

who has seen the wind

Arcola, Saskatchewan, is a changed place since Allan King moved in to film *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Lee Rolfe tells us about the shoot and traces the paternity of the screenplay used to film W.O. Mitchell's novel.

visiting arcola

by Lee Rolfe



The reconstructed main street of Arcola (Jose Ferrer in the center)

(1) the shoot

Bertha Burton sat at a long table barricaded by stacks and stacks of law books. Her office was in obvious disarray. "My ledgers are scattered all over and I can't find my account books," she mildly bemoaned. In general the inconvenience has not been all that great. Adjacent to the room in which Mrs. Burton was lamenting, Allan King, producer-director of the million-dollar production of **Who Has Seen The Wind**, was shouting "CUT" for the umpteenth time on a crucial climactic scene.

The courthouse in Arcola, Sask., where Mrs. Burton works from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. daily filling a multitude of duties including deputy sheriff and clerk of the court, was being used for a number of the film's key scenes and her office was being used as the school board offices.

The filming of **Who Has Seen The Wind**, which is set in the Depression era, is probably the biggest event to hit Arcola since the Great Depression. Although there were some initial reservations about a movie company taking over the peaceful little Prairie town, the shoot has become the pride of Arcola.

Arcola scored big points in its long-standing feud with Carlyle, an identical Prairie community located six miles east of Arcola on Highway 13. The battle began years before when Arcola was selected as the judicial centre. Later Arcola gained the hospital but Carlyle gained the nursing home. And so on.

People armed with pocket Instamatics and press representatives armed with reams of questions have converged on the site. Those absent are the residents of Carlyle. According to some, the residents of Carlyle acted "quite snooty" when the pool-hall scenes were shot at the poolhall in Carlyle. They obviously proved that jealousy is a stronger character trait than curiosity. But it's all part of the game that only Prairie townspeople can fully understand and appreciate.

The 580 residents of Arcola are enthusiastic about the filming and have adjusted to the chaotic conditions created by King and company with ease and hospitable grace. So far, the only incident which has upset the townspeople occurred when Chapelle Jaffe, who plays Gordon Pinsent's wife in the film, nonchalantly breast-fed her child on the town's main street during filming. Other than that, all is well. No doubt, the three-month

occupation of Arcola will be the talk of the town for eons to come. The actual shooting schedule was to be six weeks but construction crews moved into Arcola a good month before to change the progressive looks of Arcola back to the rustic dilapidated conditions of the 1930s. In one fell swoop, Arcola was put on the map, lost its newly paved main street and won its battle with Carlyle hands down.

Driving into Arcola now is like driving into the past. The entire main street is vintage 1930s, with antique false fronts adorning the shops. The massive orange grain elevators on the outskirts of the town were repainted white. Virtually every business had to have some alteration done to it and the townspeople were not the least bit reluctant; that is, until after King explained the entire operation to the residents in a town council meeting which attracted nearly everyone.

Now that everything is completed many of the merchants are smitten with the new paint jobs and plan to leave them that way, although everyone has the option of having exteriors returned to prior conditions. The fake fronts and antiquing will remain for about a year until after the premiere is held - in Arcola. And why not? Although they are anticipating some friction from Regina, which tossed \$300,000 into the production kitty, Arcolans are adamant about having the premiere held in their town with all stars present in full regalia. And if one thinks about it, what harm is there in holding the premiere of this important Canadian film in the centre in which it all took place?

Remember the myth surrounding Lana Turner's fabled "discovery" while she sat at the soda fountain in a drugstore? Well, Kathleen Meikle could be the Canadian counterpart of that discovery, but she doubts it.

"The first day the shooting began I was on the main street, like everyone else, curious to see what was happening. I saw this woman watching me who turned out to be Patricia Watson (the film's scriptwriter); she asked me to talk with Allan King." After a few questions, Mrs. Meikle was cast in **Who Has Seen The Wind** as the wife of American actor Jose Ferrer. One day a housewife, the next day a movie star; but Mrs. Meikle hasn't allowed herself to be swept away by all the change.

According to King, Ferrer was cast in the film as a result of the Canadian Film Development Corporation and

Famous Players' concern that the film should have a "name" actor for a stronger box-office draw. The role of the Old Ben, the town's outcast bootlegger, was easiest to cast with a non-Canadian. "I understand their viewpoint to get their invested money back but I disagree with it," King said. The role which Ferrer plays is sufficiently different from the other roles that an imported actor won't unbalance the production too much.

