



If you have spent any time in the last few years watching the AMC cable channel, you may have seen the movie, *Broken Trail*. Filmed in the beautiful Canadian Rockies, it starred Academy Award winner, Robert Duvall and Academy Award nominee Thomas Haden Church. With a power cast and magnificent scenery, it is no surprise that the movie was nominated for a bunch of Emmys, won four, and carried off a few more national and international motion picture awards. The book and screenplay were written by Virginia resident Alan Geoffrion.

Geoffrion (pronounced Jeff-re-on) has been involved with horses for 40 years. He is also a great storyteller, a part-time philosopher/

historian, and an excellent chef. One recent summer day, I was fortunate to be able to sit with Geoffrion out on the back porch at his In the Shade Farm, and discover what outsiders never realize about the inside of making a movie.

C.J.: How did you get involved in writing?

Geoffrion: My first real exposure to writing came from a collection of letters my grandfather sent me as a child. They were very conversational, as if he were sitting there talking to me. There was usually a lesson to be learned in each letter, but there was never a lecture. He talked about his ancestors and visiting his grandparents in Canada. He sent me a letter every month for years. I also wrote and received a lot of letters while in Vietnam. My father was a great reader and instilled a love of reading in all his boys. All these factors had something to do with my interest in writing.

C.J.: How did you come up with the idea of *Broken Trail*?

Geoffrion: *Broken Trail* is made up of a number of different stories. I met Waldo Haythorn at the Haythorn Ranch in Nebraska while delivering horses. His father, Walter, actually went to Oregon in the 1800s and brought back a herd of horses. Around this time I learned of the Moncrieffs and had an interest in the Boer War because I had been to

Africa a couple of times. Having read about Donaldina Cameron, who ran a rescue mission in San Francisco established to protect Chinese women who came or were sold to this country, I knew of their plight. Because of the poverty in China at that time, many Chinese girls were sold by their families into servitude in America. Unfortunately, many of them were sold into prostitution. If you study the settling of the West in the late 1800s, you can see the sacrifices all women made, and a portion of their history became another focal point of the book.

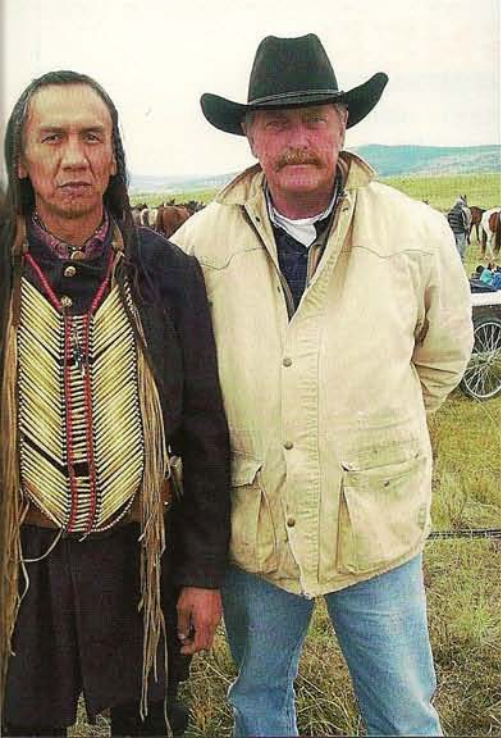
C.J.: In *Broken Trail*, women are a very large part of the book and movie. Why is that?

Geoffrion: Well, they are a pretty big part in all our lives. I found it fascinating how women coped during the migration and settling of the West. I found these women incredibly strong and thought their stories fascinating. Men had it rough but it was especially hard on women. There was no social safety net for people traveling west. If a woman's husband was killed, injured, or ran off, the woman had to survive and some had to do whatever it took. In *Broken Trail* Nola Jones represents one of these women.

C.J.: You and Robert Duvall are neighbors and friends. How did he influence you to get this movie made?

Geoffrion: Bobby was very generous with his time and advice. He is all about truth. Look at all the landmark movies he has been involved with, starting with his first movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as Boo Radley. Hollywood couldn't have written a better introduction for a new and talented actor. And he never said a line—which to me, made it that much more powerful. Then there are the other films, *The Godfather*, *Network*, *MASH*, *Apocalypse Now*, *THX 1138*, *Lonesome Dove*, *Tender Mercies*

Actor Paul Tall Pines and Geoffrion on location



A Winding Trail—From the Virginia Piedmont to Hollywood

by Clarke C. Jones

and of course his own film, *The Apostle*. Not only were these highly successful movies by Hollywood standards, but they were pivotal in influencing the way future movies would be made. One of my favorite characters of his is Jackson Fentry in Horton Foote's adaptation of "Tomorrow," a short story by William Faulkner. The other is Walter, a Cuban barber living in Miami in the film *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway*. I believe Duvall has been in more of the American Film Institute's Top 100 Movies than any other actor. When somebody with all that experience talks, a smart person listens. In the entire process of making *Broken Trail*, we never had a cross word between us. Pretty amazing.

