

John Kent Harrison's
The Way of the Willow

It was in 1979 that the south-east Asians were adrift, destination unknown. The news media did its best to illustrate the horrors of the condition of these "boat people." Civilized nations had no choice but to open their doors and accept their allotment of refugees. The Canadian government adopted a refugee sponsorship program which encouraged private individuals and groups to assume responsibility for helping these refugees to integrate into a new environment. The task was monumental and deeply touched the lives of the many people across Canada who responded to the call.

One of these sponsors, screenwriter John Kent Harrison, then a teacher in Concordia University's film program, turned the experience into a film project for himself and his students. With the help of other faculty members they produced a professionally competent film called *The Way of the Willow*.

The film is superb. It captures the very essence of the refugees' experience of their first few days in Canada. *The Way of the Willow* is a half-hour dramatic film which shows how difficult it is for the refugees "to learn how to bend like the willow in a storm" - which is the only way they can survive in their new surroundings. Harrison's film shows both the strength required and the pain involved in adapting to this alien Canadian culture with an elegance that moved me even more than did my own six weeks of intensive research into the refugee sponsorship program. And in the course of that research I heard it all - the loss of friends and family in transit, the psychological problems, the fears, the uncertainty, the bad teeth, the language problems, and the enormous difficulty of having to learn an entirely different basis for survival - the Canadian lifestyle. But it was while watching the film that, for the first time, tears of emotion wet my face as I actually felt some of their agony.

We share the experience of the Tran family: Hung the father, Anh the mother and Huw the three-year-old son. Having survived the horrendous ordeal of the boats, the pirate, the refugee camps and the loss of their second young son, the family arrives at Canadian Immigration



• A quiet pause between 'takes' for Lan and little Huw

to have their fate sealed as permanent residents of Canada. They spend their first night in an army barracks and as they get up in the morning Anh asks Hung if they are free. Hung doesn't know, but the audience knows enough about their own culture to understand that while they are legally free it may be a long time before they will feel really free, if ever.

Hung's need to keep one foot planted firmly on his belongings as he takes the mandatory morning shower, despite his natural inhibitions, is a perfect illustration of the suspicion he necessarily feels as a result of his sleepless nightmare.

Having been warned by the immigration official - a sympathetic and kindly woman who recognizes the tremendous need of these people but is powerless to do much about it - of Anh's psychological problems because of the loss of her son, the Renshaws (the Canadian sponsors), take the Tran's to their new apartment.

We see Anh locked in an incomprehensible world, failing repeatedly to find her way. All the plastic bowls in the apartment are lined up neatly on the counter filled with the precious water she is saving from the incessantly dripping faucet in the kitchen sink. The beautiful mural of a Vietnamese village which she paints on the wall of the apartment brings down the wrath of an angry landlord. Her efforts to buy shrimp to feed her family only confirm her inability to understand how the Canadians use money. In the climax of the story she comes face to face with her ultimate failure - an inability to secure the well-being of her only remaining son.

Her desperation is crystalized as she wanders hopelessly out of the Montreal General Hospital totally oblivious to the snow on her icy bare feet. Our hearts go out to her as we too understand that she can never go back to where her heart is, and that she has a long row to hoe before life will be bearable here.

One of the striking things about this film is its distinctively Canadian flavour. The profound influence of our documentary tradition makes this drama seem like cinema vérité. The acting is so good that we seem to be watching life itself unfold. The only problem that I experienced with the film was that the Canadian sponsors, the Renshaws, are so Canadian as to be almost clichéd - well meaning, empathic, practical, but somehow ineffective and strangely inappropriate.

George Renshaw's clown act in the hospital scene as he tries to make Huw laugh seems pathetic in its lack of sensitivity to the needs of the situation and yet characterizes the relationship between refugee and sponsor.

I can only assume that it was Harrison's innate Canadian modesty which

prevented him from touting the Canadian sponsor's horn just a little. While I am sure of the truth of his portrayal of the Renshaws I would also maintain that it isn't the only truth.

Last summer I was involved in a research project which evaluated the refugee sponsorship program across Canada. I found it remarkable how much these sponsors gave of themselves in terms of time, money and love to assist their refugee family. Somehow I believe that the film was remiss by barely hinting at the fact that the Canadian sponsors played an effective role in helping the refugee families to weather this storm by teaching them which way to bend.

Despite this, the cast and crew of *The Way of the Willow* have created a sensitive, memorable and worthwhile film which accurately portrays the refugees' first experience of Canada - their home, but non-native land.

Kate Jansen •

Tony Snowstill's
Our Children Are Our Future

An alarming proportion of native children in Canada end up in the care of the state; many of them are adopted by white families and sent to schools where there are no other native children. When they reach adolescence, a sense of rootlessness and despair pushes them into a self-destructive life style.

