



Alberta Film & TV

Alberta : introduction to a cultural ethos

by Dave Billington

Most people, when asked where the major filmmaking centers were in the country, would automatically think of the big three - Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Very few would even consider the possibility of including the province of Alberta on their list.

In a land which tends to pigeonhole people by their geographic location rather than the things they produce or the kinds of human beings they are, this is perhaps understandable, though certainly not particularly commendable.

Thus Alberta is equated with oil wells, cowboys, rodeos, lavish wealth and a brash brand of contemporary conservatism which tended to view Joe Clark as a dangerous radical.

But the Alberta those of us who live here know and love contains a great deal more than those cliché images, and one of those things is a very vital, productive and high-quality film business embracing everything from one of the world's most prestigious, yet still largely unheralded film festivals, to a cadre of some of the best documentary filmmaking communities in the country.

It is always difficult to encapsulate an entire cultural ethos in a few hundred words, but perhaps the best place to start is at a point on the compass far to the south of the two major cities of Calgary and Edmonton.

The town of Cardston has two major claims to fame, at this point in its history. It contains the only fully-fledged Mormon Tabernacle in the province, (probably the only one outside Salt Lake City, Utah) and it's the birthplace of film director and former National Film Board guru Colin Low.

Low became something of an icon with the Board when, back in the '50s, he made a modest little film about a cowboy riding a green-broke horse on the vast Cochrane Ranch a few miles northwest of his home town.

Modest though its aspirations were, *Corral* stamped Low as a major artist in filmmaking, and it added yet more laurels to the already heavily garlanded Film Board.

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And from that day to this, *Corral* has been looked upon and recognized as a masterpiece of lighting and camera-work, though one of its most famous scenes, when the horse runs into a slough, was actually an accident.

I met the cowboy who was in the film a few years ago and he told me quite candidly that "that damn horse got its nose in the air and I couldn't bring it down. The only way I could stop it was to run it into the slough, but I didn't bother to tell the boys who were making the film that because they seemed so tickled with the pictures they got."



● Colin Low's *Corral* : riding a hobbyhorse against the bureaucrats

Tickled they may have been, but the subsequent growth of Low's career based on the film's acceptance was to lead to an important change in the way the NFB viewed itself and its mandate in the country.

Low's hobbyhorse, which he rode steadily against the bureaucracy of the Board, was the establishment of regional production studios which could more accurately reflect the country's widely varied culture than those visiting firemen (usually from the Montreal, Toronto area), who would produce hit-and-run works which were often unintentionally

inaccurate examinations of the regions.

As a direct result of Low's work, the North West Studio of the NFB was established in Edmonton and it has been producing some fascinating material ever since.

Two of the best recent examples are Anne Wheeler's moving tribute to her father, *A War Story*, in which she recreates the prison camp hell her father survived.

And *China Mission*, Tom Radford's gentle portrait of one of the country's greatest diplomats and humanitarians, Chester Ronning, which traced that man's remarkable life from his life in a

the profile of a contemporary, middle-aged Indian who lives on the Blood Reserve on whose southern boundary perches the town of Cardston.

It was a fitting return, as if to bring Low's cinematic life back to full circle from the roots of its genesis on the Cochrane ranch.

But the NFB is not the only organization in the province which produces excellent documentary material, as the Peter Haynes story proves.

Haynes is a soft-spoken migrant from Britain who privately assembled enough capital to make an amazingly evocative documentary on the four seasons of an Inuit family whose largely traditional life still carries on on the edge of the Arctic Circle.

Entitled *Inupiatin* it was a prize-winner at last year's Banff Television Festival and it has charmed and enchanted all who have seen it.

Haynes and his partners hustled the bucks for their film, themselves and their reward was a work which was not only artistically satisfying but entertaining as well.

Its award at the Banff Festival might be dismissed as parochial by those who do not know how high the Festival's standards are, but it had to compete with first-rate documentaries from around the world, and was judged by a world-class jury.

