Hank Adams on Dramatizing Wounded Knee

A summary of his July 17, 1974 letter on the Columbia Pictures film treatment, and how it informs the stage play Hank Adams

Edward J. Fox, PhD · edfoxphd.com · November 2026

> **About this paper.** This AI-written summary was drafted with Claude from a copy of the letter supplied by Edward J. Fox, who directed the work. It is posted in the AI Sandbox under the IHF-AI mark. The letter itself is not reproduced here; short quotations are given only where Adams's exact wording carries the point.

Why this letter matters for the play

In 1974 Hank Adams read Abby Mann's treatment for a Columbia Pictures film about Wounded Knee and told its makers, in detail, what an honest dramatization of Indian political conflict would require. Half a century later, the proposed stage play *Hank Adams* attempts the same kind of work, with Adams himself as its subject. The play's authors have adopted this letter as its working conscience: the standards Adams applied to Mann are the standards the play should meet. The final section of this paper sets out how the letter has shaped specific choices in the script.

The occasion

Adams wrote as National Director of the Survival of American Indians Association, from its post office box in Tacoma. The letter is addressed to three men: John Foreman, the producer at Columbia Pictures; Abby Mann, who wrote the treatment; and Marlon Brando, the project's star and patron, reached at his address in Papeete, Tahiti. Adams added handwritten copies to Vine Deloria Jr., Russell Means, and Dennis Banks. The copy list matters. Deloria was the leading Indian intellectual of the period, and Means and Banks were leaders of the 1973 occupation the film would portray. Adams was writing to the film's makers while also making his position known to the Indian leaders whose story was being told. Columbia had committed $3 million to the project. The film does not appear to have been made.

The letter runs about five typed pages. It moves from a concession, through a series of increasingly pointed criticisms, to a closing question Adams says he cannot answer.

His opening position: proceed, but not uncritically

Adams says he has read the treatment several times and is "at once impressed, yet pervasively uncomfortable." He then makes a point of saying that none of his misgivings justify delay; production should go ahead as rapidly as possible. This framing governs the whole letter. He is not trying to stop the film. He wants it made, and made better. His objections are a test of quality and conscience, not a veto.

Fact, fiction, and living people

His first substantive concern is the line between documented events and invented ones. He has no problem with fictionalizing or dramatizing the non-Indian roles. For the Indian figures he draws a firmer line: he would have preferred that the main living Indian personalities take fictional names. Mixing the “invariable facts” of Wounded Knee with invention, whether partially or wholesale, makes several Indian characterizations artificial. The deeper problem is presentation. Passing the whole off as truth, he writes, raises the question of whether that serves either the individuals or Indian people in general.

Adams treats invention as legitimate. Invention presented as history is what he objects to, especially when it is attached to real, living Indian people who will carry the portrayal afterward.

The expedient argument

The next paragraph opens with what Adams calls his overall reaction: get on with the movie and do not get caught up in details or objections. Conditions in South Dakota and elsewhere, he continues, justify any effective slant, the taking of sides, even self-serving stereotypes and better fictions; selling the product through its packaging deserves priority, and the content does not matter that much.

This passage is best read as partly sardonic. Adams states the case for expedience in its bluntest form, the case that the cause justifies whatever sells, and the rest of the letter takes that case apart. He may partly feel its pull, since he does want the film made. But he sets it up in order to test it, and it fails his tests.

The pattern in the literature

Adams places Mann’s treatment within a body of writing about contemporary Indians. In Bob Burnette’s *The Trail to Wounded Knee* and in Richard Erdoes’ books he finds the same extravagant revisions of personal role and actions, and the same self-serving fictions, that he sees in Mann’s outline. Participants’ own accounts, he implies, are not reliable raw material; they arrive already shaped to flatter their authors.

He then turns to non-Indian authors: Stan Steiner’s *The New Indians*, Earl Shorris’ *The Death of the Great Spirit*, and Marion Gridley’s *Contemporary American Indian Leaders* and *American Indian Women*. His diagnosis is that any white person’s favorite Indians can become contemporary heroes or heroines if they are presentable between hardcovers, and that lives are rewritten to make that possible. He describes a predictable arc. The writer meets Indian subjects, proclaims that his own life has been transformed, and then moves on: Shorris forgets Indians, Steiner goes on to new subjects, and Gridley writes only about the good and great ones. In this pattern the book changes the author. The subjects stay as they were.

He gives Burnette backhanded credit for escaping “independently whimsical writers” by making himself the subject and recruiting ever better co-authors. Then he states the larger lesson. Like news coverage, such efforts, when they succeed, give part of the

Indian population temporary relief while the great permanent problems and insufferable conditions remain unchanged.

Money and priorities

Adams sharpens the point through one of the treatment's characters, Charley Barban. How do Barban's lard pancakes go down, he asks, in the knowledge that the chairman of the Indian nation with the largest legal staff and budget in the country has a $200,000 annual budget for personal public relations, while that nation has more families earning under $1,000 a year than there are families on Pine Ridge? Adams does not name the nation, but his reference to the Southwest points to the Navajo Nation. Columbia's $3 million, he observes, could as easily supplement that public relations budget as fund a Wounded Knee story; he had hoped for better purpose, wherever the locale. Indian visibility can be bought for purposes that do nothing for the poorest Indian families, and a film is not exempt from that risk.

