



Will Sampson and his son Tim dwarf Elaine Abraham of Anchorage Community college. Sampson had been speaking at an event sponsored by the ACC Student Orientation Service and the Alaska Native American Indian Student organization.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

## Portrait of a "big" star

By Bill Hess  
Tundra Times

Ask Will Sampson about his official schooling, and he is likely to tell you he went to the third grade before leaving for good. Not bad for a man who has since taught both high school and college classes. But there is more to the story than that.

Sampson is a rather large fellow, standing about 6'5" without his cowboy boots. As a child, his superior height manifested itself early. So when the Bureau of Indian Af-

fairs sent Sampson to school at a somewhat older age than most students, his first grade teacher was stunned to find this giant of a boy in her class.

At the end of the first day, she promoted him to the second grade. Before his second day in school was out, his new teacher decided it was time for Sampson to move onto the third grade. His third grade education came to an end before the morrow's sunset; three grades in three days!

Yet Sampson's education is

not lacking. He has done more than most ten men his age combined; from flying jet fighter planes, traveling around the world by the age of 14, riding the rodeo circuit, becoming recognized as one of the top artists in the United States, raising a family, and, of course, becoming one of the outstanding actors of his day.

Despite his own experiences, Sampson, a Muskogee (Creek) from Oklahoma, stresses the importance of education to the many young people, particular-

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# Will Sampson: A man of many talents

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ly Native Americans, who look to him as a role model. Not only the education needed to run computers and to survive in an ever more technical world, but also the education of their ancestors; the knowledge that has sustained his and their cultures for millennia.

"Some people think that to have progress, you have to forget the old ways," muses Sampson, who grew up with his Native tongue and tradition. "That's not true. The two actually complement each other very well."

That message is one Sampson seeks to implant wherever he goes. "I visit a lot of hospitals, a lot of prisons and a lot of schools," he notes, where in conjunction with that message, he campaigns against alcohol and drug abuse, and battles the negative image of Native Americans so long popularized by Hollywood.

He continued this campaign during a visit to Alaska which stretched over portions of the last two weeks. Sampson came up at the invitation of Doyon, Ltd., to address their annual shareholders meeting. While here, he also visited patients at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, spoke with members of the Alaska Native and American Indian Student Organization at the Anchorage Community College and made other visits as well.

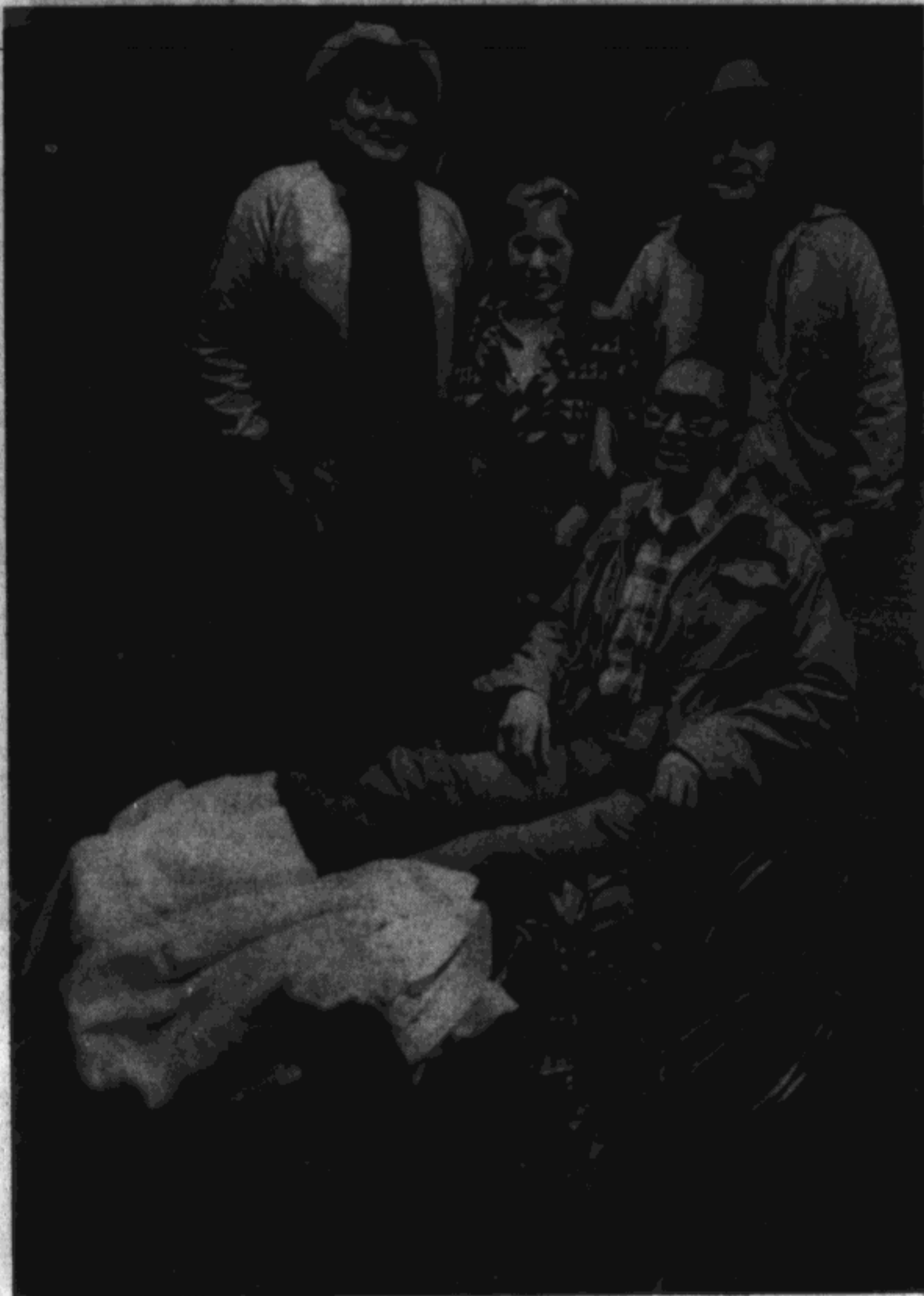
Traveling with Sampson was his wife, Darice, a Seneca from upper New York, and his 26-year-old son and movie stunt double, Tim. Sampson, who will be starring along with Pius Savage in Savage's upcoming film, "Geronimo's Cadillac" has also been in Alaska in recent weeks to help Savage raise the money and overcome the hurdles necessary to make the film a reality.