The measure of the Festival's standards is best taken by looking at what happened to three of its prize-winning entries.

This year, for example, the CBC's documentary *Just Another Missing Kid* won an Oscar in the documentary category. The film had been similarly rewarded by Banff two years ago.

Two British dramas, *A Voyage Round My Father* and *Cream In My Coffee*, were also first-prize winners at Banff last year and the year before and they went on to finish one-two in the Prix Italia, one of Europe's most prestigious competitions which covers two years of European television at a time.

Now it may seem odd to include a TV film festival in a broad look at the film business of a particular province, but the Festival was a direct result of some pretty heady times which prevailed out her five years ago.

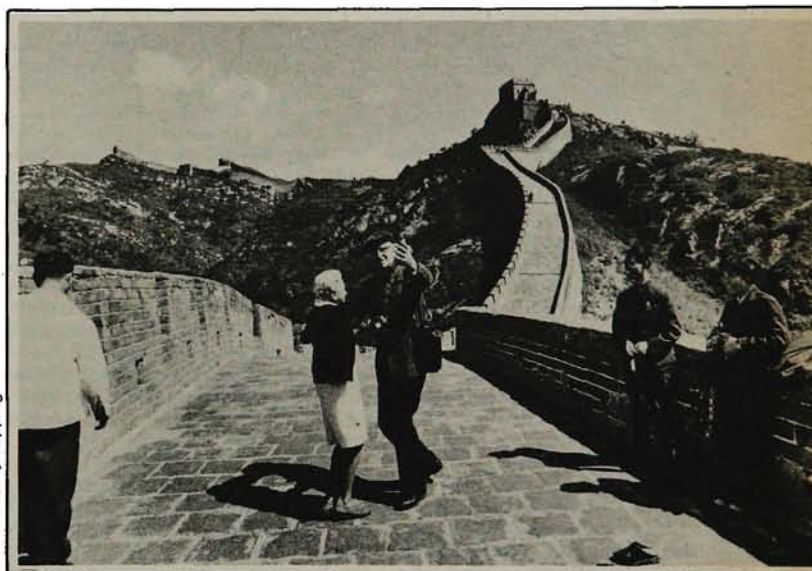


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scenic landscape within easy reach of the city.

You can go from bald prairie, through verdant foothills to primeval mountain back country in less than two hours. Add to that a modern city with plenty of first-class hotel space surrounded by good four-lane highways, and you have a producer's dream.

When you've got high-powered Hollywood types (and their Canadian equivalent) constantly checking out your turf like prospectors looking for a mother lode, it's little wonder that the local filmmakers catch gold fever themselves. But very few, if any Hollywood types



Great man on the Great Wall: Chester Ronning in China again

(except those who follow the fortunes of the Los Angeles Kings) have ever heard of Edmonton, so that city's filmmakers tend to concern themselves much more with the smaller-scale film.

Add to that the fact that Edmonton is the seat of the provincial government, a pork barrel for commissioned documentaries, and you begin to get a picture of a good place for the small filmmaker to hang his or her hat.

This latter fact is a sore point with the Calgarians who feel that, in spite of the fact that all government films are only awarded on the basis of tender, the Edmontonians have the inside track, regardless of the Calgary price.

In fact, the Calgary people got so gumpy a couple of years ago that they formed their own group called the Calgary Independent Filmmakers' Association in order to convince themselves that they were independent of the larger and better-known Edmonton film producers.

Still, it would be wrong to characterize the province as a place filled with warring factions which defeat their ultimate aim of making films by constantly squabbling among themselves.

Each year the hatchet is buried and the annual AMPIA banquet is held, at which time the Alberta film people reward each other with craft and artistic awards designed to encourage excellen-

Photo: Trig Singer

getting blood from a stone.

Just as significantly, the Film Development Corporation was successfully launched at last year's Festival with an initial pool of \$3 million and has already bankrolled several projects.

