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 worldwide 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, a montage of 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 politically. As today's viewers might consider Miner's banding geese with Bible messages slightly weird, no matter how well-received the practice may have been in the '20s and '30s, this present-day response might have been anticipated by the filmmakers through either humour or irony. To prejudge this practice straight, under the assumption that today's viewers will not 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 pre-conversion hunting days. 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

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