

Michael Murphy's

Wild Goose Jack

Jack Miner is an unusual figure from the Canadian past. Considered the "best hunter in Canada" early in this century, Miner experienced a series of tragic personal events which transformed him into a respected conservationist known throughout the Western world during the '20s and '30s. The focus of his renown was the elaborate bird sanctuary for migrating geese which he established on his property in Kingsville, near Windsor, Ontario. Starting with a few pet birds, Miner eventually lured huge flocks of geese to touch down on his property during their biannual migration. There, he provided food and proceeded to tag thousands of the birds with aluminum bands inscribed with biblical verse, making them "missionaries of the air." This practice attracted world-wide acclaim during the '20s, enticing thousands of tourists to visit the sanctuary daily. It became the "in" spot to visit, and Miner was befriended by such luminaries as Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Ty Cobb.

Wild Goose Jack traces the outstanding events in Jack Miner's life, first through a short, mock newsreel entitled "Titans of Time." This summary of life, à la *Citizen Kane*, is a clever way to incorporate much of the silent film footage dating back to 1915 - some of it 35mm nitrate stock purportedly shot by Robert Flaherty. But after this energetic introduction, the film slows down con-

siderably. Its main focus becomes the reconstruction of Miner's early life, especially the impact of the deaths of a brother and a daughter. Here the film uses archival stills and narrated excerpts from letters and journals.

Once Miner has been converted from hunter to conservationist, the film relies mainly on old footage of the sanctuary, with its thousands of geese, tourists, and visiting celebrities. The few minutes of present-day material include brief interviews with Miner's aging sons, Manly and Jasper. Some of the old footage is charming and nicely highlighted by period music, but much of it becomes boringly repetitious. One of the biggest problems in the film is its reverential tone.

It seems to me that the filmmakers did not achieve the necessary distance from their subject - a distance which would have helped to eliminate repetitious elements and which might have assisted in shaping the material more suitably for an '80s audience. As today's viewers might consider Miner's banding geese with Bible messages slightly weird, no matter how well-received that practice was in the '20s and '30s, this present-day response might have been anticipated by the filmmakers through either humour or irony. To present this practice straight, under the assumption that today's viewers will nod in agreement with it, is to risk turning off the majority.

Neither does the film make clear whether or not there was any real need for the sanctuary in the first place. After all, Canadian geese had been making their biannual trip for thousands of years without a man-made pit stop. The film stresses the fact that Miner found

guidance from the Biblical perspective that humanity was given dominion over all God's creatures, but current ecological thinking seriously questions this mind-set. Moreover, the film neglects to inform us of the impact of the sanctuary on the geese population over the decades. We don't learn whether the flocks grew or diminished over the years. But we do learn that tourism to the area increased substantially with the growth of Jack Miner's celebrity. I, for one, was left with the impression that the real purpose of the bird sanctuary was to assuage remnants of Miner's guilt from his pre-conversion hunting days.

Other questions are also left unanswered. For instance, at one point in the film, we see footage of Miner entrapping thousands of starlings within the sanctuary and we hear about the need for proper regulation of such predators. But we are not informed as to the fate of these birds. Did Miner not see them as God's creatures, too? Thousands of starlings trapped in a huge net is a disturbing image and we are left to wonder just how this conservationist dealt with them. The film might have explored how the question of regulating predators was addressed by such early naturalists.

In their reverence towards the figure of Jack Miner, the filmmakers have missed opportunities to place his work in perspective. The result is that, at times, glaring contradictions surface, of which the filmmakers seem totally unconscious. For example, much is made of the fact that Henry Ford became enamoured of the bird sanctuary, fascinated by Jack Miner, and often used the place to rest and relax from his job at the motorworks. He even sent his personal cameraman, Ed Flickenger, to film the

sanctuary. Of course, who knew, in the '20s, that Henry Ford's most illustrious product would become the major threat to our natural environment? We know it now and the filmmakers of *Wild Goose Jack*, regrettably, make no comment on the irony inherent in the friendship between these two men.

One wonders whether the financing of this film - private investors taking advantage of the capital cost allowance - somehow contributed to the reverential gloss. After all, Ford, Mellon and other industrialists eventually took the bird sanctuary under their wing, making it the recipient of corporate funding even as their more worldly business efforts further eroded our natural environment.

The filmmakers have ignored the fact that their subject is a highly political one. Past history is always seen from a present perspective, and no amount of sentimentality or reverence can cloud that fact. By not dealing with the controversies raised, *Wild Goose Jack* lamentably makes conservation seem a boring and outdated affair.

But mine is only one view, and, clearly, the CBC disagrees - having purchased the film for a tentative air-date of April 10 in prime time.

Joyce Nelson ●

WILD GOOSE JACK p/d. Michael Murphy exec. p. James Linton, Calvin Moore, Michael Murphy cinematographers Laur Pray, Michael Murphy ed. Allan Gibb narrator Samantha Langevin voice of Jack Miner Don Francks sc. David Rain, James Linton, Calvin Moore, Michael Murphy mus. Tom Borshuk p.c. Clear Horizon Films, Suite 108, 2 College St., Toronto, Ont. (416) 927-1724. 16mm, colour, 57 min., 1982.

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