The story of the breakdown of native culture in the wake of industrial society is a familiar one. This documentary by independent filmmaker Tony Snowstill (whose previous work includes *The Man, The Snake and the Fox* - an Indian legend, and *To Talk With Dignity* in which native actors portray white reactionaries) is more carefully researched and sensitively directed than most CBC and NFB productions on the subject. Instead of making generalizations and quoting statistics, the film deals in depth with two individuals caught in the system.

Michael, 20 years old, is a Cree from Northern Saskatchewan, serving a two-year sentence for armed robbery. In their comfortable suburban home his adopted family treated him as though he were their own son. Against the stark background of his jail cell he speaks of his confusion and shows the marks of his attempts at suicide. His story is contrasted with that of Chip, a Blackfoot child from Southern Alberta who was adopted by a family on the reserve. He is shown in his new home where they

speak the native language and he is taught the folklore and dancing at an early age. He is being brought up in an extended-family situation where the old people are teachers who pass on the traditions of the past to the young.

A sequence shot on a reserve shows why cases like Chip are rare. The government built housing is so inadequate that most families could not fulfill the minimum requirements of Children's Aid. The houses are already over-crowded and there are few employment opportunities for the parents, leading to many of the same social problems encountered by unemployed people in the city.

In the powerful opening sequence a speaker at an Indian Child Caravan rally in Vancouver points an accusing finger at the camera protesting the loss of their children to a child welfare system which denies them their heritage. The two stories are dramatically interwoven without the use of any moralizing narration. The dilemma of the white family is presented sympathetically and the audience is left to draw its own conclusions. The process by which justice often contributes to the problem rather than relieving it is shown in a re-creation of a court case in which a native social worker argues unsuccessfully against a Children's Aid representative that an Indian mother should be allowed to keep her family together.



The film presents clear evidence of the need for more Indian social workers and better child care facilities on the reserve. There is also a need for more films showing modern Indians coping with social change instead of being the victims of it. A growing number of Indians are finding jobs in the city and bringing up their children in an urban environment without giving up their traditional values. The Wandering Spirit School, Anduhyaun House and the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto are examples of the changing role of Indians in Canada life. This urban-based Indian community was present in large numbers to support the opening of *Our Children Are Our Future* at Harbourfront with an Honour drum song. The film shows the ability of native people to confront social problems through their own initiative.

Alan Collins •

OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE p./d. Tony Snowstill a.s.o.c. p. Christine Welsh d.o.p. Mark Irwin e.s.c. Robert Nichol ad. rec. Ian Hendry, Martin Fossum pic. ed./ad. ed. Christine Welsh cam. asst. Carl Harvey Pamela Nichol orig. mus. Al Soberman Ben Mink re-rec. Soundmix Ltd. stills Christine Welsh p.c. Direction Films running time 53 min. col. 16mm dia. Canadian Learning Co. Direction Films

THE WAY OF THE WILLOW p./d./sc. John Harrison p./d.o.p. Bob Miller a.d. Val Nathan (1st), Rudy Barichello (2nd), Avra Goldenblatt (3rd) p. man. André Lauzon unit man. Richard Carriere. Nicole Joron (1st asst.), Carol-Lynn Meland (2nd asst.), Céline Pelletier (3rd asst.) gal./cam. op. Dave Young asst. cam. Marc Landau (1st), Helen Yee (2nd) key grip François Garcia grips Neil Woodward, Paul Van Emmerick best boy James Peto art d. Allison Burns ed. Alfonso Peccia, Arto Tavukciyan (1st asst.), Maureen Alliman (2nd asst.) sd. Delano Jureidini boom Alex Vachon ad. ed. Lisa Frankfort cont. Loreen Pindera loc. scouting Trish Irwin. James Peto, Lisa Frankfort, Alex Vachon props Marc Lalonde ward. Maureen Alliman, Barbara Victor (1st asst.), Camille Gueymard (2nd asst.), Rita Vani (3rd asst.) p. sec. Diane Lavore, Gwen Campbell make-up Fernanda Tavares p.a. Shimon Greenbaum consultants Ding Ngoc Mo, Stephan Wodolawsky (NFB), Monica Armour pub. Marc Lalonde (Engl.), Céline Pelletier (Fr.) Lp. Huynh Thi Mai Lan, Ding Ngoc Mo, La Tung Huw, Nancy Allison, Ralph Allison, Kate Williams, Grace Findley, Jane Hackett, David Mills, John Bourgeois, Scotty Hannah, Corporal Murray Helm, Alan Glazer stills Peter Budden p.c. KentCom Productions in cooperation with Concordia University, 1980.