A 20th Century Chocolate Cake is not a conventional Canadian feature film. It is a bizarre comedy about the absurdities of the 20th century where dreams don't come true. It re-creates contemporary cliches and creates a recipe for the future. I produced, directed and edited the film. Gregory Van Riel wrote the screenplay, acted the lead role and co-produced the picture.

The documentary includes interviews with Montreal gossip columnist Thomas Schumiacher: "...is that you, Great Antonio, a 500-pound mass of raping man; a secretary who xeroses herself; a giant rabbit that dodges cars: and anti-romance.

Essentially Greg and I put the film together with very little money. We recruited friends and friends of friends to shoot the entire film, which was shot on weekends and during summer months.

I met Greg at John Abbott College where I teach film and English and Greg was trying to be a student; in the '70s neither of those occupations was easy. Greg wasn't the typical John Abbott student. He was more aggressive, independent and less controllable. I found these traits attractive and took up the challenge of trying to work with him.

We made a first "dramatic" film entitled Recipe to Cook a Clown, a rather loose scenario featuring Greg and Charles Fisch, Jr., another former student of mine. The film consisted of a series of vignettes - Greg meeting bizarre people in the city, a favorite theme of mine. Somehow, we forgot the pain of making our first drama and decided to create another script - Greg came up with a story about this schoolboy out of the 20th-century youth who goes around the city with a tape recorder interviewing people on the street. I loved the idea of interviewing people candidly. The most spontaneous material came from children: there's a revealing sequence where a four-year-old boy tells us his father is in jail - suddenly his sister scolds him with her fist, and he quickly changes his story saying Daddy is in the South; obviously, just what he was told to say.

By now we were hooked. We had edited about 20 minutes of really interesting documentary footage, but there still wasn't a coherent story.

Greg would write all day and drive taxi at night, while I'd teach school during the day, then edit at night. At about 12 midnight we'd meet at a bar downtown to discuss the scenes and plan the next weekend's shoot. We enlisted Charles Fisch, Jr. from Recipe to play an alter-ego to Greg, as well as the very charismatic Jeannine Laskar, who had never acted in films before, to play a mysterious lady.

One night I received a strange call in broken English with an Italian accent: "Gregory, he in jail!" I freaked out - we were to shoot the next day, and Greg was in the scene. "Where?" I shouted in panic. "Gregory, he said you would know." And the lady hung up. I spent the next four hours on the phone calling every jail in the city trying to find Greg. Finally I reached him. "Greg, what happened?" "Oh, they picked me up for an expired taxi license. I'll be out by tomorrow. I'm having a great time. There's all these weird people in here. I'm interviewing them, doing research..."

Despite tremendous efforts to finish the film, A 20th Century Chocolate Cake, started in 1978, was still being shot in 1980. One of the most elaborate scenes involved PJ's Cabaret, one of the more liberal-minded bars in the city - a place where both gays and straights mingle without hostility. M.C. Armand Monrose was fantastic in helping us achieve an authentic look. The week before we shot, he announced to the regular clientele that we were in pursuit of extras for the film. People from all over the city showed up at 6 a.m. Sunday morning to be in the scene: rockers, a leather man, punks, the Queen of England - it looked like Halloween. One girl was even let out of Douglas Hospital for the day to be in the film, and stripper Fonda Peters showed up practically naked. (She subsequently became Linda Lee Tracy of A Love Story fame)

Our new cameraman that day, Peter Benison, who actually was a real cameraman, shooting normal features and commercials, flew in from Toronto at the last minute for the PJ's shoot. Peter had been in Toronto shooting Death Ship the day before and had missed his plane back to Montreal. The only flight available was to Ottawa where he rearranged to rent a car when the plane arrived at 1 a.m. But when Peter landed in Ottawa, there was no car and the rental office was closed, shut tight for the night. Wisely, Peter had written down the name of the owner of the rental office and after waking up half of Ottawa asking for a Mr. Johnson, Peter finally found him (imagine calling anyone after 9 p.m. in Ottawa) and coaxed the man, with the threat of ruining a multi-million dollar picture, to get out of bed and come down to the airport and give him a car.

It was 5 a.m. when Peter arrived in Montreal and he was on the set two hours later. Webried his eyes open, fed them some coffee and glued them to the camera eyepiece. Then Peter proceeded to shoot one of the most superb scenes in Chocolate Cake.

Charles did his belly dance, and I post-dated some cheques into oblivion so we could look at the rushes. Bellevue Path Laboratory was great. Everytime a cheque would bounce they'd merely call me, and I'd post-date a few more cheques. I was always about three months behind.

Then Greg came into an inheritance - a "Flower-Powered Geek Mobile." Scriptwriter Edith Rey (Babe, The Armoured Man) had been working on the film...
Tomorrow, directed by Peter Collinson. As a going away present Edith was given the car which was completely covered with painted daisies. Greg took one look at the car and flipped: "I gotta have that car for our movie!" Edith gave him the car. So now we had a car covered with daisies. People looked at us like we were crazy. As we did highway shots and stunt the Geek in the country, the Geek in the city, the Geek in the morning, the Geek at night, the Geek going the wrong way on the Trans-Canada Highway service road, dodging shocked little red Volkswagens...

