The Crawley Era

by James A. Forrester

Crawley Films began as a hobby for Frank Radford Crawley, the athletic son of a straightlaced Ottawa accountant, Arthur A. Crawley. For some long lost reason Frank Radford was known to family and friends alike as 'Budge,' and it stuck with him for the rest of his career. Arthur A. gave his son a movie camera for his birthday to study his swimming style: 'That was the Stuart-Warner. I remember it well. It cost $75 and was crackle black. It had no diaphragm so you would change the f-stop by rotating a metal disc in front of the fixed focus lens. It would be a 25mm lens, with this rotating disc in front, but the big attraction was the 64 frames-per-second speed.'

One wonders if Arthur A. would have given such a present to his eldest son if he could have foreseen in what direction it would lead over the next 40 years. Pandora's Box had been opened in this strict Methodist household.

Crawley became an accountant and joined his father's firm, while he continued to experiment with filmmaking on the side during the 1930s. In 1933, he purchased a Kodak Cine Special which had recently come on the market: "I had a big attraction; you could run 33 feet on a wind, but it wasn't a reflex camera. You could view and focus, but as soon as you started to shoot, it would drop down and you couldn't see. So you had to allow for parallax, and it was diagonal parallax, which is a little tricky."

With his camera Crawley would make a number of black and white industrial films with intertitles, as well as amateur films with titles like Glimpses of a Canoe Trip, which won honourable mention at a N.Y. competition in 1937.

The following year Budge married Judith Sparks, who was literally 'the girl next door' and the scion of another old Ottawa family. At the suggestion of ethnologist Marius Barbeau of the National Museum, they went on their honeymoon to Île d'Orléans and of course they made a film about the island.

The same year (1938) John Grierson arrived in Ottawa at the invitation of the Canadian Government to study government film production, This "Presbyterian public relations man," as Rachel Low described him, hit the bureaucratic Ottawa like a proverbial bomb shell. Things began to happen in sleepy old Ottawa.

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And the opportunities for an ambitious young filmmaker looked brighter.

The arrival of Grierson and the fact that the Crawley's film Île d'Orléans won the Hiram Percy Maxim Award for Best Amateur Film of 1939, ensured that Budge would not have to remain an accountant much longer.

"The money was put up by Hiram Percy Maxim who invented the Maxim gun, that's where he made all his money - on the machine gun business. He funded the competition." Crawley recalls.

With the coming of World War II there was an urgent need for training films, and Crawley Films was pressed into service:

"You see we were founded before the Film Board. I did a lot of work for the Board. In the early years we did a lot of stuff for the Army, Navy and Air Force. I'd go to Bagotville and shoot on the deck, low-level flying in old Ansons. I remember photographing the first Lancaster that Clyde Pangborn flew to London. That flight was the morning of Dieppe and we were in a PBY and we passed us in the Lancaster." In 1939, the NFB consisted of John Grierson, Boss McLean and a secretary, so anyone with an interest in film was conscripted immediately. The Crawleys in turn took over the top floor of the family home at 540 The Driveway, turning a billiard room into a film studio. Grierson and the British technicians he brought with him were comfortable with 35mm equipment, which was the professional standard and they sneered at 16mm film, calling it 'shoe string.' The Crawleys continued using 16mm, in spite of the fact that they had to edge number the film by hand with white ink and a fine pen.

Budge recalls, "The Film Board was down on John Street and we had a Bell Tele land line from 540 The Driveway to the Film Board. We did a lot of narration and shot interviews there in the early days: things called discussion trailers. We had a Mauer recorder and it was done with a galvanometer, and the recording was optical. You would process the sound track and we used Kodak paper which was very slow. It was a double expanding sound track."

A little known aspect of Canadian film history is that Crawley Films introduced 16mm synchronized sound filmmaking in Canada. Grant Crabtree, one of Crawley Films' first employees, stated that the NFB borrowed the camera set-up perfected by himself and Rod Spence. The NFB crew shot a film in Western Canada and then claimed years later that they had invented the system.

Like many young enterprises which evolve spontaneously, Crawley Films was founded in 1939, but did not become a limited company until the end of the war. Crawley Films grew to a staff of six during the war, working mainly on films for the "war effort," but also completing sponsored films for industry as well as cultural groups like the Canadian Geographical Society.

By 1946, Crawley Films had evolved from a tight-knit group of family and friends into a small business; comprising Budge, Judy, Cecil Sparks, Rod Sparks as well as Grant Crabtree and Dorothy Murray. The company had outgrown the cramped quarters at 540 The Driveway and an old church hall at 19 Fairmont Avenue was purchased.

At the end of the war, government contracts began to taper off and Crawley Films found it necessary to return to sponsored filmmaking in order to survive in the private sector.

Budge remembers: "It was hard to sell because people didn't want to buy films. All you could do was go out and hustle. You knew that if you put in a certain amount of time you could sell a picture, but your volume would be 12 to 15 thousand dollars a year gross and your film costs might be two or three thousand."

It becomes obvious from talking to Crawley that his enthusiasm for film, coupled with his hustling business style, had sparked the company during its earliest period. That is until the arrival of Graeme Fraser in 1946.

A large part of the credit for the survival of Crawley Films over the past 40 years must go to this man. Business Screen stated that Fraser had "sold more film than anyone else in the world," which may sound like hype but in the area of sponsored films, it is an overstatement.

In time, the company developed into two separate entities with Fraser supervising the sponsored films and industrial documentaries and Crawley concentrating on the feature films and the entertainment side of things.

