

TERRENCE ST. JOHN MARNER

interviews

FILMWEST

How does the Alberta government encourage film production?

There is a tender list in the province that has been rather personalized; has tended to be sort of one man's decision. They have not in fact put all filmmakers and all provincial production companies on provincial government tender lists up until last year. I think they're more open now. I think they're talking about putting up a small amount of front money for everybody who tenders on a provincial government film; a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars, just to pay printing expenses or travelling expenses associated with putting together a proposal and a budget and whatever else has to come, like what they're asking for on their tender notice. So in that department, things are a little bit healthier. The Film Industry Development Office's first mandate is not in fact to develop filmmakers or to develop filmmaking in Alberta. Its first mandate is to attract feature filmmaking from Hollywood and New York into the province so that the province can reap the benefits of people eating here and sleeping in hotels here. Secondly, and I'm pessimistic about this, they want to encourage the hiring of handfuls of local filmmakers to take seventh string jobs on what would very likely be union crews. So I rather suspect that it won't do filmmakers in the province all that much good.

Especially if you're essentially documentary people.

Well it's not true that we at Filmwest are only interested in documentary. We're not. Most people in the province are. We are developing a feature kind of package. We've got the rights to a couple of scripts already. Scripts which are virtually ready to produce. Over the next several months we're going to be trying to put together some investment to get started. Hopefully we can do them on a reasonably low budget basis. They're both adaptations. I don't know if you ever read the **Double Hook**. The **Double Hook** is a novel by Shiela Watson who is in the English Department here. The second story is called, for the moment, **Truckdriver**. It was written by Vladimir Valenta.

We are also working in connection with him to put together a dramatic television series in 16mm. We have thirteen programs in outline form. The stories are based on human interest newspaper reports involving real incidents related to the ethnic population of rural Alberta.

What kind of sponsorship do you anticipate for all this?

Well, Canada Council are seriously interested in sponsoring the writing. We will farm out a great deal of the writing. Some things will be written by people here in Edmonton, but we're also going to move some out of the city if we can.

Are any of the television companies interested?

It's hard to measure the extent of their interest because what they're asking for is one completely polished script and twelve at least reasonably well-outlined stories which will indicate which direction they're going to go.

Who will do the acting?

We have auditioned all across Western Canada, for a year and a half now. We've got a lot of people on file. We know a lot of people who have left this particular area and have gone to Toronto or wherever, to try and make a living, who would be more than willing to come back and spend a summer shooting.

I find this interesting because, a few months ago, a local television station asked if I would be interested in putting together a series of thirteen shows, and a drama series was



Reevan Dolgoy and Hanson Bearspaw in Ernest Brown: Pioneer Photographer

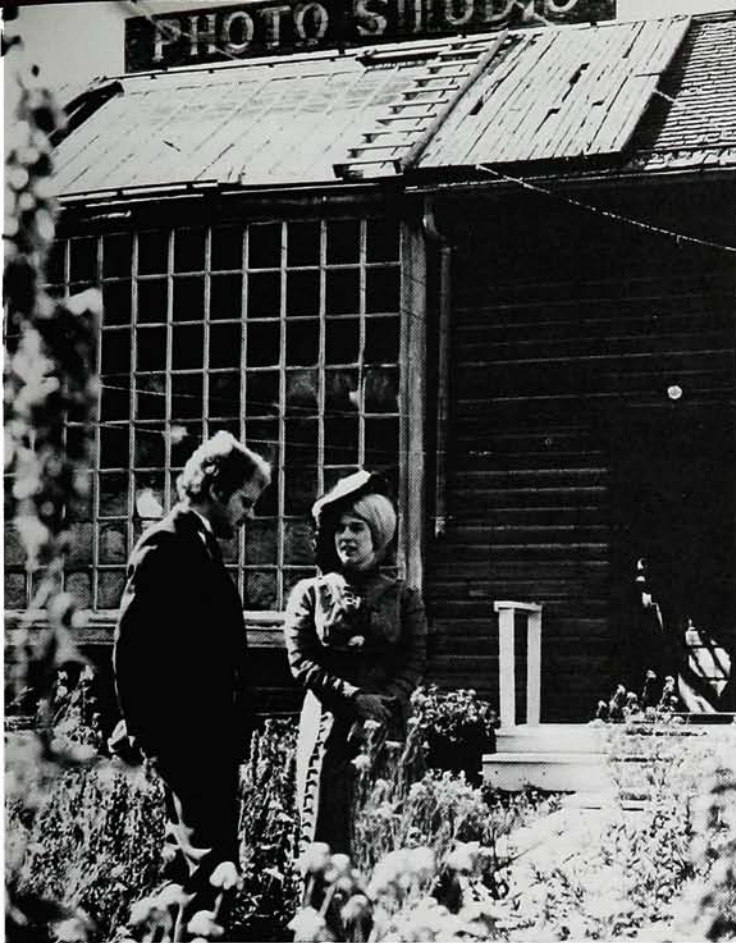
precisely what my mind went to. The station said that it was absolutely out. There was no way I could do it. When I asked why not the production manager said, "Well the public is so accustomed to really good professional stuff coming from the States, that they wouldn't look at local productions."

