

Native American film review Sunday

By Kevin Cowan
Senior Reporter

Native Americans are not foreign to the silver screen. Many a Hollywood actor through the years felt the repercussions from "savage Indian" bowstrings. Yes, the glamorized western — one of the first hardened genres of the Hollywood trade.

Movie Review

However, the western is but one wry, sensationalized aspect of film, a ghastly misrepresentation of Native American culture and plight.

A series of documentaries will show today through Sunday at the Sheldon Film Theater. The series, "Native America Now: A Festival of Films," concentrates on the little-known plight of the Midwestern and Eastern American Indian.

Three of those films are reviewed here. The first, "Abnaki: The Native People of Maine," is by Jay Kent and chronicles the sheer-face battle of the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac and Maliseet against the government of Maine. The struggle is deep-seated in tradition, internalized to the point of fatalistic consistency. It is seemingly a no-win situation. The Abnaki, as the film espouses, view the vicious circle as a battle for their culture.

Though commentary is the primary goal, Kent utilizes the lucid Maine landscape and the leathery faces of Native Americans, combined with excellent timing and dissolve montage, to produce a documentary of riveting proportion.

"Box of Treasures," directed by Chuck Olin, centers on the Kwakiutl tribe of Alert Bay, British Columbia. Olin, with the aid of Gloria Cranmer Webster, director of the U'Mista culture center, insightfully describes the oppression of the Kwakiutls and the

religious rite of "potlatch." The Canadian government, in an effort to destroy the Kwakiutl culture, declared the masked dance of potlatch — in fact, the entire ceremony — pagan worship, not to be practiced. Members of the tribe continue to practice the benevolent rite of celebration and are arrested and imprisoned. The ceremonial masks worn by the participants were taken to the national museum and placed alongside artifacts of extinct cultures.

"They made it seem like our tribe no longer existed," Webster said, "like we weren't even there."

After years of negotiation, the potlatch masks finally returned to their original owners. The return spawned the creation of the U'Mista culture center.

U'Mista, Webster said, is a Kwakiutl word describing the return of members of their tribe who were kidnapped or enslaved.

"The elders felt the word was ap-

propriate," she said.

"Box of Treasures" is another informative documentary that makes use of the environment and the people who have lived as a part of it for 30,000 years.

Native American cultures have long been known for maintaining their own belief systems. As Anglo-Americans run the course of taming wild North America, dying numbers of Native Americans hold true to their spiritual cosmology. In their cultures, certain things and certain places hold the power key to life. "Our Sacred Land," a film by Chris Spotted Eagle, documents some of the most institutionalized aspects of Native American struggle: the rights of language, religion and education.

"Our Sacred Land" glances at the Sioux Indians' efforts to reclaim their sacred burial and dreaming ground. Given to them in the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 and taken away when gold was discovered, the Lakota

Sioux's sacred ground has remained in a state of upheaval for many years. When the Lakota were offered \$105 million by the American government — payment for land stolen by Andrew Jackson — the Lakota replied, "This land's not for sale."

All three films portray the systematic devastation of Native American language, society and environment.

"This land was given to us to nurture — to take care of," said the Lakota spiritual leader. "It was not meant to be tamed."

Indeed. A thought often lost in the urban confines of white society.

The "Native America Now" film festival is scheduled today through Sunday. On Sunday, the festival features a panel discussion with special guest speaker Chris Spotted Eagle, a director of one of the documentaries. Eagle also will conduct a free workshop at the Lincoln Indian Center at 2 p.m. Sunday.

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