An interesting footnote to this history is the fact that A.A. Crawley, while he may not have approved of his son's career choice, supported the company once it was underway. When he became convinced that film was more than just a hobby, his company name - Bannon & Co. - was passed on to the son, Arthur A. Crawley, now owner of Crawley Films, which ensured that the company had financial backing.

The company grew slowly at first and retained the feeling of an extended family for a number of years after the war. The people who worked there
In keeping with the attitude towards women during the 1950s, most were never given the opportunity to become directors - with one exception. Sally MacDonald worked very capably as a producer-director for years in the industrial sponsored side, turning out films on a wide range of subjects. During the early 1960s, Judy Crawley undertook a long range series of films produced for National Health and Welfare and eventually sold to McCraw-Hill Films in New York. The series was called the Ages and Stages Series and each film covered a particular stage in a child’s development, with each episode having a catchy title like The Terrible Twos and The Trying Threes, etc. A unique element in the series is the fact that she used her own children for the filming. Chris Chapman remembers Judy “with a flying pan in one hand and a pencil in the other.”

Judy’s contribution to the establishment of Crawley Films cannot be overlooked. For the first three decades of the company Budge and Judy were thought of as a team as recognized by the special Canadian Film Award which they received jointly in 1957. She acted as a balancing influence on Budgie, as did his father Arthur A., and between the two of them they kept Budge’s sometimes misguided enthusiasm in check.

Budge won the Film of the Year Award again in 1952 for the Newfoundland Scene, which was once again sponsored by Imperial Oil. Most of the footage was shot by him with assistance from one of Crawley’s best cameramen, the late Stanley Brede. Budge used his faithful cine special during the filming and he managed to damage his eye during a particularly violent storm.

As the demand increased for sponsored films during the 50s, more technicians with experience were brought over from Europe, most notably Peter Carter’s father Donald, who had worked for Gaumont British Instructional Films in London. Peter, who directed The Scowboy in 1972, recalled his earliest years in Canada during a Cinema Canada interview: “I started as an apprentice in the J. Arthur Rank training program…before I came to Canada in 1955. Here I worked at Crawley Films, which was another great place to learn in those days, because you had to do everything from edge numbering right the way through.” A major change occurred in 1954, when the new wing was built onto the front of the old church hall and an office was opened in Toronto at 21 Dundas Square to make television commercials. In 1958, when Imperial Oil received a special Canadian Film Award for “its encouragement of high standards in Canadian Film Productions,” Crawleys with the director and editor Rene Bonniere for one year of location shooting along the North Shore from Tadoussac to the Straits of Belle Isle.

The subject of the 13 half-hour programs may seen a little recondite for a commercial company, considering that Crawleys was already involved in a major TV series. However, the Crawleys had a keen interest in Quebec dating back to l’ile d’Orleans in 1958 and Canadian Power made in Charlevoix County the next year. The series is mainly of ethnographic interest today, but it had a profound effect on the subsequent films made by Perrault - in particular, the film trilogy Pour la suite du monde, Le regne du jour and Les voitures d’eau.

Following the critical, if not financial, success of these two endeavours Budge contracted to make 130 five-minute limited animation cartoons in the Tales of the Wizard of Oz Series for Videocraft of N.Y. By the time that the hour-long special Return to Oz was completed and aired on February 6, 1984 on the G.E. Fantasy Hour, Crawleys had 40 animators including Bill Mason and Norman Drew who now runs his own animation studio working there.

Vic Atkinson, who was art director on the series, has criticized Budge for not keeping this nucleus of talented animators working together. However, one of the main reasons that the animation department was neglected, was the dedication Budge demonstrated for the idea of producing dramatic feature films.

In 1962, Rene Bonniere convinced Budge to bankroll David Walker’s feature length script called Staircases. The story concerned a mild-mannered man whose well-manicured lawn suddenly erupts in mushrooms. The point of the film had something to do with ecology, but was ahead of its time in voicing a concern about the environment. If it were re-released today, I’m willing to bet that we would get some
academic trying to convince us that the film was a Structuralist message about herpes.

Renews as Amanita Pestilens (Poisoned Love), it only found an audience once at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival, where it was sold to West German television and beamed into East Germany for rather obscure reasons. Amanita Pestilens had a number of minor distinctions to its credit, including the fact that the signature appearance of Genevieve Bujold, the film's Canadian actress, filmed in colour and the first feature shot simultaneously in two languages (French and English).

This $300,000 bomb, rather than discrediting Budge, prompted him to a typical fashion to invest money in an other feature. He put up $150,000, matched by a Canadian investor: plus $250,000 from Walter Reade, the U.S. theatre distributor, to produce a film version of the Brian Moore novel The Luck of Ginger Coffee. Robert Shaw and his wife Mary left the film with The Empire Strikes Back director Irvin Kershner guiding it through an eight-week shooting schedule.

Once again, Budge managed to spot talent waiting to be developed: particularly in the case of Kershner, who had previously only directed two B-movies, The Houses of Power and Stake Out On Dope Street (both films shot by Haskell Wexler). And Robert Shaw was virtually unknown in the film world, although he was an author and stage actor in England.

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The sponsored film division was very busy in the years immediately preceding Expo 67, cranking out films promoting the idea behind the festival and encouraging people and groups to participate. Quality of a Nation, which contained statements by famous Canadians was produced for the E.B. Eddy Company, as was the film A Day in the Sun by Wexler. And Robert Shaw was virtually unknown in the film world, although he was an author and stage actor in England.

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