Mrs. Meikle, who has but five words of dialogue in the film ("Ain't seen him since yesterday") said she was "scared skinny, or maybe sick is a better word" playing opposite an actor of Ferrer's stature - and as his wife no less. "Off-camera you would have never known that he was of the stature he is. Not only did he mix well with everyone but he even refused a chauffeur-driven car that was offered to him." That impressed Mrs. Meikle.

Jose Ferrer had come and gone early in the shoot and everyone who met him spoke highly of him as a person and as an actor. Allan King said it was difficult and expensive filming Ferrer's scenes because nor-



Helen Shaver relaxing in the Arcola courthouse

Lee Rolfe is the staff film reviewer at the Winnipeg Tribune.

mally all scenes set in one area are filmed at the same time, but the company has had to return to areas they otherwise would be finished with... "But that's part of the difficulty of accommodating performers and commitments."

Mrs. Meikle was one of the few people spoken to who said she hated the book, which spans eight years in the life of a boy (from the age of four to 12). "I found it dry up until the time Brian - the central character - turns 10." Most people interviewed, both crew and townspeople, seem to be unusually enamored of the book, seeing the allegorical characters and events as true and accurate depictions of Prairie life.

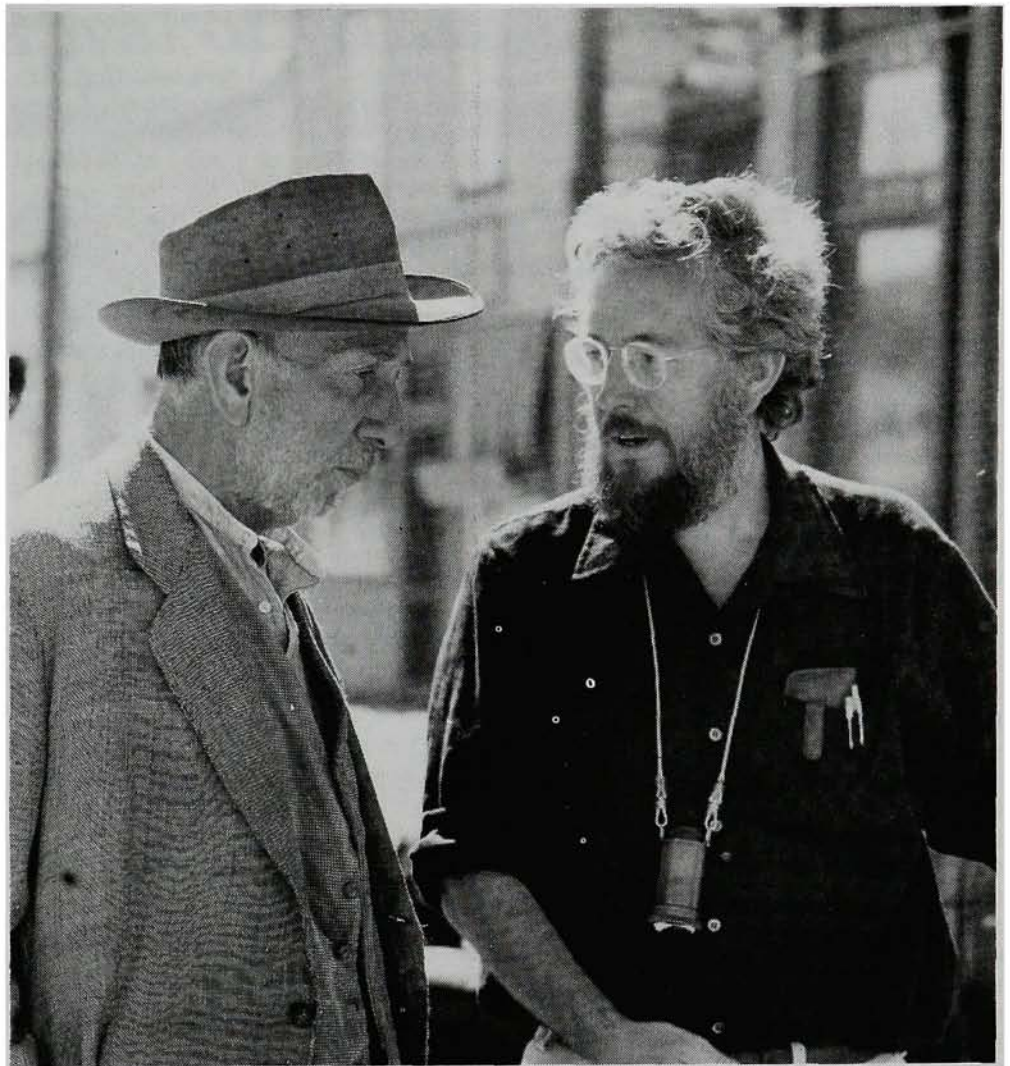
photo Lee Rolfe



Charmion King during a dinner break

The only other person who voiced reservations about the book and characters was Charmion King (Mrs. Gordon Pinsent) who plays the "heavy" in the film. She did not find her black-and-white character very believable but adopted the attitude that she was doing the best she could with a stereotyped role.

For Mrs. Meikle, the only drawback to accepting the role of Mrs. Ben was that "they cut off my \$20 streaks and now I can't do a thing with my hair."



Jose Ferrer takes direction from Allan King

(2) the author ?

A million-dollar film, by Canadian standards, is big - especially when that production is directed by Allan King and stars Gordon Pinsent and Jose Ferrer. But when that film is based on a book by one of Canada's most noted and esteemed authors, its progress is watched with keen interest. During the two-month occupation of Arcola, Sask., the site of the filming of W.O. Mitchell's **Who Has Seen The Wind**, the tiny town has been besieged by filmmakers, press and the curious. But one VIP is conspicuous by his absence: the author himself, William Osborne Mitchell.

Considering that his 1947 Prairie classic is largely autobiographical, it seemed odd that the author was not on the site. But he was nowhere to be found, nor was he expected. Instead, he was off at his summer retreat, away from telephones, putting the finishing touches to a number of other projects.

The first indication that something was radically amiss occurred when

Teri Matravolgyi, the film's public relations co-ordinator, nearly made a sharp right turn and drove into a ditch when the subject of Mitchell was mentioned. She was visibly alarmed and cautioned that this line of questioning should not be pursued.

