

Picking a Bone Over a Disinterment

By Jack Anderson

With actor Robert Redford as the chief pallbearer and television cameras deployed to record the tender scene, the last remains of legendary mountain man and Indian fighter Jeremiah Johnson were laid to rest the other day at Old Trail Town, Wyo.

Warner Bros., which is now massively promoting the Redford movie about Jeremiah Johnson, happily provided the television networks with film clips. Thus, a nationwide television audience was treated to a Redford portrayal of the old Indian killer, as his moldy bones were lowered into their new grave.

There was one problem, which was never mentioned in all the publicity. The removal of Johnson's bones from a less glamorous veteran's grave apparently was quite illegal.

The idea of relocating his mortal remains originated with some students at the Parkview Junior High School in Lancaster, Calif., which is 50 miles by freeway from the Warner Bros. lot.

They discovered that Jeremiah, whose real name was John Johnston, had been buried around the turn of the century

in a Los Angeles veteran's plot. They decided that the old "liver eater," as he was known in the Wild West, would be happier buried among the mountains of Wyoming than the freeways of Los Angeles.

The students presented their proposal to the Veterans Administration, which agreed to the transfer of Jeremiah's remains to the locale of his legendary exploits.

Rufus Wilson, the VA cemetery boss, explained to us that the decision was "a real historic thing." Allegations of commercialism, he said, were unfounded.

The celebrated reburial was challenged, nevertheless, by Rep. John Melcher (D-Mont.), who told us the Justice Department had informally advised him that the project appeared to violate regulations.

The national cemetery regulations state that burials are deemed to be "permanent and final." Disinterment is allowed only for "cogent reasons," including a court order or the written consent of all close living relatives.

After Melcher raised his objections, Wilson agreed to put a hold on the project. But the following day, he changed his

mind and authorized the disinterment. He said the regulations had been incorrectly interpreted.

Congressional experts fear the case could set a bad precedent. "Under (Wilson's) interpretation of the rules," said one aide, "the next thing we'd expect the Chamber of Commerce of General Pershing's hometown asking for his bones to be dug up."

Footnote: A spokesman for Warner Bros. denied that the movie-makers promoted Jeremiah Johnson's reburial, calling the event a "fluky publicity break." As for Redford, he lives in the mountains and has a genuine interest in the mountain man he portrayed.

Senate Whispers: There have been whispers in the Senate cloakroom that, if too many embarrassing tapes are subpoenaed at an impeachment trial, the President may release some of his taped conversations with individual senators.

Sen. Barry M. Goldwater (R-Ariz.) acknowledged that he could be hurt by the release of his private talks with the President, because he probably used "the most embarrassing language" of any senator on the White House tapes.

If his conversations were released, said the candid Goldwater, "I would be sorely tempted —although I would try to resist—to vote (against the White House) on that basis alone."

Sen. Russell Long (D-La.) said he remembered the "high points but not the low points" of his meetings with the President. If embarrassing conversations were made public, said the senator, "we'd have to say he (the President) lost stature in our sight."

Most senators agreed with Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott, who said the release of presidential senatorial tapes "would push senators over to the other side."

Washington Whirl: The House impeachment staff still is relying on the investigations of others to build the case against President Nixon. House investigators haven't yet gotten around themselves to interviewing some of the key Watergate figures. The staff has placed great stress on the White House tapes, including those President Nixon is still refusing to hand over. Some committee members contend the staff is counting, foolishly, on the President to hang himself.