This is the kind of bias which we have set out intentionally to correct. It has two main thrusts and one is at the local level for people who will not place their confidence in local producers, directors, writers and what have you. The other is an internal media bias on the part of media producers who say that it's not really that good unless it's produced in Toronto or Montreal or New York or Los Angeles or Dallas, Texas or what have you.

I think we're beginning to successfully crack that nut. The last one-hour film we did which is only a partially dramatized documentary is called **Ernest Brown — Pioneer Photographer**. It helped to do that because technically it's an extremely proficient movie. It totally surprised a lot of critics who came to look at it expecting to have to apologize for local quality. Gradually these prejudices are being broken down and I think more people are open to talking about a co-production on a dramatic series or a co-production on a documentary series, where you can do more than one film at a time or one pilot at a time. You can put it together as a series that can be efficiently produced, rather than doing a spot here and a spot there. Doing things as a unit helps to realize economics which are important. Especially in a young country's situation.

It might be an idea if you said something about your development as a company and how you sort of mushroomed up.

Filmwest started in July of '71. Prior to that there were two smaller companies in town by the name of Film Frontiers and Barnyard Films International Ltd. Neither of them had the equipment or the skills or the conceptual capacities to survive as a small company doing different things on their own, so they decided in 1971 to get together and form a new company and even bring some new people in. There were three people from each of the two sides plus three or four other people who came in as independents and formed Filmwest Associates. The



William Thorsell and Anne Wheeler in the *Filmwest* production

first things that Filmwest did was a six-part series for CBC-TV here and a two-part series for CBC-TV in Toronto, and some public service commercials; just very small things, and some for educational television through the Department of Education.

You mentioned doing something for CBC. We have the impression in Saskatchewan that CBC are very distant people to deal with. There's no local production at all. If there's anything done at all locally, it's basically reportage.

It's been a similar situation in Edmonton over a long period of time in our experience. The only kind of local programming that we've been able to take part in has been their local supper hour news and public affairs program which is usually an hour or longer. The half hour films we did for them fit into that format. But rather than treat CBC as a whole, it's probably more fair to treat CBC in terms of whatever producer you are dealing with. There is a range of levels in the CBC. First there's CBC policy which says one thing and another. Then there's CBC budget which dictates one thing and another, but over and above that there are people who will refuse to deal with you. We were fortunate in having somebody who was willing to place a degree of faith in us and believe reasonably in what we were doing and what we were trying to do as a company. Hence, we got *Country Doctor*, *To Live Good*, *Shelter* and another film called *Urban Dilemma*. We also did a film called *To be Ungifted & Western Canadian*, which was sort of an expression of the artists' situation in western Canada vis à vis the media, and the cultural institutions at the federal level and that kind of thing.

I think even now CBC policies are changing again. I think in 1974 and 1975 you will see them opening up a bit more towards co-producing things and letting producers retain some rights which CBC retains — producing 16mm features for TV, sharing investment from all sides, having it put together by a producer outside the Corporation. They're also, I think, loosening up gradually as far as regionalizing their production facilities. I know the CBC outlet here made a kind of a breakthrough when it began to produce the *Tommy Banks Show*. It's all written and produced locally.

So with precedents like that the central brass tend to loosen

up a bit and as budgets increase at a regional level, they allow more regional control. That again is what we're really after. I don't think there's nearly enough feed from regional situations in Canada to really justify the mandate that was given to CBC by parliament. No doubt the latest CRTC hearings will help a lot.

It's an analogous situation now with the NFB. They're beginning to worry down in Montreal about their image and also their lack of involvement in regionalized production.

The NFB has begun to set up a regional outlet in Halifax just as they have done in Vancouver, and this spring they'll be opening up a production office either in Edmonton or in Calgary, but it will very likely be in the province of Alberta. I'm not sure, I think they want to put it here so they can use it as a take-off point for getting into the north more. What Edmonton does have is an extremely good lab which can process virtually any kind of film. It's fully equipped with flatbed editing tables and sound transfer units, etc. That sort of took them by surprise.