Who Has Seen The Wind was quickly turning into **Who Has Seen W.O. Mitchell?** The first person interviewed was Gwen Iveson, the production manager. In the midst of routine questions about her background, the practical side of the business and her 11-year association with director Allan King, the topic of Mitchell was slipped in. Ms. Iveson made only a vague comment. "Budge Crawley (the original producer) left the production at his request because he did not consider that the script (penned by Patricia Watson, King's wife) was commercial enough." It has been previously reported that Crawley was at odds over the Watson script. Pierre Lamy stepped in as producer, on the advice of the CFDC, and saved the

production from being shelved for a second time.

Ms. Iveson was not prepared to talk about the issue. Her tone reflected the general feeling of all the people interviewed. Concerning questions about filming, everyone was co-operative and genial; concerning Mitchell, everyone froze.

The wife of one of the company members confided that she knew Mr. Mitchell was very upset over the Watson treatment of his work and wanted his name stricken from any credit. She also said that he was angry that his adaptation was not the one being used, suggesting that nepotism was a key factor in King's selection of the Watson screenplay over Mitchell's.

On to Patricia Watson who said that her function on the set was that of dialogue director. "The script had been approved and there has been little revision made." Mrs. Watson, who was very much en garde throughout the interview, replied to a question concerning the book's stereotyped characters: "As I say, I don't want to get into a critique at all. I really don't think it's my duty to criticize that book. If you want to talk to someone whose function that is, you should talk to Mitchell. I just did the adaptation." It was more than peculiar that Mrs. Watson was so adamantly reluctant to talk about the book, which is, after all, the source of her adaptation. If anyone is qualified to comment, she is. And if she's not, what is she doing writing a screenplay?

Her most revealing comments follow:

Question: How does your script differ from the original one Mitchell did?

Answer: Pardon?

Question: How does your script differ from the original one Mitchell did?

Answer: Ah, I don't know what script you're talking about.

Question: Well, I was told that Mitchell originally did a script which you people decided not to use.

Answer: No, as I say, we've worked on this project for four years... He's very pleased and very supportive of us.

Question: Has he read your script?

Answer: Not this final version. He's read other drafts and he sent in some material but that was a week before we went into production and it's very hard to incorporate new changes at that point. And besides, a lot of it was new material.

No one seemed to agree on the stories. Some said Mitchell wrote a script; others said he didn't. Some said that he was very pleased; others said he was angry and upset.

