the Indians nodded their heads saying something that sounded like "ho yuh." Though Adonis and LeForce couldn't be expected to know it, to even the most maudlin Ikwik, it was inconceivable that anyone could want anything in Crow Flats unless it was directions to somewhere else.

In a flash of insight, LeForce had a revelation to rival those of the prophets. He was, after all (as he liked to point out at cocktail parties in his honor) "nothing if not a visionary." He was almost perfectly correct, of course, but in this instance he rose above his self-deception. What he saw was a picture of Indians - herds of them. Big ones, little ones, papeese and squaws. Indians springing from the soil. Indians attacking wagon trains. Indians scalping bearded buffalo hunters and dragging screaming blonde-tressed sexpots with milk-white thighs and Brooklyn accents into the bushes before selling their ravished bodies to lascivious bear-skinned trappers for beads and a few pelts from a place called Freddies of Fullerton.

Best of all, in his mind's eye he saw with a certain clarity that these Indians could be all his, and if this whole tribe belonged to him, Hollywood would have to come to Acme Films any time anyone wanted an authentic massacre.

"White man come in peace," he intoned with great solemnity, waiting for the murmur of approval to come from the closed faces that stared up at them. As none was forthcoming, he took a new tack.

"Me friend. Come from land of paleface to make talk with great chief of the reedmen."

Big Paw turned to Big Horn Toad with a very un-indianlike expression on his wizened face. "Wadda fuck dis nut talking about?"

"Look, chrome dome," Big Horn Toad chimed in menacingly, "speak English or we're liable to get the idea that you're one of them commie pinko fags who hang out on Hollywood Boulevard."

LeForce and Adonis were taken aback, but if they had both done more reading, they could have guessed the story. Compared with the various religious orders that hungered for their souls, the Indian's truest friend was the U.S. Cavalry. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, itinerant religious zealots crisscrossed the West in search of heathens with souls to be saved and skins to be fleeced. What often followed was privation, misery, servitude, disease, half-castes, and in many cases (mercifully) death. Always there was the limbo of not quite making it into the brave new world while being unable to retreat fully into a gentler and nobler past.

Not untypical of these wandering cross-bearing disaster areas was the Reverend Scruggs who stumbled into Crow Flats one day in 1874, a young man of dubious parentage from Boston Massachusetts who after deserting the Union Army during the Battle of Gettysburg, stole for a living while moving West. Young Scruggs showed a commendable aptitude for the art of fleecing, so it was that during a short stay as a guest of the proud citizens of Denver - a consequence of his divesting a durable matron of a variety of her worldly goods - he came to meet the Reverend Mr. Pierce. It may not have been a conversion to match that of Saul of Tarsus, but in the course of his stay that amounted to little more than six hours (when the Widow Harris reached the reasonable conclusion that her gains outweighed her losses and abjured of her right to press charge) Scruggs saw the light.

Within an hour of his release, he knocked over a dry goods store for proper clothing and after light-fingering the Book of God from the Castle Rock Holiness Church; he forswore his evil ways, embarking upon that righteous path of saving souls.

Scruggs hadn't been in Crow Flats for six hours before he started organizing things. He figured that if he was appointed by God to lead the Ikwik into grace, he would have to see to it as well that they had some means for showing him some durable measure of their devotion to him for his beneficence. Unfortunately, the Ikwik were unskilled at virtually every endeavor Scruggs set before them. In desperation, he marched them off to the scruffy community of Camarillo where they found a loose board in the wall of a meat packing warehouse and liberated a few flanks of crusty hung beef bound for the port at Hueneme (pronounced Why-Knee-Me for those less versed in language skills than Oxnardians). After rendering their booty in vats back at Crow Flats, they sold the vetch to a middleman in San Fernando for half the going rate. The Ikwik, thanks to the Reverend Scruggs were at last on their way to self-sufficiency and the American dream.

While it is true that Scruggs took somewhat more than the lion's share of the profits from the community enterprise (in literal fact he took it all), it was by no means a one-way street. In return for their devotion, he gave them religion and language according to Saint Scruggs (the latter made them the only Indians west of the Mississippi to speak in glowing terms of Calerfawnyer) and a moral code that made politics look like philanthropy. Apt at nothing else, the Ikwik took to their new enlightenment with a dedication that would have brought tears to the eyes of even so august a person as Father Serra had he still been alive to witness it.

As is often the case with men of purpose, Scruggs lived a full and lengthy life, finally crossing the boundary to the hereafter at the age of eighty-seven when he bit into the wrong mushroom. Thus it was that, though dead for nearly five years, Scruggs lived on in the thoughts and language of his grateful converts. The year was 1927 and the rendered beef market was close to collapse. It was into that well of depression that LeForce's offer fell and the Ikwik were of no mind to pass up the opportunity.