I only spent money on film stock and processing and hustled everything else. I took care of equipment, crew and transportation. Greg took care of actors, accessories and locations. Every week Greg would approach another delicatesen on Ste. Catherine Street for catering so that we could feed our crew. We'd trade a credit in the film for food, props and beer. Our credit list is about five miles long, not unlike that in Superman.

Greg would often secure a location by offering the manager of the place a place in the film.

By the end of the shoot we had used 12 cameramen, 10 sound men, 10 different costumes, and most of the film was shot on outdated 'short ends' - some only 40 feet long. Once I received some outdated film from a group of women who wanted to make a porno film, but who never got around to it...

We got to the point where we'd offer assistant cameramen the honor and opportunity of shooting part of our film if they would supply the film stock. I'd often find film cans pushed through the mail slot in the morning.

Then we scripted an insane ski in a gas station with Stephen Lack and Peter Brawley of Montreal Stan and Rubber Gun fame (an inductivistic mechanic who completely dismantles Stephen's handsome car. We interviewed Thomas Schnurman horror about why people loved him in the movie. The Great Antonio (one of Montreal's famous street people, known for pulling four buses at a time on chains through downtown Montreal) biscotting The Great Antonio's services was not an easy task. He didn't have a phone and could only be reached by leaving a message at the restaurant where he worked. After several weeks of calling, we arranged to meet him at his apartment in Montreal East to try to convince him to be in our film. We weren't very impressed by us because there weren't any real 'super stars' in Chocolate Cake.

He pulled hundreds of photos of himself posing with famous stars: snapshots of him hovering over Alain Delon, Liza Minnelli, Lee Majors, etc. He wouldn't appear in a film unless there was a big star featured. Finally I said: "O.K., listen, Tom Jones is in tonight. If I take a picture of you with Tom Jones, will you be in our film?" Antonio said: "What do you want me to do?" We filmed him the next day.

He broke again. I applied for a couple more charge cards and put all my cash into the film. Then I figured out how to obtain two Master Cards. By this time I had started another film - a documentary entitled Extreme Close-Up, about multi-handicapped young adults who have one handicap in common - blindness. Since I was putting money into two films, my funds were low. Eventually Master Card discovered my two accounts and blew their top. I spent one whole day answering hysterical phone calls because their system had gone wrong, and no one could cope with the idea of a customer having two cards under the same name. Finally a guy from the head office called me at school, and we had a great conversation. I explained to him how anything was possible within a large system - the larger the easier, and I taught him how to obtain two accounts. Then I told him about my films and said we'd send him a cheque immediately, but by the end of the conversation everything had reversed, and he told me not to worry, everything was all right. I didn't have to send him any money.

The second summer was almost over, but we still had a few shots left to shoot with the Geek mobile. Unfortunately, the car had become a problem - so Greg approached stuntman Marcel Fournier about fixing the car. Fortunately, Marcel had just been looking for such a crazy car. He was hired to perform the stunts for CTV's National Driving Test and needed a 'punk car.' Marcel fixed the brakes, we shot the next day and delivered the car that night to Bienville, Quebec. Then Greg and I were hired to play the parts of punk kids who get smashed up in the punk car in National Driving Test. It was the first time I saw myself killed on television.

Next, we got the idea of having a rough-traffic, motorcycle lady pick up Charles who was hitchhiking in one scene. But where do you find motorcycle 'Hells-Angels' type ladies? Greg and I went down to the tough side of town - Pointe St. Charles - and discovered a bike shop on Wellington Street. Looking like the Bobbsey Twins on Sunday, we smiled at several mean-looking characters who were polishing their brass knuckles and omnivorous tattoos. We asked whether they knew any motorcycle ladies. Surprisingly, they were all kind and made a phone call and during the half-hour, pulled the biggest purple Harley-Davidson we'd ever seen in our film. We drove the car.

Then I read this lovely story in a newspaper about a beautiful red-haired girl with her rear-end for a party invitation and was consequently fired. Of course, I had to recreate the scene for Chocolate Cake.

Filmsplan International, a company which makes features, agreed to let us use a film machine on a Saturday morning. We never had so many requests to work on a scene.

Then we arranged to shoot a fight scene at a heavy bar near St. Lawrence Street. We got permission to shoot on a Sunday, and O'Keefe dedicated about 15 cases of beer for the cast and crew. But the union decided to make some extra cash and started selling the free beer to all the extras. By the time we needed the extras for the fight scene, everyone was drunk. The bartender had been drinking for 12 hours when it came time for him to say his lines. His contribution to the film is most unusual.

Now towards the end of year four, Chocolate Cake is finally scheduled to appear. It will have its world premiere at the Monckland Theatre, June 1, at 9 p.m. in Montreal. Thank to finishing assistance from the National Film Board of Canada, the cake is finally out of the oven.

Stories about the baking of the cake could go on forever. Obviously, 19th Century Chocolate Cake is not your average slick, commercial film, but it is just about everything else. It's a 20th-century adventure in which one learns to accept the world - absurd as it is.