

# The Searchers

*By Scott Allen Nollen*

In 1954, producer Merian Cooper, seeking material for a surefire John Ford and John Wayne Western, optioned Alan LeMay's *The Searchers*, a novel about revenge-crazed Amos Edwards' 10-year quest to track down the Comanche who murdered his brother and captured his niece. Working on the adaptation for Warner Bros., Ford and Frank Nugent changed Edwards' Christian name to Ethan and created two additional characters as a serio-comic counter to the downbeat and violent material suffusing the novel.

The Reverend Captain Samuel Johnson Clayton, who, when not preaching, lawfully serves as a Texas Ranger, was written especially for Ward Bond; while another Ford favorite, Hank Worden, was given Ol' Mose Harper, a bald, mentally challenged old buzzard who accomplishes daring deeds while aiding Ethan and conducting a side search of his own, for a rocking chair in which he plans to "retire."

*The Searchers* takes place over several years, so it was essential for Ford to depict Ethan carrying on his quest ("as sure as the turnin' of the Earth") without regard to variations in terrain or the changing seasons. He shot winter scenes on location at Gunnison, Colorado, and then sent a second unit to Edmonton, Alberta, where buffalo sequences were filmed at Elk Island National Park.

Principal photography was scheduled to begin in Monument Valley on June 16, 1955. Ford, using Charles Russell's Western paintings as inspiration, worked in

Technicolor and VistaVision with cinematographer Winton C. Hoch. In creating one of his finest films, Ford also had a totally absorbed John Wayne, literally punishing himself for being such a complex, contradictory character called Ethan Edwards.

Ford, shooting in long takes, often uses a single, wide shot, without resorting to editing, simultaneously to impart overlapping action, dialogue and layers of meaning. Within the first 12 minutes, using minimal verbiage and spare editing, he establishes the web of complicated relationships between Ethan, the family of his brother, Aaron (Walter Coy), the Reverend Captain Clayton and Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter). These associations are enhanced by Max Steiner's musical score, using the melody of the Civil War ballad "Lorena" as a leitmotif.

As dusk falls on the Edwards home, the reactions of animals (a flock of birds and the family dog) are an omen of impending doom: the elemental force of nature known as "Scar," Cicatriz (Henry Brandon), and his tribe of Comanche. Here, Ford and Hoch use color brilliantly: outside the house, the Monument Valley sky is blue; seen from inside, from the family's point of view, it is *red*. A track into a close-up on Aaron's daughter Lucy (Pippa Scott), who emits a spine-chilling scream, signals the imminent horror: wife Martha (Dorothy Jordan) is defiled and murdered; and younger daughter Debbie (Lana Wood) is captured.

Ethan outwardly hates the Comanche, but speaks the language and has a thorough knowledge of their tribal customs. Heading into snow country, he becomes pathological, attempting to kill as many buffalo as possible, so the meat will not “fill Comanche bellies.” Riding away from a cavalry troop, he and Marty reach the burning remains of a Nawyehkah Comanche camp, the result of an army massacre. (Here, Ford presents a radical departure from the celebratory depictions in his earlier cavalry films, *Fort Apache* [1948], *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* [1949] and *Rio Grande* [1950].)

Here, Ford includes one of the most memorable and powerful images in his work, a brief tracking shot (a parallel to the earlier track on Lucy) into a tight close-up of Ethan’s face, with Wayne’s eyes (bathed in shadow) registering one of the coldest expressions of hatred in cinema history. Prior to the close-up, observing the behavior of three crazed girls freed from captivity, a cavalry officer observes, “It’s hard to believe that they’re white.”

“They *ain’t* white—any more,” Ethan replies. “They’re *Comanch*.”

At Scar’s camp, Ethan and Marty are shown a collection of scalps taken in vengeance for the killing of the Comanche’s two sons. The young woman who holds the lance is Debbie. Later, as she explains her decision to remain with the tribe, Marty is ordered to stand aside by Ethan, who draws his pistol. Debbie’s “brother” shields her from the executioner, who is struck by a Comanche arrow.