Perhaps the most important point to make here is that all of this film activity takes place in the service of between 100 and 150 filmmakers scattered from Lethbridge in the south to Grande Prairie in the north and in a province of just over two million people.

Most of the people involved in film in Alberta belong to the Alberta Motion Picture Industry Association, a fractious organization which attempts to serve the needs of everyone but whose internal operations are often badly split between the province's traditional rivals - Edmonton and Calgary.

Now you wouldn't think that, in a province this size, there would be very much room for the kind of inter-city paranoia and sense of rivalry as exist between, say, Toronto and Montreal, but Edmonton/Calgary is precisely the same and is even rooted in the same kinds of attitudes.

Edmonton, like Montreal, doesn't believe it is superior - it knows it is - and this condescending attitude absolutely infuriates Calgarians who suffer from the same kind of uncertainties which make Torontonians such blatant boosters for their own city - they blow their own single horn to drown out the brass band that lives in the other town.

But there is no doubt strong differences exist between the two cities and these differences are particularly obvious to an eastern migrant like myself who has lived in both cities.

To use a gambling metaphor - the Calgarians are crapshooters, while in Edmonton they play five-card stud.

Calgary's atmosphere is one of shooting for the big pot which is why there is much more of an inclination toward the major feature film, an atmosphere which was stimulated first by the making of the ill-fated Robert Altman film *Buffalo Bill And The Indians* and most recently by the *Superman* films.

The main reason for this has less to do with the pool of talent available in Calgary (though there is certainly plenty of that), than the incredible variety of

Photo: Audrey Topping

It was then that the redoubtable Fil Fraser, fresh from his critical triumph in producing *Why Shoot The Teacher*, was all set to turn this province into the living proof that genuine Canadian stories, filmed with care and integrity could move right out there into the ranks of world cinema and stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of them.

Fraser and his colleagues thought that, if they could bring together as many important film people as they could find into the resort town of Banff; fill them with fresh air, western hospitality and a banquet of major international television films, that investment money would buzz in like hungry bees heading for honey.

At the same time the festival was launched, there was another mood afoot in Calgary which was to add even more yeast to the ferment, making the brew even more heady.

A group of businessmen in Cowtown bought some land in the hills just west of the city and announced the beginning of Tri-Media, a studio, sound stage, hotel complex which was going to be the biggest and most modern filmmaking facility in Canada capable of producing everything from 30-second commercials to feature films.

Back in Banff, Fraser and his colleagues were slowly pressuring the provincial government into establishing the Alberta Film Development Corporation to offer aid to the province's filmmakers in the pre-production work.

But the whole bubble burst through a combination of things, all of which could be traced to the provincial government's inability to find enough extra cash to keep the pot boiling.

The result was that the television festival had to suspend operations in its second year while it was refinanced and Tri-Media stumbled when the economy did. Just this year its backers announced that the project was all but finished unless mega-bucks were forthcoming from the provincial treasury.

But the Festival, thanks to the dogged determination of director Carrie Hunter, is not only alive and well, as the prestige of its winners shows, but it is still growing in reputation and in size and this in spite of the fact that getting money from the private sector these days is like

Tom Radford of the NFB: the documentary as macrocosm



ce in the field. Again, this may seem to be parochial, but, as someone said after this year's awards, "you may treat them lightly if you want, but once your name is read out, your attitude changes because your peers have recognized that you've done something well."

"And that means something whether it's an Oscar or an Ampia."

But if there is one thing which has acted as a catalyst to bring everybody in the province together in recent years, it was the advent of pay-TV, particularly when a local company, Allarco, was awarded the Superchannel franchise for both Ontario and Alberta.

With the Canadian content stipulations written into the pay licenses, visions of feature films danced through the heads of every independent producer in the province, only to draw mostly blanks so far.

Ironically one feature film has already been made for pay-TV, but it was sold to First Choice, the Toronto-based national service, and not to Superchannel even