C.J.: Duvall seems so natural in a Western, but his co-star was Thomas Haden Church, who played a goofball mechanic in the TV series *Wings* and an offbeat character in the movie *Sideways*. I thought that was a strange choice for Duvall's nephew in a Western movie.

Geoffrion: I did too—in the beginning—but let me tell you something. Thomas Haden Church got it!



He really understood the time period and what the story was about. For example, in the movie, notice his haircut. It *looked* like the kind you would have had in the West in the 1890s. That haircut was *his* idea. He also picked his hat, which was not the kind the producers had in mind, but it was in keeping with what would have been worn at the time. I think he did a fantastic job! Duvall has a singular ability to make other actors that share a scene with him look good. It is a rare quality. Another person who really understood the story was Christina Wayne, the VP at AMC. If she hadn't fought for us, the movie would never have been made.

C.J.: *Broken Trail* was filmed in Canada, any particular reason for that?

Geoffrion: Economics dictated part of that decision. Working with the Canadians on the film was terrific. They were very enthusiastic and Western Canada has magnificent scenery. The wranglers who staged and managed the horse herd were super. They were made up of the Bews family, headed by their father, Tom. The head of production, Ken Rempel, made towns out of nothing. When I first saw the town of Caribou, I was truly amazed at how realistic it had been done. Ken was able to take the cast and crew back to the late 1800s.

C.J.: Authenticity in this movie was something of obvious value to you. Were there things you had to fight for to keep the movie authentic?

Geoffrion: The names of the towns in the book/movie were, or had been, real towns at that time period. However, the producers wanted to change the names to Buzzard Gulch, Indian Flats, or something like that. They also wanted the Chinese girls, on the second day of the journey, to start speaking broken English, which was how unrealistic it was. What Bobby [Robert Duvall] and I kept saying was that the audience needed to be just as ignorant of what the Chinese girls were saying as did the rest of the characters

in the movie. It was also important that the audience should get the sense of frustration the two cultures had, not knowing how to speak the other's language. Where we felt subtitles were necessary, we put subtitles. Another thing some of the producers wanted was to change the story to depict two cowboys delivering 12 Percherons (draft horses that originated in France) across the plains instead of a herd of horses. This would have made it a dorky, idiotic film, and it is amazing someone would have suggested this for a Western! Lastly, the original title was *Daughters of Joy*. The "suits" thought that would offend the audience, so they came up with *Broken Trail*. We said that the title, *Daughters of Joy*, had a double meaning and that the girls were in a way Print Ritter's daughters. We pointed out that *Broken Trail* really didn't mean anything, but they said that was exactly what they wanted, something that would offend no one. That was non-negotiable.

C.J.: You don't see many Westerns being made anymore. Why is that?

Geoffrion: People who make Westerns are kind of sticking their necks out there anyway, because the people in LA and New York really don't have an affection for Westerns. The hero in a LA/New York Western must always have some underlying character flaw and the bad guy must have some good/redeemable traits. The kinds of Westerns producers on both coasts want are like the cable Western *Deadwood*, where every other word is a profanity. For some reason, they think everyone in the West spoke that way *and they did not*. I'm not the least bit prudish but believe me, in all the research and reading of letters, diaries, and other correspondence of the people from those times, you will never find language at that level as portrayed in *Deadwood*.

C.J.: *Broken Trail* was nominated for 16 Emmys and awarded four, plus it was nominated for a number of other movie and book awards. As successful as it was, why

doesn't Hollywood build on that success?

Geoffrion: The producers were hoping to bring in three million viewers the first night of the two-night mini-series. The movie brought in *nine million* the first night and an even higher number the second night. However, Madison Avenue wanted this movie to translate to the 17- to 40-year-old market and the majority of the nine to almost 10 million viewers were 50-plus. They would rather make ten vampire movies in a row than something original. There are plenty of movies like *Spiderman* and *Harry Potter* that are good movies, but Hollywood rarely risks \$5 million on a movie like *Broken Trail* although it *will* risk \$150 million on a movie like *The Da Vinci Code*. And it just sucks all the oxygen out of the room for other people trying to get a movie produced.

C.J.: How much control did you have in making the movie you wrote?

Geoffrion: Very little, if any. I just wrote the thing. I don't know if it works for every screenwriter, but for me, after being told how *novel and refreshing and original* my screenplay was and how much the producers wanted to make it, one of the first things I heard after I signed the contract was, "Thanks Alan, now here are the *changes* we want you to make." I spent 61 days in a motel in California rewriting my refreshing and original screenplay!

As the interview concluded, Geoffrion showed me around the farm and introduced me to his pride and joy, his Spanish stallion, Jenago. "Hollywood's an interesting place," he remarked. "Kind of like an exotic wildlife preserve. So it's good to have a place to go back to, like Virginia. To keep yourself grounded. To get on the tractor and spread manure. There's an esthetic to that too."

Clarke Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time with his black Lab, Luke, hunting up good stories.