Seriously injured, Ethan scrawls a makeshift will, bequeathing all his property to Marty. Outraged that Ethan claims having “no blood kin,” Marty throws the paper back at

him, demanding to know, “What kind of a man *are* you, anyway?”

Refusing to accept his bigoted explanation, Marty moans, “I hope you *die!*”

“*That’ll be the day,*” Ethan replies.

Clayton appoints Ethan and Marty as civilian scouts for the Texas Rangers. A dawn attack begins with Ethan scouting the basin (Wayne is standing on the Monument Valley formation known as “John Ford’s Point”) and his revelation to Marty that one of the scalps hanging from Scar’s lance had been taken from his own mother.

Marty reaches Debbie, but a Comanche stealthily appears behind him. Alerted by the sound of a rifle cocking and Debbie’s scream, he pulls his pistol, firing three times. Riding to the chief’s tepee, only to discover that Scar is dead, Ethan satiates his bloodlust by scalping the corpse. Knocking Marty into the dust, he rides after his niece, still appearing intent on killing her. But his cry of “Debbie!” suggests a change in attitude. After raising her up to the sky, he cradles her. “Let’s go home, Debbie,” he suggests.

Mr. and Mrs. Lars Jorgensen (John Qualen, Olive Carey) await the delivery of Debbie. His mission accomplished, Ethan looks in the house, but turns and walks back into the desert as the door is closed behind him (and in front of the viewer). Having scalped a dead man, proving he is equal to those he despises, Ethan knows he cannot join the family, and must remain among the “savages.”

In LeMay’s novel, Amos Edwards’ fanatical, psychotic search ends in disaster. When he discovers the young woman he believes is Debbie, she proves to be an armed squaw who guns him down. Ford

and Nugent's Ethan Edwards survives to wander the wasteland, and their Debbie, unlike LeMay's character, chooses to leave Scar. The literary Martin Pawley (who has no Native American ancestry) kidnaps the girl just before the cavalry raids the Comanche camp, and she undergoes a mental breakdown while being assimilated back into white culture.

LeMay's Amos is a two-dimensional creature of hatred that *must* be obliterated from society. Ethan Edwards is far more complex, carefully developed by Nugent while heeding Ford's command to create a thorough "biography" for each character. Wayne's performance is a measured crescendo of (often nonverbal) acting. Contrary to the idea that Ethan's forgiveness of Debbie is sudden and unconvincing, this behavior results from the evolving relationship between Ethan and Martin, who exerts a positive influence on the fearsome hatred within his "uncle."

*The Searchers*, made under the Production Code, could not have ended much differently. Arguably, if Ethan was killed (as Amos in the novel), few members of a 1950s Western audience would have accepted such a thing happening to *John Wayne*. Conversely, if Ethan had killed Debbie, censorship would have demanded his death. *Hanging Wayne* could have proved even more unacceptable to 1956 audiences.

So deft is Ford's storytelling, and so powerful the John Wayne mythos, that some viewers of *The Searchers* fail to grasp the dark psyche of Ethan Edwards. One of the most significant screen characters of the era, he is a cinematic embodiment of the American pioneer who experienced the spectrum of consequences wrought by continental slaughter. (Laurie Jorgensen,

even though she loves the "eighth-Cherokee" Martin Pawley, shares Ethan's bigotry, going so far as to claim that the deceased Martha would want her brother-in-law to kill her own daughter.)

During his later years, Wayne was asked about his affinity for the character, whom he insisted was not a "villain," admitting that he "loved him" and "loved playing him." In fact, he appreciated the character enough to name his youngest son, born in 1962, John Ethan Wayne. Delivering a multifaceted performance in the film, Wayne subsequently developed an indelible identification with the role.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Historian Scott Allen Nollen has written more than 30 books on the history of film, literature and music, including Three Bad Men: John Ford, John Wayne, Ward Bond (2013). For a decade, he served as a historian and archivist with the National Archives and Records Administration. His latest book, with Yuyun Yuningsih Nollen, is Karloff and the East: Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern and Oceanian Characters and Subjects in His Screen Career (2020). Currently, he is writing a new book on film representations of President Abraham Lincoln by John Ford and his elder brother and mentor, Francis Ford.*