

All-women crew use Super 8 for documentaries with a difference

An all-woman film crew from Canmore, Alberta, is making a series of documentary films with a distinct difference.

The most obvious difference is in their use of Super 8 professionally in Flying Tomato Productions' documentary series on the Pribilof Islands. The more profound difference is in the approach – filmmaker and native people interacting to produce a unique view of a culture and its environment.

Filmmaker, producer and director Susanne Swibold and associate producer Helen Corbett have spent much of the past five years living among the native Aleuts on the Pribilofs, two windswept dots in the Bering Sea off the southwest Alaska coast. Out of this interaction came the decision to let the Aleuts narrate and script the four films in the series (the Aleuts also have final approval of the completed films). "Too often", says Swibold, "documentaries provide only a superficial view of a culture that an outsider does not and cannot fully understand."



In the second film – on Aleut culture – the filmmakers chose to portray not the usual, and universal, problems of natives in modern society but instead the spirit of an endangered people who live close to the land. As Aleut leader Larry Mercurieff says, "If you lose your feet off the land, you're in the Aleut version of Hell." That spirit has sustained them through a tenuous 200-year existence on the Pribilofs, most of it as virtual slaves of an annual fur-seal harvest under first Russian and then U.S. government overlords.

The first film, *Peter Picked a Seal Stick*, is a straight-forward ethnographic portrait of the seal harvest by the Aleuts for subsistence and commercial purposes. The second film, recently completed, depicts a people who have now gained their independence but face further dislocations as they prepare to shift toward an economy based primarily on their lost art of fishing. The third and fourth films, natural histories of the Pribilof's world-class populations of fur seals and sea birds, are now entering post-production.

The Pribilof series has not been without controversy. "Some audiences have trouble dealing with a native perspec-

tive," says Swibold, and the depiction of seals being killed has raised objections and censorship from television networks in Canada and the United States.

Yet the women's persistence has paid off. They have independently raised \$170,000 for the first two films under charitable umbrellas in Canada and the United States. The seal harvest film has been shown at such forums as the Venezuela Super 8 Film Festival and the International Wildlife Film Festival in Missoula, Montana. The cultural film

has been shown to members of the U.S. Congress determining the future of the Pribilof seal harvest. And perhaps most importantly, says Corbett, the cultural film has made many Aleuts proud of their culture for the first time.

Swibold is a pioneer in Super 8 documentaries, using special mounts that hold prime lenses from 35-mm and 2 1/4-inch still cameras (the films are enlarged to 16 mm for release). Trained in her native United States as an artist, she has for more than a decade been making

Super 8 films, on the wildlife of the Galapagos, the seabird colonies off Newfoundland, the Badlands of Alberta and Nahanni National Park in the Northwest Territories.

She uses Super 8 because "it's cheaper, smaller, much more accessible and unobtrusive in the environment." Video, she says, "does not have the keeping power of film. It uses a magnet to produce an image and thus loses its magnetism over a period of time, whereas film is a chemical process, which allows the image to remain intact for a much longer period of time than video ever will."

● Bill Corbett

An Act of God: Ottawa' filmmaker Gary Nichol's 'infallible' documentary

When you've invested \$50,000 in a documentary and at the last minute your male leads has to cancel out, you can hardly kiss your 50 G's goodbye and expect to remain in business. But what else can you do when your lead is the Pope, and your story is his scheduled visit with 4,000 Dene people gathered at Fort Simpson, N.W.T.?

That was the problem facing veteran filmmaker Gary Nichol, whose company, Gary Nichol & Associates Ltd., operates out of Ottawa. He had spent three weeks shooting 30,000 ft. of 16 mm prior to the fog that prevented the Pope's plane from landing at Simpson and providing the *raison d'être* for Nichol's film. This footage portrayed the Dene nation's elaborate preparations to receive His Holiness, preparations ranging from an altar housed in a huge open-sided teepee to caribou-berger stands to feed the multitude: Dogrib and Slavey, Chippewyan and Hare Skin Slavey and Loucheux gathered from their villages, their hunting and trapping grounds, their jobs in white man's towns to receive the personal benediction of the Holy Father.

As word spread that morning of Wednesday, Sept. 12, that the dense fog blanketing the MacKenzie valley at Simpson would prevent the Pope's plane from landing, Nichol rolled his cameras to record the disappointment on Indian faces – a year-long buildup and a crashing letdown.

"I didn't think I was wasting money," Nichol says, "I knew I was seeing the end of a dream, and that with careful editing my film would be a documentary

of importance in the history of the Dene people."

Nichol conferred with his aides, especially his brother Richard, chief cinematographer, and later with Don Brittain, writer and narrator. He consulted with members of the Dene council who had commissioned the film, and his financial backers, the CBC and the Oblate Fathers, who between them had pledged \$85,000, and also the National Film Board, which was providing production services.

The question was simply: where do we go from here? Nichol argued, with strong support from Brittain, that there was still potential in those cans of film if they revised the story line, reorienting the film to tell the story of the first non-political gathering in Canada of the native peoples. It could have worldwide potential; Indians were present from other provinces, from the U.S., even from South America. Its impact would spread far beyond Denendeh, the 450,000 sq. mi. of the N.W.T. claimed by the five tribes of the Dene nation as their motherland.

Thus was born *An Act of God – A Gathering of the Denendeh*, a film to tell the world about the Dene, and with the aborted papal visit as a backdrop, to bring out the strength of the Dene spiritually and the Dene's cohesion, especially evident in adversity. Much of the poignancy was captured by Nichol's cameramen roaming through the congregation at mass the day after the aborted landing – ironically, a beautiful Indian summer day without a trace of fog.

Despite some reservations in CBC

executive offices, the financing, which had taken seven months to put together, held up under the strain. Nichol and his crew, with vital input from NFB production staff, put together an hour-long film in 14 weeks from the start of editing to Jan. 1, 1985, when *An Act of God* had its premiere on CBC National network – an incredibly short time from opening the cans to feeding the network. Despite stiff competition for airtime from U.S. football on New Year's Day, 760,000 viewers watched the premiere. Some viewers even went to the trouble – and expense – of phoning CBC in Toronto to get Nichol's phone number in Ottawa so they could call him and offer their congratulations.

In February members of the Dene council journeyed to Rome for a private audience with the Pope, hoping to persuade him to dock his prospective visit to the U.S. and detour for a day with the Dene at Simpson. Among their presents to the Holy Father was a video of the film.

Nichol's growing reputation as a director and producer was originally built on his cultural and nature documentaries in the areas of art and artisans, like *Jean-Luc Grondin*, the ornithological painter, and *Bob Kerr, Master Carver* of duck decoys. Gradually, almost unknowingly, his interest and emphasis shifted to the native Indian culture, films on the Yerxa family of Ojibway artists, the almost forgotten Iroquois game of snow snakes, or harvesting wild rice by canoe. Nearly all of these have been shown on CBC, PBS, and as in-flight entertainment on Canadian and foreign air lines.

From an appreciation of Indian culture, Nichol has veered to some of the less attractive realities of Indian life. His *The Circle Moving*, a half-hour documentary on alcohol and drug abuse among native people and how they are using their own resources of mind and spirit to control it, won a Special Jury Award at the 1984 Yorkton Festival.

A sequel, *The Only Gift*, is scheduled for 1985, being produced in collaboration with the National Native Association for Drug and Alcohol Prevention, and will target on native women's attitudes and roles in combatting this evil gnawing at the roots of their family life.

● Gerald Waring

