

Richard Stringer, cameraman, and David Springbett, sound recordist, are freelance filmmakers from Winnipeg with their base of operations in Toronto. They are part of a small group of independent filmmakers who've formed the Canadian Acme Crew & Gear Co.

They were on a five week shoot last year in Bolivia shooting an hour-long documentary co-produced by the BBC and OXFAM for telecast on the BBC's *World About Us*. The film, called *The Beginning of Love*, shows the life of the Amayran Indians in Bolivia and incorporates a low-key look at OXFAM operations in the area.

The film follows a young Amayran, Casimiro, through the many contrasts of culture and climate in the area around La Paz, Bolivia. These travels are paralleled with those of the OXFAM field director of Lima, Mike McCormack, who is on a working-adventure-honeymoon with his wife Merle. He travels around the Altiplano with Xavier Albo, a Jesuit involved in teaching literacy and political awareness.

FILMING IN THE ANDES

— by Richard Stringer

The director, Tony Mayer, and the production manager, Kevan Barker, were looking for a North American crew since the savings in transportation costs are considerable. After screening some of my films in Toronto, they decided to use myself and David Springbett as crew. We were away for five weeks — August 15th to September 19th. We flew directly to La Paz, where all involved met and made for the Altiplano by truck. Besides David and myself, there were Tony Mayer, Kevan Barker, Penny Tweedie (stills photographer), our guide and translator Xavier Albo, our "actors" — Mike Merle and Casimiro; and our driver Lucio.

We stayed at a convent in an Altiplano town called Corpa, where we had to forego the conveniences of hot water and electricity and the main form of exercise was snowball fights with the Indian schoolgirls and singing and dancing with the nuns in the evening (as long as our supply of rum lasted).

The climatic conditions were really hard to deal with. First of all, the altitude throws you — the 14,000 foot level literally takes your breath away! Your enthusiasm is subdued because everything takes so much effort. Almost everyone experienced altitude sickness since with the lack of oxygen, your body becomes more vulnerable. If you overeat, you can be sick for two days — it's the kind of place to avoid hangovers! On our arrival, conditions were

dry and very dusty. The roads were so bad one of our trucks broke a rear spring. But our driver, Lucio, didn't bat an eye — it was fixed on the spot in an hour with an inner tube and wire. Lucio was a godsend one night when we thought we were totally lost in a blizzard — he zeroed in on the convent like a pilot flying on instruments.

The snow brought all sorts of problems — our continuity was screwed up, the schoolgirls kept attacking with snowballs, the intense sun bounced off the snow and caught us off-guard (we got sunburn to the point of blistering) and the melting snow turned Altiplano into a mud bowl. Once, while running around trying to finish a sequence before the sun set, I went belly-up and gave myself and the BL a thick mudcoat, much to the entertainment of the locals.

But through it all, the items we shot were really interesting. The life of the Amayran farmer is so far removed from the rest of the world. We filmed the Indians working on the fields with plow and oxen; playing a soccer game with an award presentation of bottles of beer, a sheep and naturally a llama; rituals with cocoa leaves forecasting the future; a fiesta where we nearly got mobbed by some hostile drunken dancers; we were on Lake Titicaca in papyrus reed fishing boats; and finally filmed a llama sacrifice much to our dislike — especially when we were expected to partake of the undercooked tough meat!

We went back to La Paz for a quick wash-up and then drove over mountain passes down into the jungle. This is really an impressive (read: terrifying) trip. At 16,000 feet, you're surrounded by snow-capped mountains, then narrow dirt roads which cling to the edge of the mountains and plunge down into the jungle valleys. We literally drove down through clouds, having mixed feelings about them blocking the hair-raising views of 3,000 to 4,000 foot drops on a very narrow road where passing oncoming trucks is a very tricky undertaking. There are crosses erected at the side of the road where trucks have gone over the edge. We were told of a BBC crew who had a fatal accident on these roads just a year ago. But the adrenalin was worth it — we came through the clouds to find a virtual paradise. Tangerines, papayas, pineapples, *cocoa leaves* — growing all around us in a warm, humid environment with real air to breathe! All this only 5 hours (50 miles) from the Altiplano.

Another day's travel found us deep in the jungle at the only hotel for miles (a run-down dump which had seen bet-

ter years) run by a man who claimed and did seem to have a gold mine in his backyard. This was our Base of Operations and Drinking Hole for filming "The 14th of September" — a village formed by Altiplano Amayrans. It was a very communal place where everybody gets together to build a new schoolhouse, or a road to the main road, etc. After a week of a very pleasant shoot amongst very friendly people, we moved down the road until we ran out of bridges and had to transfer to dugout canoe to get to Guani — a town with an incredible pioneering backwoods look about it. From here on, the only way of getting around (other than mule train) was on an uncompleted road being built by a fanatical, chauvinistic Dominican monk — Father Tex. We stayed at his military-style work camp. At 6 a.m. a very distorted, scratched version of *Ave Maria* is played over the camp's P.A. system and at 6:30 *The Yellow Rose of Texas* makes sure you're up and going. But to give Father Tex credit — building roads there is next to impossible. To get anywhere in a reasonably straight line means scaling innumerable mountains and just as many valleys under very dangerous conditions. Approximately 100 miles, covering 50 miles straight-line-distance will take four to five years to build. Father Tex gets funding from groups like OXFAM, and workers from the universities who would otherwise be drafted into the army.

After filming road building operations, it took us three days to get back to La Paz. This time we had a super view of the mountain passes and did a considerable amount of filming. We had a camera mount made at Father Tex' machine shop to get some truck POV shots. Back in La Paz (our first shower in 10 days) we spent a week huffing and puffing around getting some pickup shots and some aeriels.

It was here that we seriously considered going to Chile to cover the revolution — little realizing we couldn't have made it (alive, anyway). We flew back through Lima and filmed a mass wedding of 120 couples. September 19th we flew back to Toronto only to have one day off before a 2-week shoot in the Maritimes!

The equipment on the shoot was as follows: Arri BL with 10-100mm Zeiss, Arri S with prime lenses; lighting — portable light bounced off white sackcloth; film — Eastmancolor negative (at very high prices through Bolivian Customs); sound — Nagra 4.2; Sun made available through the occasional offering to Mother Earth.



Richard Stringer on camera, David Springbett on sound, shooting at Altiplano

David with the still-dry Nagra 4.2



Balancing tripods and crew on the edge of a precipice



On Location: BOLIVIA

Roadside cross commemorating the BBC crew

Director Tony Mayer and Richard Stringer



Richard and David surrounded by fascinated Amayrans, with BBC director Tony Mayer in foreground