"LeForce, you one-celled half-wit, how do you know these savages can ride, much less shoot arrows, scalp buffalo hunters, and rape milk-white maidens?"

Burley A. Damian was overjoyed with what LeForce had done and determined to show his gratitude in the only way he knew how. Burley had come up through the ranks, which is to say that he pirated a film from a European studio while taking the grand tour as resident stud to his mother's best friend. Distributing it illegally in America to the awesome tune of a million bucks, Damian acquired the struggling Acme Films Empire and moved into the big time.

The French producer screamed and yelled bloody murder about the theft when he caught up with BA two years later, only to find himself deported when immigration, acting on an anonymous tip wrapped in a wad of hundred dollar bills, nabbed him for "perversions too unspeakable to divulge,” and slung him into the hold of a tramp steamer en route to Marseille via France's possessions in the Far East and Africa. As expiation for the dastardly part he played in the whole affair, Burley spent the rest of his life treating one and all to tirades and vituperations of a very contrite heart.

"It'll be all right, BA," LeForce maintained. "Riding is in their genes."

But it wasn't. Nor was scalping or raping as it turned out. It was a year before LeForce could look forward with any certainty to a scene in which the eager redskins didn't get it wrong and try to rape the buffalo hunters or scalp the horses. Acme Films was well on its way to bankruptcy under a welter of lawsuits from violated virgins of both sexes while at the same time SPCA called for a nationwide boycott of Acme's wild west films.

Finally, LeForce called Big Horned Toad in for a chat.

"What's it gonna take to get the tribe's act together?"

Big Horned Toad hadn't the slightest clue as to what LeForce meant, but Little Horned Toad was by no means similarly indisposed.

"White man gonna take dis treaty and stuff it in place where sun don't shine," he intoned in the best Hollywood tradition. "New treaty give red man ten percent of the gate and twenty percent of the stock in Acme Films."

"How the hell do you think you're going to get away with that? For one thing, buster, I don't own a blasted share of the stock, and besides, that's a legal and binding contract that we've got there and if you walk out on it, your little red carcass will hang."

"Look, LeForce, you're a realist. What court in the country is going to honor a contract that all but repeals the Emancipation Proclamation? Beyond that, we are ' . . . jus' poh noble savages taken in by Whitey and his forked tongue'." Little Horned Toad did a little soft-shoe routine before continuing. "These commie-pinko judges will have to call a recess to dry their eyes by the time our lawyer gets through telling them what rotten slave drivers you are. In fact I'd be surprised if they won't salt you and Damian away for a few years for screwing with 'wards of the government.’ Call old Burley and give him our terms."

Little Horned Toad had been ten years of age at the time, and now, after thirty years of guiding his people through the webs and tangles of the white man's legal world, he found himself tossed out into the cold without so much as a 'mother may I.’ Worse still was that he had been shelved by a bunch of lightweight sycophants whose power and prestige rose and fell with the sales of such improbables as Crinkly Crunch Cereal and Sara Jane's Underarm Shave Cream.

"Well screw you all, you unappreciative turkeys," he hissed with a conviction born in response to an amazing revelation. Scruggs had been an idiot. For fifty years he had salted away all the proceeds of the tribe's industry and never spent a cent of it make himself or anyone else the better for it. Stupider still he had never left Crow Flats.

What Little Horned Toad realized was that he had come close to making the same mistake himself. While the tribe sat around weeping and wailing in the wake of Scruggs's death, Little Horned Toad had discovered the mattress sack filled with all the little green pictures of dead Presidents. He was seven at the time and not sure what they were good for, but he toted his windfall off to hide, certain that the good reverend had something in mind.

It was through LeForce that he learned the significance of the stash, so at the age of 15 he bought 20%—six sections plus water rights--in one of the biggest citrus ranches in the San Fernando Valley. Five years later, Little Horned Toad leveraged his 20% into nearly a million square feet of industrial property throughout the Los Angeles Basin.

When the housing boom came at the end of World War Two, he was the first to chop down his lemon and orange groves and turn them into housing tracts, setting up a mortgage syndicate in the process to get rid of the paper. Over the years he had transferred his assets into overseas accounts - first Switzerland and later Grand Cayman. The beauty was that no one in the tribe knew of the stock in Acme Films or the fact that Little Horned Toad had been making a killing right under their noses.

"Emerging from the six-holer, Little Horned Toad looked around Crow Flats for what was to be the last time, shrugged, fired up the bulldozer so it could finish off the job on the town, shouldered his knapsack, and headed off to Los Angeles.