At dinner on the second day of the two-day visit, Allan King was available for questioning. Diplomatic and confident, King was not at all ruffled the way his wife had been. King explained his version of the Mitchell affair thus: "There was nothing wrong with his script" - a treatment King says was submitted in late June - "but it wasn't quite right." Mr. King said that Mitchell's treatment was a good one for a television production but because he had altered the focus of the book it wasn't right for a feature film. "We're on good terms. There is some hurt on his part, which I can understand and I'm sorry we weren't able to use more of his material." He added that he wasn't aware that Mitchell wanted his name removed from the credits.

Although Mr. Mitchell was not available for comment, we were able to reach his wife in Calgary. Voicing some initial reservations about commenting on the matter, Mrs. Mitchell

finally said that her husband had, in fact, written a screenplay but that it was rejected. W.O. Mitchell is not unfamiliar with scriptwriting; he gained his reputation on scores of CBC *Jake And The Kid* radio scripts. "I don't think there was ever any intention of using it but he was to be involved from the very start," Mrs. Mitchell said. When Allan King picked up the option on the book, after CBC decided they no longer wanted it, the idea was that the author would adapt his own book but, according to Mrs. Mitchell, Patricia Watson wanted to do the screenplay.

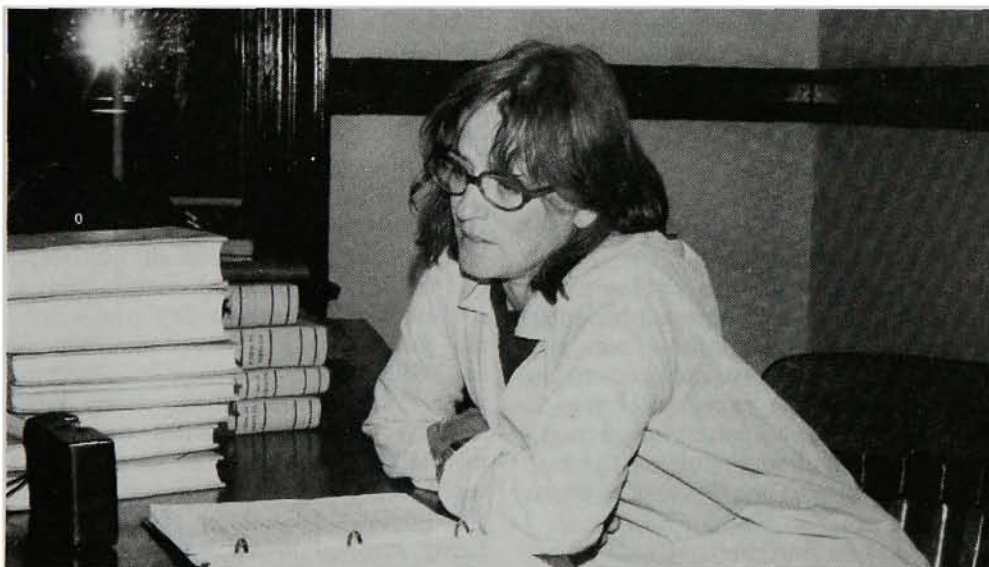
The CBC was planning to produce the book initially in five one-hour episodes à la *Rich Man, Poor Man*, but "he was never approached on the matter again. My husband is a strong person and perhaps Mr. King felt that Bill would take over the production." She definitely feels, however, that he should have been more involved in the shooting of the film. Mitchell has been quoted as saying that he would have given anything to have been present "but not under those circumstances."

When asked whether her husband was supporting the production or not, Mrs. Mitchell said: "It all depends what you mean by supporting. In a sense he has to, since he sold the rights to Mr. King. If it's not a good script he will lose out on the new expensive edition of the book which is coming out in November."

She went on to say that Mitchell was hurt - one of the few comments which corresponds to King's. Also, he did alter the original material but only in order to preserve the theme from one medium to another. "He did change the book and add new dialogue but, being that he is most familiar with it, I think he's the only one who could do it."

At this point in our telephone interview, Mrs. Mitchell thought she had said too much. "Based on the questions and answers you've got, you have a good story," she said, adding that the book, which is a favorite of university studies, should have been taught to those working on the production. Judging from her tone, Mrs. Mitchell has strong reservations about the film but hanging up on a note of optimism, she said that she has been told that some of the rushes are excellent and that the treatment might work.

Who Has Seen The Wind is scheduled for a May release date but as yet, the film, which is over budget, does not have a distributor. For the greatest market potential, Gwen Iveson is hoping that an American distributor will pick up the film. □



Pat Watson going over the script

photo Lee Rolfe