



## King of the Hill

By Christina Harlin, your  
Fearless Young Orphan

*Jeremiah Johnson* (1972)

Directed by Sydney Pollack

Set against the cold beauty of the Rockies, Utah, Arizona, a vast and merciless wilderness in the southwestern United States, *Jeremiah Johnson* tells the story of a man in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century who

wants to spend his life camping. Having had enough of war and towns (he speaks of them with about the same contempt) Jeremiah rides a boat down a long wide river until he reaches the end of what one could call “civilization.” With the guidance of a Wilford-Brimley styled narrator, he buys himself a gun, a mule and a horse, heads up the mountainside, and makes an attempt to live the life of a hermit, hunting and skinning. We are to be told a tale of a legendary character, a man who accidentally carved out infamy for himself.

As the opening narration tells us, Jeremiah wants to be a “mountain man.” Judging by his early difficulties, I feel as if this young man was a soldier, disillusioned by the violence of the war against Mexico, who saw the term “mountain man” in an article and thought, “Yeah, that’s me all over!” and went about it without making sure he understood exactly what it meant. We spend a half hour or so with a man who is ill-equipped for survival in this harsh place. He struggles with even the



***“So, did you move out here to kill yourself intentionally, or was it just a cry for help?”***

most basic of necessary skills: making a fire and a shelter. Jeremiah can't shoot well. He doesn't know how to catch fish. He even lets his poor horse freeze to death.

Lucky for our dunderheaded Jeremiah, he bumps into an experienced mountain man (it's Grandpa Walton!) who shows him the ins-and-outs of surviving. (We'll notice that, for a hermit, Jeremiah Johnson runs into an awful lot of other people or, I suppose I should say, the same five or six people, as if in the vastness of the southwest, the same bunch is this likely to encounter each other over and again.) This “hermit” Jeremiah even manages to accidentally get married to a native princess and, in a completely separate set of events, adopt himself a young son. So much for the hermit life.

Slowly, oh so slowly, we see Jeremiah put together what amounts to a “life” for himself and his family. But of course, when a man spends his “life” surrounded by tribes, elements, and animals that would as soon kill him as look at him, there

really is no such thing as safety or security. There is an effort to romanticize this eschewing of society (just look at the year the film was made – 1972, the height of the era when we wished for peace and love), as if Jeremiah’s “getting back to nature” is vindicated despite the sheer volume of bloodshed it demands. Hey, I thought this guy wanted to live *peacefully* among the trees, and hardly five minutes goes by that he hasn’t killed someone or something.

Jeremiah Johnson is almost two hours long in real time but feels far longer than that. On my DVD copy, at 1:17 on the clock – a good two-thirds through the movie - there is an “Intermission” and only after that does something like an actual plot begin. Everything up until that time has been a sort of set-up, putting all the pieces in place so that finally we can get around to the point from which stems Jeremiah’s “legend”.

Jeremiah has always been friendly and peaceful with the many local native tribes until an ill-fated rescue mission goes awry. Jeremiah desecrates a native burial ground. Well, he rides his horse through it, if you can call that “desecration,” (the natives do) and suddenly everything he’s fought so hard to achieve comes to bloody ruin.



*Jeremiah finds himself in what they called Bad Omen Canyon.*

Let's try to piece together the theme of this film. Despite his desire for solitude and peace, company and violence follow Jeremiah everywhere he goes. Does this imply that we are unable to escape such things because of what we are? Can a man go anywhere without tainting the place? Eventually Jeremiah is forced to kill so many natives that he has a reputation as a "big magic" spirit, an immortal that roams the mountain. Thus, the legend. Makes me wonder how many legends were truly miserable people, forced into ugly circumstances.

There is certainly admirable craftsmanship in the look of the *Jeremiah Johnson* and the final third of the movie has a haunting horror to it, but oh my lord is it dull, mostly just a terribly dull dull film. I hate camping, too, I hate the idea of living in a hovel on a mountainside, I hate the very notion of being far away from people. Maybe back then it wasn't so different, because no matter where one lived, there was still no Internet or penicillin, so life all just sucked anyway. Just because I don't agree with Jeremiah's choices isn't a legitimate reason to bitch about the movie, I suppose; it does, however, mean that I spent most of the film thinking that if he wants to be a lone mountain man, he should stop pulling other people into his precarious life. Plus, Jesus, man – do a little research before you decide to hightail it into the wilderness.

There were a couple of incongruities, too. The first is Pollack's rare but utterly weird descent into "comedy" – twice in the movie, for only brief moments, the film descends into cartoonish silliness (at one point, a grizzly bear is trapped in a log cabin with Jeremiah – the camera actually shakes; at another point, Jeremiah rolls his eyes and faints and I'm surprised we don't see little yellow canaries spinning round his head). The strangeness of these moments is jarring.

The other incongruity is more a matter of perspective. Jeremiah Johnson is played by Robert Redford, who in 1972 (and before, and ever after) was the most stupidly handsome man alive, and no amount of fuzzy hats or scruffy beards is going to hide that. He's far too good-looking for the part and the film does very little to hide that face, possibly knowing that a significant chunk of their audience would see the film for the sake of it. Redford spends a lot of time in the movie with his golden hair blowing in the wind, looking pretty much like an advertisement for some rugged outdoorsy cologne. It's hard to imagine a man this good-looking having any trouble in society. Society would fall all over itself to please him.

*Jeremiah Johnson* has a reputation for being a “classic” western. It feels familiar if you have seen its contemporaries, such as *The Outlaw Josie Wales* or *Little Big Man*; it is one among that rash of films stressing the suffering of the western expansion rather than the glory of it. The ideas are there, and the wilderness is breathtaking. Viewers simply may give up before Pollack gets to the point. I think the movie should be half an hour shorter (take the easy road and



***Jeremiah Johnson Cologne: Smells like a mountain man should smell.***

just whack the first 30 minutes) and that its tone lacks consistency (solved by whacking that first half hour, I believe). And maybe it wouldn't hurt to give us some better notion of why the “mountain man” life is preferable to this handsome Jeremiah Johnson, seeing as he's happiest when he's with other people, and, in addition, people easily grow to love him. When wolves aren't actually trying to tear him limb from limb, he truly seems to miss his mom's cooking and a real bed.