My impression from what I find is that everything that happens outside Toronto or Montreal takes the NFB by surprise.

Well yeah, the guy who was in charge of English production in Montreal was pretty surprised when he drove into the city and saw big buildings and so on. That's typical of eastern bias or eastern attitudes. I really don't like to go into that because we've been into it so often and probably the people in the east are tired of hearing and reading about it. I can remember the first time we visited CBC in Toronto. They were totally surprised that we knew how to expose film and how to take light readings, etc.

It's part of the old colonial attitude that came with the building of the railroad from the east to the west. We're still gum-chewing cowboys as far as most of them are concerned.

What sort of co-operation do you have with other companies in Alberta?

Filmwest doesn't really have all that much. We have a pretty high degree of co-operation with other individuals around the province who work by and large, as independents. Most of the other companies fall into the same category as your people in Saskatchewan who take up the industrial side or the commercial-making side of the picture. But there certainly are people in the province that we work with. There are people in Calgary and in Lethbridge, even people in town who are just small individual companies.

Where did you get your training?

Here, in town. Just doing it. Just buying a camera and starting. Just buying a tape and starting, developing from there. A few people have had formal training in film. One of the unit has gone to school at UCLA, but apart from that people had training just in theatre arts and that sort of mode. I worked for CBC for a while as a freelance radio and television story editor and interviewer, that kind of thing, but I certainly never had any technical training.

How is the company organised?

Well my role is by and large putting together proposals and outlining films. I'm not that much into detailed research or script writing. The other half of my job concerns financial management and budgeting, trying to sell and putting together series and packages. I might add that we're setting up a distribution centre here, and hopefully we'll be able to set up an arrangement where we can work as agents of distributors who are centered in Toronto or New York.

That's another one of the things we're trying to do to give us an economic base, something just to fall back on during the long, cold winter if you want to call it that.

What equipment do you have?

We have a 16mm Arriflex BL which is fully equipped; zoom

etc., Nagra IV, we just bought a new Nagra SN, the pocket sized one. A couple of Uhers, a 1000 and a 4000, two crank Bolexes and one motorized Bolex, plus a pretty good lineup of lenses to fit the Bolexes. We've got two fully motorized editing benches. The lab here that we've got really good relationships with, has a new Moviola flatbed. He will let us use it at a pretty reasonable cost. They also have a small mixing board and good sound transfer unit which our technical sound people can use without having to have an operator. It's a good working situation.

What is the lab?

Cine Audio. They have a color processor, but we still do printing in Vancouver.



(left to right) Gary Armstrong, Robert Reece, Tom Radford and Allan Stein with Hanson Bearspaw and Reevan Dolgoy in front.

What staff do you maintain permanently?

Usually seven at the bottom, but we go up to fifteen, sixteen, seventeen depending on how many productions we've got going.

But you have seven people working full-time?

Yes — in fact we've had three films going at one time.

What sort of relationship do you have, if any, with the unions?

Virtually unheard of. We pay ACTRA scale if we hire actors. We usually subcontract music to a music producer. It's his obligation to make sure that union production regulations are lived up to.

The music is usually delivered to us clear. We have signed authorization to use it for optical sound track uses.

Apart from yourself what do the other six do?

The basic seven are pretty well versed in a number of aspects of filmmaking. It would be more fair to call everyone here, apart from myself, a filmmaker, rather than a cameraman or editor. Although those kinds of things are tending to develop. There are people here who are better at handling sound than others and there are people here who are much better behind a camera than others.

Most of them have just learned the craft in practice in Edmonton? — They must all be fairly young.

I would say the average age is probably 28 or 29.

Have you done any industrial films?

We're not adverse to doing films for industry as long as they

are not hack industrial films which are glossing over pretty obvious stinking pollution situations or something like that. We've been approached by one mining company who are stripmining in the mountains. We told them quite frankly that we were interested in making the film for them as long as we were reasonably satisfied in our own conscience that they were worth making a film for. In this kind of case we'll go to people in the Department of Land and Forest and Department of the Environment; the pollution people who operate independently of the government to see if we can get an assessment; not only of what they're doing there but about the rehabilitation programs, whether or not they're cleaning up behind them and replanting and this kind of thing.

How many companies of your size would there be in Edmonton?

We're the largest.

How are you organised financially?

