



I watched "How the West Was Won" again on cable last week, and was reminded once more of the great story of settlement we Americans share. Of course, every story has more than one side, and forgotten in this stirring epic are the people who were displaced to satisfy the insatiable thirst for land our pilgrim descendants visited on the West.

Because parts of this iconic Hollywood epic were filmed in South Dakota, I have learned a lot of the back story over the years. It doesn't take much sleuthing to recognize that an attack by the Cheyenne Indians couldn't have taken place in Monument Valley. Apparently John Ford's obsession with the Arizona scenery reached far beyond his own western classics of the thirties and forties - and damn the facts. (The nomadic Cheyenne roamed the Northern Plains.) And alert viewers could recognize rapids in the Pacific North West which were substituted for the main characters' harrowing voyage down the Ohio River.

But I'm talking about lesser-known tidbits that I have shared with travelers to the Black Hills for decades. This movie was a monumental undertaking by any standard, covering the story of four generations and fifty years of an American family as they "conquered" the West, and - not surprisingly - one of the biggest challenges was finding unspoiled locations to film key scenes. Long before this film was made in 1962, National Geographic had discovered the pristine beauty of the Black Hills of South Dakota and featured the location even as far back as when the classy magazine was still printed in black and white. Someone on the production crew had taken notice and scouts were dispatched post-haste to western South Dakota to identify suitable locations.

Not surprisingly, they zeroed in on Custer State Park, the second largest state park in the country, which had been set aside in 1898 as a wildlife refuge, and the state Game, Fish and Parks Commission had taken its mission of preservation to heart. The result was a thriving herd of buffalo commanding hundreds of acres in the southern portion of the park where there were no telephone or electric high wires and precious few fences. This would do very nicely for the buffalo stampede in the second act!

The script required buffalo to stampede through a railroad construction camp, creating both havoc and thrills. Let me describe the scene: the script called for the herd to crash through a camp where rail-ties were being laid. The setting included a rustic campfire (of course) with a sun-bonneted woman tending it, wee tykes cavorting around

the fire, and a covered wagon - all within a few feet of the railroad workers pounding away in the background. Unfortunately, the buffalo had not read the script, nor were they inclined to go anywhere near fire. These pre-historic mammals didn't survive to the 19th century by being stupid! And although by nature a herd animal, they preferred to do their own herding, and weren't inclined to take orders from a silly human.

Although a number of park rangers worked behind the scenes, they were no more successful at getting the buffalo to cooperate than the director, and take after take, day after day of mounting expenses went by without anything to show for it.

Historians could also take issue with the presence of a "pioneer woman" and family anywhere near a rough-and-tumble railroad camp. Ditto the covered wagon. But I digress.

MGM was too deeply invested in this crucial scene to give up. This film was one of the first to employ wide-curved screen Cinerama and the buffalo scene was going to blow audiences away! So they made a few compromises. Since the buffalo weren't inclined to take on a covered wagon, stagehands rigged guy-wires to the wagon to yank it on its side, giving the illusion that the nearby buffalo had actually trampled it. Ditto the campfire, and a few other flying pieces of scenery for effect.

Well it worked. Sort of. If you watch the scene closely you can actually see the wires pulling over the wagon, and scattering the fire and actors, just seconds before the buffalo actually reached them!! I have to admit, I never noticed it either, until reading a tell-all book about how the movie was made. Now I can't watch it *without* seeing the wires.

In fact so much of this movie is pure Hollywood, yet it still stirs feelings of romanticism of the West in me. And oh, that scenery!

And now you know the rest of the story.