

Will Sampson. Obituary notices

I. "Los Angeles Times", 4 June 1987. I. P. 24.

Role in "Cuckoo's Nest" Will Sampson, Gentle Indian Giant, Dies.

By Burt A. Folkart, "Times" Staff Writer

Will Sampson, the gentle Indian giant best remembered for his portrayal of the feigning mute chief in the alternately amusing and poignant film, "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest", died Wednesday in Houston.

He was 53 and died 43 days after undergoing a heart-lung transplant at Methodist Hospital, to which he had gone from his home in Los Angeles.

The 6-foot, 7-inch tall full-blooded Creek Indian who came to acting after careers on the rodeo circuit and as an artist, had suffered from scleroderma, a chronic degenerative disease that produces swelling of the skin and affected his heart and lungs.

Knew Chances Were Slim

Hospital spokeswoman Brenda Blake, who said that Sampson's son and former wife were at his bedside, said: "he knew that his chances for survival were extremely small, because of his weakened condition prior to surgery".

His weight had dropped from a normal 260 pounds to 140.

"Cuckoo's Nest", based on the novel by Ken Kesey, was made in 1975 after most producers had rejected as commercially unattractive its plot of a mental inmate literally taking over his asylum.

The film won five Academy Awards, including two for its stars, Jack Nicholson and Louise Fletcher, and critical praise for Sampson's portrayal of Chief Bromden. In the film's climax, he provides a disturbing, ultimate gesture of defiance. After his friend Randel P. McMurphy (J. Nicholson) undergoes a frontal lobotomy, Bromden smothers him to death with a pillow then dramatically pulls a giant wash basin from its concrete foundation, throws it through a barred window and escapes the asylum where he had spent years silently pushing a broom. That haunting portrayal marked his film debut for he had come to acting late in life and solely by chance.

Announcer Found Him

A rodeo announcer friend had been asked by a member of producer Michael Douglas' staff to keep his eye out for a big Indian.

"He [the announcer] found me in Washington", Sampson told the Associated Press in 1976. "I was directing an art show".

Thus Sampson was launched into an acting career at age 41.

He next appeared in "The White Buffalo" in 1977, "Orca" in 1977 and "Alcatraz: the Whole Shocking Story" in 1978. Most recently, he appeared as the demon-battling Indian in "Poltergeist II: The Other Side".

On television, he played Chief Harlon Two Leaf in the television series "Vega\$". He also appeared in the 1979 NBC-TV version of "From Here to Eternity" and starred in a short 1982 NBC series "Born to the Wind".

Born in Oklahoma

Sampson was born in Okmulgee, Okla., a full-blooded Muscogee-Creek Indian with the name Kvs-Kvna, meaning left-handed. Much of his family remained in the Okmulgee area, where he was known as Sonny Sampson. He began painting as a child.

Sampson said he studied acting the way he prepared for his paintings of cowboys, Indians and Western landscapes, many of which hung in galleries and museums in the Southwest.

“I research thoroughly”, said Sampson, who would not accept the “Cuckoo’s Nest” role until he had read the book. “I’ve done paintings of all the great Indian chiefs and I studied everything about them”.

Sampson is to be buried in his birthplace.

(more)

II. "The Washington Post", 4 June 1987. D-6.

Will Sampson, Jr.,

53, the 6'7" American Indian actor who began his screen career in the film “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” died June 3 at Methodist Hospital in Houston, 41 days after underg. a heart-lung transplant.

A hospital spokesman said Mr. Sampson died as a result of severe pre-operative malnutrition and post-operative kidney failure and fungal infection. Mr. Sampson had scleroderma, a chronic degenerative disease characterized by swelling of the skin. In Mr. Sampson’s case, the disease affected his heart and lungs.

Mr. Sampson began his screen career playing a silent Indian mental patient in “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest”. The film won 5 Oscars in 1976, including best picture. Its coproducer, actor M. Douglas had said he was looking for someone to play the silent Indian role, when he met Mr. Sampson, seated next to him on a plane. At that time, Mr. Sampson had spent several seasons on the rodeo circuit and worked part time as a ranch hand.

After “Cuckoo’s Nest” he went on to roles in several movies, including “Buffalo Bill and the Indians”, “The White Buffalo” and “Orca”. On TV he played Chief Harlon Two Leaf in the “Vega\$” series...[etc.]

...He began painting as a child, boasting he sold his first picture at age 3, and was an established artist before he turned to acting. He continued to paint and his works – mainly of cowboys, western landscapes and Indian scenes – has been shown nationwide.

His marriage to Jill Sampson ended in divorce. Survivors include a son, Tim.

Collected by [Svetlana Lyutova](#)