Savage, an Athabaskan from the interior, will play an Alaska Native who followed up a BIA boarding school education in Oklahoma with a stint in the military. The story documents his struggles afterward as he plows his way through the Outside world of rodeo, roughhouse boxing and hard living. Sampson will star as his older brother, a man strong in the traditions of his people and unapproving of much of the lifestyle Savage gets into.

"It's about a cultural clash," notes Sampson. "It's a good story. The appealing part is that in telling the struggle of culture, it is not only his (Savage) story. It is the story of everyone. Native Americans from all over have been sent off to school, away from their home environment.

"There have been problems in having this education where their own culture has not been taught; where the BIA tried to stamp it out! It has been difficult to adjust to mainstream society."

Although it tells a hard story of struggle, Sampson



Sampson, his son Tim, wife Darice and fan, Clarence Gregg.

stresses that Geronimo's Cadillac is positive. "That's what Native Americans need, a more positive image," he says.

Sampson has been working to build up that image ever since he first broke into the film industry in the movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," in which he co-starred with Jack Nicholson.

Many have hailed that role as the best ever played by an Indian actor. Sampson played a patient in a mental institution, who when all was done, turned out to be a saner human being than did those running the institution. His performance shattered the stereotypes imposed by Hollywood on most Native American parts prior to "Cuckoo's Nest."

Sampson did not seek the role but rather, it sought him. "They were having trouble casting the part," Sampson recalls. He had ridden the rodeo circuit for 22 years of his life. The producers consulted a rodeo announcer who was a friend of Sampson's. "He told them he knew a person who could do it - if he was still alive," Sampson relates.

"It took him a year and a half to find me. I hadn't seen him in 20 years. I had

been in Korea, Viet Nam - whatever. When he did find me, I thought he was joking. Cowboys are always joking around. I was at an art show in Yakima, Washington. After it was over, he asked me if I wanted a job in the movies. I said, 'well, sure!' 'Okay,' he said. 'Be here by ten tomorrow!' Cowboys are always joking!"

But not this time. When his friend showed up, he was accompanied by film personalities Michael and Joey Douglas. Sampson landed the role on the spot.

Since that time Sampson has dedicated himself to straightening out the distortions ingrained upon the public by Hollywood in over 2,000 films depicting Indians as being any variety of combinations of bloodthirsty savages, unsmiling, unfeeling, uncrying, drunken, dirty, stupid, uncivilized, murdering heathens, etc. etc.

Sampson demands the power to read any roles he takes and the right to modify them to portray a truer picture of Native Americans. For example, he recalls the TV series in which he co-starred, "Vegas."

It was a good show, Sampson feels, which portrayed Indians as real human beings. Often,

however, "outlandish" scenes were written for the Indian players which only served to perpetuate the old stereotypes. Sampson had them eliminated or changed.

He also frequently reviews scripts and acts as a consultant on films and television shows in which he does not have a role. He was a consultant for the movie "Windwalker," for example. "There's a saying around Hollywood," he half-jokes. "If you're going to do an Indian film, you better tell Will about it first!"