This company has never paid people well. We're probably just paying poverty wages which is around \$3,000 to \$3,600 a year. Previous to that we were paying a hell of a lot less than poverty wages. For the first year and a half people made no more than \$250.00 per month and during a lot of that period of time, people weren't working full time. Now we're paying \$400.00 per month to people who work here. It's beginning to look like we're going to be able to keep at least the baseline people working pretty much full time. If it gets to a situation where we can raise that again, then of course we'll do it. But usually what we'll do, since we are all shareholders, is see the value in laying off an increase in wages until the year end and look back. We'll look at the accounts and decide collectively whether or not we will take an increase in salary and I think that attitude has been one of the leading factors in our survival. People are willing to make personal sacrifices for the collective benefit — well certainly it has been that attitude that has bought us the Arriflex and the Nagra, and has bought us time, time — which is really important in gradually developing some credibility and a track record.

Do you charge the normal going rates for what you do?

We try, but we negotiate — there's no such thing as a going rate in this town as yet. It's contingent on so many other things. If you're competing with thirteen other people in response to a tender and you know that you've got a really good idea, then I think you can tender a budget which is viable and will not oblige you to take a bath in the production. That has not often happened. I think because we are trying to respond to peoples' needs, we've finally arrived at a way of looking at situations and trying to extract from people information which is helpful in putting together a story outline with a story key, with a story tone, that will give them some kind of a theme that they can look at even before we start to pull focus.

That's the area in which, for some considerable time, we were very weak — not knowing how to respond to the often unarticulated needs of a potential sponsor.

How do you work together as a unit?

Often a director or producer will deny a cameraman or editor access to what they're really after until the first day of the shoot, and that to my mind is really wrong. It seems to me that you're really not preproduced until the cameraman has had a chance to go over the script with the director and the producer for that matter, and even change it. I think a director has to be open to that, especially if he doesn't have some skills as a cinematographer himself. That has been another strong point here. Everyone has a chance to take a kick at the script before it goes into production; and that includes the editor. If a person who's going to edit the film says that there's no way that this cut is going to work, then we sit down and rework it. A lot of things have gone into production in the east that have been CFDC funded which just have not been carefully enough

pre-produced or put in a ready state before they pull focus. Believe me, it's really worth it; it really pays.

You've already had some experience with the CFDC. How did they go for your internal financial structure?

They didn't, they were not happy at all with what we were prepared to pay. They said you can't pay a cameraman \$400.00/month and expect him to be a good cameraman, which is a bureaucratic consideration because we know damn well we can do that if we want to. We can give him nothing, and if he wants to do it he'll do it and do a damn good job on it. But they've got this thing in the back of their minds, that unless you pay a guy top rates he won't do what you want him to do; that he'll sabotage you.

But of course the other side of that coin is that if they did give grants to people who applied on your basis, they'd have shit from the unions.

Maybe they would. I really don't think the CFDC as an investor has to worry about that. It's the producers' problem.

Yes, but the CFDC is also a political sort of organization.

Yes, that's true. It's a political organization; and that's a reality that I suppose we should try and live with more, but at the same time, I feel a little bit badly about the fact that they're not willing to live with some of the producers' conditions and problems and so on. What we basically wanted to do was do a film which would involve a larger number of actors for a long period of time, rather than doing a film with three people in it. Anyway, we're going to go carefully now. I suppose it's a little bit conservative, but I would much rather be in a position to say that we are going to make a good feature the first time around rather than take money and blow it just through inexperience. That's a little bit too indulgent for our tastes. It's also not too good for one's financial reputation.

How do you think as a company you would transfer the feature situation?

Well, in fact we already have; **Ernest Brown** was an hour. It was managed reasonably well. The film we're doing now is a dramatic film. It's being done as an industrial safety film for the Workmen's Compensation Board. We've got a character in it who is somewhat of a Grim Reaper, the biker character, but he's more of a gentleman; and there's a dramatic tension all the way through the story, there are ups & downs in it. It's probably the most dramatic thing we've done. We're using actors and we're using costumes and we're using makeup, props, dramatic lighting, etc.

More like a Peter Watkins' documentary-feature type mixture . . .

Yes, we're using a lot of documentary information. There's dramatic dialogue in it. We've hired actors to play certain parts.

It's nice if you can get industry people to back you up and get in what they want in, while at the same time you're getting the experience you want. That all adds up. If it's handled well, dramatically, it speaks for itself.

If it goes, it's going to say a lot about whether or not our editors can handle a 90 minute film. I think the music can be handled. I think cinematically it can be handled. Whether or not it will pace properly and maintain a rapport with the audience remains to be seen. I have reasonable confidence that it can be done. So I think our strengths are on the verge of being graphically provable. I think it will come. I'm sure that we'll all feel more comfortable about producing fully dramatic, full-length features once this period of consolidation and transition is behind us.

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