Film News: Amanda Kinsey of ‘Jews of the Wild West’ at Chicago Jewish Film Fest, March 10-27, 2022

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CHICAGO – In the continued reopening the Chicago JCC Jewish Film Festival has put together a hybrid event … in person and online from March 10th-27th, 2022. One of their centerpiece films available to stream is “Jews of the Wild West.” Filmmaker Amanda Kinsey has put together an overview of the Jewish influence in the 19th Century taming of the America West, through immigration and commerce.

“Jews of the Wild West” contains much history and many surprising stories about the Jewish immigrants who settled westward during the 19th Century. Stories involving an early silent film cowboy star (Broncho Billy Anderson, who worked out of Chicago in his early years), a brand name born (Levi Strauss) and a leader emerging (Golda Meir), among others, highlight this colorful and lively story of America’s melting pot.



’Jews of the Wild West,’ Directed by Amanda Kinsey
Photo credit: Electric Yolk Media

The film’s writer/director Amanda Kinsey. an independent filmmaker, five-time Emmy Award winning producer and fourth-generation photojournalist. Prior to founding her own production company, Electric Yolk Media, she spent over a decade writing and producing for NBC News. During that time, she was also awarded with several Edward R. Murrow Awards, National Headliner Awards and a Gracie Allen Award. She also won an Emmy for her Today Show story “The Fighting Grossmans,” about a Jewish American family with eight soldier sons in WWII.

In an interview with Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, writer/director Amanda Kinsey talks about the background of her

documentary “Jews of the Wild West” …

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the genesis of the project … was it a piece of information you uncovered or just part of an idea based on something else?

Amanda Kinsey: I moved to Denver from Brooklyn four years ago, and I started looking for untold stories of the Wild West. My background was I was a producer at ‘The Today Show’ for 13 years, and one of the primary things I did was called ‘American Story,’ which was essentially ordinary people doing extraordinary things in a mini documentary series. After leaving Today, I worked for PBS and Vice News, and that was my specialty and what I like to do.

I wasn’t necessarily looking for Jewish stories, but there was an archive here at the University of Denver called the Beck Archive of Rocky Mountain Jewish History. I thought that might have something interesting in it, and it did. I was blown away by the volume of information and the incredible stuff that was in the archive. It was Colorado specific, and a lot of it was Wild West. There were entrepreneurs, cowboys and ranchers and many things that were just amazing and wonderful, and I felt that nobody had really heard of these stories.

HollywoodChicago.com: So from there you expanded the Western element of these experiences?

Kinsey: Yes, I realized there were equally compelling stories out of Texas, New Mexico and California, and there had never been a documentary that had connected the dots between these states as part of a larger Jewish-American migration experience. And I thought that would be a fantastic film, and these are important stories to hear today. These are positive immigration stories, which also don’t hear much about, and there is something really beautiful about the contributions these Jewish immigrants made … and a really lasting and positive impact it had on the American West.

To me, there are two narratives in the film. There is the narrative on the Jewish migration experience and the narrative of the Wild West itself. And it is where the two meet that I think is really the magic of the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: The network of Jewish peoples willing to help each other during the mass immigration to America was fairly comprehensive … how did that network best help their incoming fellow travelers in establishing homesteads across America, including the Wild West?

Kinsey: Jewish migration has two waves … Prussia immigrants from Germany around the 1840s, which was different from the enormous wave of Eastern European Jews towards the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. With the influx of the very large Eastern European group, they were fleeing poverty and terrible violence, so when these people arrived they were not necessarily in great shape.

There were concerns of taking in all these people within New York City, so there was an effort made to push people West. That’s what Jewish organizations and community building played into. Part of that was due to the efforts of Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff from New York – who we profiled in the film – who took the lead on providing connections to the West.

HollywoodChicago.com: What were the specifics on those relocations?

Kinsey: Schiff was part of the ‘Industrial Removal Office’ and later, modeled after that office, was the Galveston Movement. What they would do is compile lists of Jewish people already settled in the West. Then if Pueblo, Colorado, needed a cobbler, for example, if you got off the boat from Europe in New York City or New Orleans or Galveston, and you were a cobbler, off you went on at a train to Pueblo.

The hope was once you got to these places, that there would be Jewish families already in place that you could connect into, and they would help you in this transition as an immigrant. Sometimes that would work well, and these new immigrants would join the community, and sometimes it didn’t work for various reasons. What that reflected is it wasn’t easy to settle in the West, of course, and in the smaller towns there wasn’t as many Jewish communities to join.



Still from ’Jews of the Wild West’
Photo credit: Electric Yolk Media

HollywoodChicago.com: I noted that several of your interviewees mentioned the genocide of the indigenous people in the “Manifest Destiny” of the Western United States. How do you think we as a nation needs to reconcile that about ourselves, even as some states are passing laws to prevent white people from feeling guilty?

Kinsey: These are interesting times for sure.

Because I am neither Jewish nor Native American, and the majority of the interviewees and subjects are Jewish because that is the topic of the film, I still felt a responsibility to help amplify voices from both of those communities. They are very different communities, but unfortunately there is a lot of overlap in the way the outside world has treated both of them … there are historical parallels when it comes to genocide and oppression, and also when it comes to being misrepresented in the media.

The film had two Jewish advisors and one Native American advisor, because of this complicated history. We also have a complicated relationship with who belongs and who doesn’t belong in the U.S. What I tried to delve into is that we’re a diverse place and always have been a diverse place, and there isn’t a monolithic Native American or Jewish experience. But’s it’s important for me to acknowledge our history, for the people who lived here originally and the people who came here, and the diversity that came along with it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you owe to the courage of our ancestors and their history in general that allows us to live in our modern times in relative wealth and comfort, and why do we need the stories like the ‘Jews of the Wild West?’

Kinsey: As I said previously, as we start to understand the diversity that has always been in this country and the contributions that these various peoples have made, I think we do become more empathetic … understanding not only ourselves better, but also everyone else. That is an important thing right now. We are in times of great upheaval, and in a time in which Anti-Semitism has skyrocketed to a level most of us have never experienced before. I see the film as a way to stand up to that problem, and to be an ally to the Jewish community.

In the film, I didn’t just want to express the difficulties, hardship and pain of marginalized groups, but the joy. That Jewish joy, for example, is an important piece in standing up to pain and hatred. I hope that the film does that because it’s a positive story and it’s meant to be up lifting. Also, that the people who went through it are still here, still thriving and still making contributions … I want that to come through the film as well.

Chicago’s JCC Jewish Film Festival takes place through March 27th, 2022. Click JEWISH FILM FEST *[19] for more information and a complete schedule.*


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By PATRICK McDONALD [21]
Editor and Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [20]

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