The horrors of Hollywood's treatment of Indians becomes painfully apparent in "Images of Indians," a five-part documentary series on the subject which has and is showing nationwide on public television. Sampson narrates the series, which clearly shows the callous disregard shown for Indian life by the film industry.

In what may well rank as one of the most horrifying scenes ever produced by Hollywood - horrifying because of the light, humorous way it treats the deaths of large numbers of human beings who happen to be Indians, is a scene from a Bob Hope film. In it, Hope guns down Indian

after Indian, pausing only to crack jokes to his leading lady. Each Indian falls dead into a very neat pile of corpses.

Finally, the last Indian is staggering wounded around the pile of his brothers. Even in war, it would now be considered the only moral thing to do to try and save the life of this wounded man, as he was now a threat to no one. Instead, Hope walks up to him, and without the slightest show of human feeling dispatches him by hand.

"Let's keep it neat!" he cracks, as a new body joins the mound of dead flesh. Of course, how many in the intended audience ever suspected that Indian men had wives and children who would cry when they did not return from such an encounter?

One reason Indians have been so poorly portrayed is that Indian actors have seldom played Indian parts. If they had, many, like Sampson, would undoubtedly have tried to modify their parts to reflect a truer picture of their people. "Images of Indians" quotes one Hollywood personality when he explains that white men can play Indian parts better than can Indians. Further, he expounds, when white actors have good, sharp features, they actually look more like Indians "than do the Indians themselves!"

The atmosphere is improving, says Sampson, although slowly. Indian parts are there for Indians, but he stresses that Native Americans interested in acting have got to commit themselves. They have got to be ready to take and accept criticism and at the same time be ready to stand up for themselves when necessary. "Indians hate to be laughed at," notes Sampson. But in Hollywood, the laughter will come.

The actors just have to withstand it.

Tim, the eldest of Sampson's seven children (he is expecting another very shortly) is following his father in breaking through the barriers of Hollywood. Prior to Tim's entering the profession six years ago, there were no Indian stuntmen to double for Indian actors. "It was time to get rid of the wigs and make-up and have the real thing," the younger Sampson muses.

He has also played some small parts, and looks to more roles in the future.

The parts are there for Native American actors, Sampson reiterates, if they are willing to work for them. Savage, who has already starred in the award winning film, "Spirit of the Wind," about Athabaskan dog musher George Attla, is a good example.

Yet, Sampson notes, good films about Indians still have tremendous obstacles facing them. He points out films

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PHOTO BY BILL HESS



# A commitment to culture is very important

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made by Robert Redford and Academy Award-winner Keith Merrill which are having difficulty even finding their way into the market place. There are many people who seek to have as little true knowledge about Indians disseminated to

the public as possible, Sampson believes.

They do not want America — or Native Americans, to be educated about the truth of American history or contemporary Indian life. Sampson cites the great oil, mineral, and timber reserves now held

in Indian lands — more than half the nation's total in some cases — as the reason.

"They want to keep you ignorant until they can exploit this," Sampson explains.

Not if he can help it. Sampson will be playing a major role in an upcoming, ten

hour mini-series based on Dee Brown's book "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," which he calls the first true history of the United States from an Indian viewpoint.

He plans to be in other documentaries, telling the stories not only of great Indian chiefs, but statesmen, orators, and other people who have made major contributions not only to this country, but to the world.

People will know the truth, Sampson says, because they now want to — they are no longer content to accept the images foisted upon them by Hollywood.

Sampson's talents go far beyond films. A collection of his art is held by the Smithsonian as part of a project undertaken to obtain works of the thirteen best artists in the country. Although he modestly answers, "oh yeah, a little bit," when an Alaskan admirer asks him if he has ever flown around in a small plane. Sampson owns his own Cessna 182. In the Navy, he piloted jet fighters, helicopters, transport planes and more.

Yet most of all, Sampson is committed to his culture. "Mother Earth," he replies when a student asks him if his people had a name for this

country. He recalls a visit to Oregon where two women asked him how he liked their country. "I like my country very much," he replied.

"From the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, from the North Pole to the South Pole," he reiterates further, "It's all my country! It's all Indian country! And I love every bit of it!"

By his own account, Sampson grew up speaking his Native tongue and living his traditional life-style. Although that lifestyle has been battered by the government, the BIA, Hollywood and untold business and political interests, it is still strong in Sampson and, he notes happily, is undergoing a resurgence all across America, including Alaska.

As Sampson prepares to leave Alaska, for a short while at least, an Inupiat man in a wheelchair recovering from a terrible case of frost-bitten feet stops him and asks that Sampson and his wife and son pose in a photograph with him.

Afterward, Sampson shakes his hand. "I will pray for you," he says emotionally, "the Spirit of our people will be with you!" As Sampson turns away, there is a gleam of moisture in the corner of his eye.

A tear, perhaps?

