



News

- Local
- Regional
- National
- International
- Sports
- Political
- Nouvelles
- Editorial
- Lottery
- Health

Wawa and Area

- Local Sports
- Public Notices
- School News
- Nouvelles Scolaires
- Weather News

Columns

- It's Our History, Our Country
- Basic Black
- Nuts N Bolts
- Pathways
- Paws N Claws
- Other Columns

Announcements

- Births
- Obituary/Memorials
- Thank You's

Entertainment

- Movies
- Highlights

[Home](#) > [Columns](#) > [It's Our History, Our Country](#) > Jay Silverheels

Jay Silverheels

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 by *Ronald Wolf*

When I was young (or younger) I watched The Lone Ranger in reruns on TV. I knew Jay Silverheels had the role of Tonto but that was all I knew of the man. Years later I found out that he was born a few miles away from my hometown of Kitchener, Ont. I thought that was cool and never thought I would be writing about the legend.

[Jay Silverheels](#) (1912 –1980) was and is a true Canadian. He was a Mohawk Aboriginal and an actor. He is well known for his role as Tonto, the faithful American Aboriginal companion of the Lone Ranger in a long-running American [television series](#).

Silverheels was born Harold J. Smith on the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation, near Brantford, Ont. He was the son of a Canadian Mohawk Chief and military officer, A. G. E. Smith.

Silverheels excelled in athletics and lacrosse as a boy before leaving home to travel around North America, competing in boxing and wrestling tournaments.

In the 1930s he played indoor lacrosse under the name of Harry Smith with the Rochester, N.Y. "Iroquois" of the North American Amateur Lacrosse Association. He lived for a time in Buffalo, N.Y. In 1938 Silverheels placed second in the middleweight section of the Golden Gloves tournament.

Silverheels began working in motion pictures as an extra and stunt man in 1937. During the early years of his screen career, he was billed as Harold Smith or Harry Smith, and appeared in low-budget features, westerns, and serials.

From the late 1940s he played in more prestigious pictures, including Captain from Castile starring Tyrone Power, Key Largo with [Humphrey Bogart](#), (1948), Broken Arrow (1950) with [James Stewart](#), War Arrow (1953) with Maureen O'Hara, Jeff Chandler and Noah Beery, Jr., Drums Across the River (1954), Walk the Proud Land (1956) with Audie Murphy and Anne Bancroft, Alias Jesse James (1959) with [Bob Hope](#).

He made a brief appearance in True Grit in 1969. He played a substantial role as John Crow in Santee (1973) starring [Glenn Ford](#).

Silverheels achieved his greatest fame as the Lone Ranger's friend Tonto. In addition to starring in the Lone Ranger television series from 1949 to 1957, Silverheels appeared in the films The [Lone Ranger](#) (1956) and The Lone Ranger and the [Lost City of Gold](#) (1958).

Following the end of the Lone Ranger, Silverheels found himself typecasted as Tonto and had trouble finding further acting work. Silverheels was forced to work as a salesman to supplement his acting income. He also began to concentrate on writing poetry influenced by his youth on the Six Nations Reserve and appeared on television reciting his poetry.

In 1966, he guest-starred as John Tallgrass in the short-lived ABC comedy/western series The Rounders, with Ron Hayes, Patrick Wayne, and Chill Wills.

Silverheels raised, bred and raced horses in his spare time. Once, when asked about possibly running Tonto's famous Pinto horse Scout in a race, Jay laughed off the idea: "Heck, I can outrun Scout!"

Married in 1945, Silverheels was the father of two boys and a girl. He died from complications of a stroke in 1980, at age 67, in Calabasas, Calif., and was cremated at Chapel of the Pines Crematory. His ashes were returned home to Six Nations Reserve.

In 1993, Silverheels was inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Okla.

He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 6538 Hollywood Blvd.

Not only did Silverheels leave this world in a lot better state than when he arrived in it, he helped out a lot of Aboriginal actors make a name for themselves in an American workshop where Aboriginals could develop their skills. He was and is still a positive role model to all people all over this world.

