



*Canada's most renowned news cinematographer*

# ROY TASH CSC

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Doubtless Canada's most honoured cameraman, Roy Tash CSC has photographed and participated in more news events of the past than Lloyd Robertson can remember. Much of the 1930's news footage used in *Dreamland: A History of Canadian Movies 1895-1939* was shot by Tash — one of the very few pioneers in film in Canada. The Canadian Society of Cinematographers annually awards a trophy named in his honour to the news cameraman with the most outstanding story of the year; and this year, Tash himself received the Hillson Trophy (the world's smallest Arriflex) from the CSC for his outstanding contributions to the art of cinematography.

In over 50 years as a newsreel cameraman for Pathé News and Associated Screen News, Roy Tash photographed heads of state, royalty, hobos, beauty queens, athletes and babies. Events such as fires, floods, regattas and funerals were standard fare for Tash while getting the news of the day onto theatre screens across the country.

Roy Tash was born in Brooklyn in 1898 and grew up in Chicago. He started in the movie business by sweeping out peanut shells in the local nickelodeon after school. By the time he was 16 he had worked his way up to assistant projectionist. He was given an old camera and taught himself the fundamentals of cinematography by shooting tests on scrounged short ends of film. His first Universal camera weighed almost 150 pounds with magazine, tripod and 200 feet of film, and had to be cranked at two turns per second to expose 16 frames per second. His first big news break was the scene of the Eastland boat disaster in Chicago harbour when over 800 people lost their lives. He was promoted to assistant news cameraman for Pathé News.

His move to Canada was mainly for adventure. In 1919 he was a founder of Filmcraft Industries which had offices above the Photodrome Theatre across from the old City Hall in Toronto. That five-year association ended when a fire destroyed the facility, but those years kept Tash busy as cameraman, developer, printer, and general one-man-show. His next job was with Associated Screen News Ltd., shooting footage for the four big U.S. newsreel outfits, Fox Movietone News, MGM News of the Day, Paramount and Universal. He got that job as a result of being the official government cameraman on a series of sailings to the Canadian north photographing experiments of ice-breaking techniques. Tash was the man behind the camera in 1920 shooting the all-Canadian feature film called *Satan's Paradise*, an eight-reeler.

In 1911, Tash shot the funeral of Sir Wilfred Laurier, and has since photographed every Prime Minister, and the past nine Governors-General. But probably his favourite assignment was shooting the Dionne quintuplets in 1934. The backwoods farmhouse had no electricity, and lights were powered by renting every available car battery, hooking them up in series, and shooting under the yellow light provided by about 75 Volts.

During the royal tour in 1939, Tash crossed the country by train, shooting footage of all events. During a stop between stations for a stretch, he got off the train to shoot some of the scenery. When his camera stopped, he was startled to hear another camera running. He turned and gaped straight into the lens of King George VI's 16mm camera, gaining himself a few feet in the royal home movies.

The Tash scrapbook features page after page of press clippings of the famous cameraman coming to town to shoot the Bucksaw contest (Peterborough 1936), the Ancient and Accepted Order of Liars (Brampton, 1936), the Queen of the Apple Blossom Festival drinking from Evangeline's well (Halifax, 1938), the Golden Plough ceremonies (Cobourg, 1955), the Rotary Beauty Contest (Woodstock, 1949), the Second Annual Snow Carnival, (Kenora, 1946), and the Dominion Speed Skating Championship (Sudbury, 1946).

Among Tash's mottoes is "Never take no for an answer." He had an opportunity to demonstrate his persistence when he was assigned to film Irving Berlin and his wife as they were passing through Montreal. Having never seen Berlin, he went into a music store and bought a song sheet with a cover photo of Berlin and stationed himself in the rotunda of the Windsor station. His worried frown gave way to a triumphant smile as he spotted his target.

"Hello Mr. Berlin," Tash said suavely, "Would you and your wife kindly consent to pose for the newsreels?"

"I'm not Berlin." the man replied.

Confident that he had Berlin and the the noted songwriter was attempting to avoid publicity, Tash came back with "You look like Berlin. In fact, I know you are Berlin and I'm taking no chances. I'm getting your picture and getting it while the getting's good."

"O.K. If you want to waste your film, go ahead."

Roy got the picture. He reported to his newsreel editor, James Campbell, "Well, they gave me an argument, but Irving Berlin and his wife are in the bag."

Campbell raised an eyebrow, dug into his desk drawer and brought out a telegram which he handed to Tash. "Berlin trip to Canada cancelled," it read.

"Was my face red," Tash laughs. "I had shot the wrong man."

In December of 1967, the Canadian Film Weekly announced that the last Canadian newsreel companies were going

out of business and Tash, after 45 years as a newsreel cameraman, entered retirement. He has received numerous awards, including the Centennial Medal, special recognition from the CSC, Variety Club, the Canadian Film Awards, and his recreation room walls are literally covered with stills of him meeting the greats and near-greats. In 1956 he accompanied Governor-General Vincent Massey on an Arctic air tour, flying in a North Star and visiting Frobisher, Hall Lake, Cambridge Bay, Resolute, Tuktoyuktuk, Aklavik and Whitehorse, covering over 10,000 miles in 17 days.

In his two-inch thick scrapbook, on faded yellow newsprint, there is only one item that says nothing of Toy Tash's CSC membership nor of his association with recording the history of Canada for public exhibition:

"The one dream entertained by every bridge player was realized by R. Tash playing with Mrs. Tash, dealer, and Mr. and Mrs. E. DeRoches here (Montreal) recently. He held thirteen spades."

Still very active in the film industry, Roy Tash is the Treasurer of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers, as well as holding a Membership for Life. We hope he will always take interest in the Canadian film scene and add our salute to one of the first pioneers in the field of Canadian filmmaking. □

- 1 *Sammy Davis Jr. presents the Variety Club award to Tash*
- 2 *An early still of the Dionne quintts*
- 3 *General de Gaulle (left) and Tash (right)*
- 4 *The incorrigible Tash shooting a wax copy of Khrushchev*



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