Mann's failure of proportion

Adams credits Mann with having captured the ingredients for an extraordinary movie, and says the basic form and outline suggest promise. The failure lies in the sense of proportion that puts the ingredients together. Mann, he writes, seems overwhelmed by the Indians while fully confident of their possibilities.

To explain, he uses Dick Cavett's television interview with Brando, which he calls dismal. Cavett had a grand opportunity for revelation and education, about Brando or about Indians, and lost it by assuming his audience wanted provocative tidbits, focusing on rumor over the realities of human lives. Adams then asks how anyone can fail in an interview with America's greatest actor, and answers: by treating the superficial as the whole reality, by mistaking superficiality for insight, and by refusing to go beyond first impressions.

This leads to the letter's central judgment. Can a Wounded Knee movie fail?

> "By standard tests, it won't. By higher standards, while publicly adjudged a success, it can fail."

Adams separates commercial and critical success from the deeper success he cares about: truthful revelation that serves Indian people.

His central concern: the Indian opposition

Under the heading "One concern or question," Adams asks what positive content or hopeful direction the film communicates. Is its message only that some Indian people have again reacted to oppression, non-collectively and deeply divided, and shouted at America to stop?

He then points to an imbalance in how the treatment distributes complexity. The White rancher is both good and bad. Charley Barban is not transformed but damaged (Adams's term is blunter), and the audience is left asking what he will become. Even

the federal officials, whom Adams calls cop-outs, are given a conscience, philosophic and non-compelling but nonetheless verbalized. The goon squads and the Indian opposition, however, get no motive, no explanation for their confusions, and no possibility of redemption. May no real Indian hero ever emerge from their ranks, he asks, or ever help lead the divided Indian ranks together? The treatment does not say, and it gives them no chance to change.

He asks whether the film is content to show them simply as a gone-bad, bought-out dark side of Indian people, denied close-ups, character development, or a stated viewpoint. Or are they, like the audience the film hopes to move, as much a part of the answer and as much a needed force for change? For Adams this goes beyond dramatic fairness. Wounded Knee was a conflict among Indian people as well as with the government. A film that turns one Indian faction into faceless villains closes off the reconciliation any lasting change would require.

The closing

Adams admits he has elaborated more than he intended. He is not asking for an esoteric movie, and he understands that drama restructures time, events, and sequence. He ends with a prediction. Many Indian people who were at Wounded Knee, or who supported it from the periphery, will ask why the filmmakers did not do it honestly, and he will not be able to explain it, “because I just don’t know.”

The view in brief

Adams accepts dramatization and its techniques, and he wants the film made. He sees real value in the resources, the audience, and the opportunity to educate. His concerns are about honesty and proportion. Invention should not be presented as history, especially about living Indian people. Self-serving accounts, whether by participants or by sympathetic outsiders, should not become the story. A film should not settle for temporary relief or commercial success that leaves conditions unchanged. And every party to the conflict, including the Indians on the other side, should get a viewpoint and a chance at redemption. His final standard is simple: would the people who were there recognize the work as honest?

How the letter informs the stage play

The proposed stage play *Hank Adams* is a working script, prepared for review by friends of Hank Adams and as a graduate course exercise. Its authors have adopted the letter as the conscience for finalizing it, and reduced it to eight working tests:

- **Label the fiction honestly.** Invented scenes and dialogue are identified as invented, and a companion Source Notes document separates documented premises from dramatic proposals.
- **Take care with living people.** Scenes that give invented speech to living people are to be shown to them, or fictionalized, before the play is finalized.

- **No “favorite Indians.”** Hank should not be polished into a hero who is always right; his judgment should be contested where the record shows it was.
- **Keep the author out.** The script does not place its author in the story.
- **Give the opposition a viewpoint.** People on the other side of each conflict should have motives and some possibility of change.
- **Show the people beyond the three men.** The women whose work stood on its own carry authority in the action, and unnamed roles are placeholders until research identifies the actual people.
- **Say what stayed the same.** The narration states what the settlements did not achieve: the Twenty Points were not secured, and the 1868 treaty question was not resolved.
- **Apply the closing test.** Would people who were there ask, “Why didn’t they do it honestly?”

The fifth test, the one Adams pressed hardest in 1974, led directly to two additions in Dialogue Revision 7 (November 2026). In the BIA occupation scene, an elected Tribal chairman, an unnamed composite role, tells Hank the occupation is hurting the cause: his council was never consulted, his people’s land and trust records are in the building, and Congress will remember the broken windows rather than the reasons. He is given the last word in the exchange. In the Wounded Knee scene, a Pine Ridge resident who supports the elected Tribal government argues directly with the community representative. Both are Oglala women who will live with the outcome, and both are given reasons the play does not dismiss. Each role is labeled as an invented composite, and identifying the real people whose positions they represent is listed as a research task.

Source

Hank Adams, National Director, Survival of American Indians Association, letter to John Foreman (Columbia Pictures), Abby Mann, and Marlon Brando, July 17, 1974, with handwritten copies to Vine Deloria Jr., Russell Means, and Dennis Banks. Typescript, five pages, signed. Archival location to be added.

Related: Hank Adams Stage Play, Source Notes and Research Tasks (edfoxphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Hank_Adams_Stage_Play_Source_Notes_Rev6b.pdf).