

# Geneva Park and Sinking Creek

by Kirwan Cox

Director, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre

Film Capitals of the World Series:  
Sinking Creek, Tennessee

Film festivals tend to exist for the purpose of getting bigger and slicker and uglier in order to how everyone how successful they are. The more people and more films shown off the better whether anyone can possibly see them or meet them.

Sinking Creek is a small stream of sanity in this hodgepodge of monied ego. It was small enough so you could see all the films invited and talk to all the people there. It was efficiently organized yet remained a very personal event.

I was invited to come and present a program of independent Canadian films from the distribution co-op. My first thought about Sinking Creek was that it was an elaborate put on. My second was that it was a good excuse to get out of Toronto and into the spring countryside of Tennessee. I wasn't disappointed by either the beautiful weather, the rural countryside (Sinking Creek is near Chucky and an hour's drive from Johnson City where the Tri-Cities Airport is), or the southern hospitality.

The festival is held at Tusculum College and I must admit that the "film sophistication" of the people in the audience amazed me. The festival was divided into films in competition (including a category for the educably mentally retarded) and invited programs or workshops. Paul Carrico brought some films on the arts from New York, Tony Hodgkinson showed experimental films his students had made in Massachusetts, Davis Shepard from the AFI in Washington presented a Flaherty Retrospective, Robert Russett explained some experiments he was working on in Louisiana, etc. And then there was the picnic down at Sinking Creek and the buffet dinners in the ante-bellum mansions of the local aristocracy or the tennis at four in the morning after the last day at the house of the festival director, Micki Coleman, or the music that some people from Nashville were doing at the motle . . .

So what kind of films were shown in competition? Mainly social/political documentaries it seemed. A film on the life and philosophy of an amazing Iowa roofer, or a film of a country butcher made by an Appalachian film co-op, or three months in the life of a cop, or a woodcutter from Vermont still using a horse team, etc. There was also some excellent animation. One fairly colorful animation film on the joy of *smoking marijuana* was the favorite of the students who voted for their own prize.

I found out that most of these social films were sponsored one way or the other by public television. Especially interesting were a couple of guys from New York who made films for NET — short 6 minute things on the state of life in a city full of retired couples or a campus training crusaders for Christ. They would get a contract for \$50,000 from Net to make a number of these films. This meant that free lancers could make films on contract in a way that I don't think is possible in Canada. The result was television stations sending out guerrilla film units across the country doing pretty much what they wanted. The main criterion was they had to be talented — but they weren't an *in house* crew. They also weren't doing things on speculation or wondering if someone didn't like one film whether they would ever get a chance to do another.

The Canadian films I brought included things by John Straiton, Martin Lavut, Jean-Claude Labrecque, Al Sens, David Rimmer and went over very well. They invited Canada back (maybe the National Film Board could send a program). Also, Sinking Creek has offered to pay the rental of these films if their finances allow. I took the films down with the idea that the co-op would pay the rental if Sinking Creek couldn't. The point is that festivals and all the promotional events owe their existence to filmmakers and should pay them as well as the printers that do the programs or the shippers. If there is a cash prize that is one thing, but programs of Canadian culture being organized abroad must stop taking advantage of the artists they show. If the Canadian government sponsors an event, then part of the cost of that event must be a fee or rental to the filmmakers involved (just as now a fee must be paid to a playwright under rules of copyright).

The success of Sinking Creek is a success of simplicity and warmth. It's a great place to spend a spring weekend.



Film Capitals of the World Series:  
Geneva Park, Ontario

For the past few years the Ontario Film Association has been sponsoring a film bazaar at the YMCA centre at Geneva Park near Orillia. This is a very specialized event designed to get 16mm buyers and sellers together in one marketplace come what may.

The sellers are primarily commercial distributors such as Marlin, International Telefilm, Moreland-Latchford, Universal, BBC-TV, Encyclopedia Britannica, McGraw-Hill, etc., and the not as commercial like the National Film Board and the distribution co-op. Of course, these groups were there for one reason — to sell prints, but they approached that end in different ways.

Each distributor paid \$250 to get into Showcase plus \$50 per person and were given a room, or loft, or auditorium, or hallway to screen their wares. Most distributors had two people there though some seemed to have dozens. These minions could be easily recognized despite their nametags because they smiled and made jokes the way people on commission smile and make jokes.

The NFB had the best technical arrangement because they had three projectors complete with earphones so people could come in at any time, select a film off the rack, and look at it in relative privacy. Some distributors like Moreland-Latchford concentrated on a few titles. They only showed a film on horses and a series on sex education over and over. At the other end of the spectrum the distribution co-op brought about 25 hours worth of film and tried to show it all. This was a mistake because the buyer would have to stay the entire three days to find out what the co-op had. One person actually did that and was last seen driving off into the sunset, hair frazzled, eyes glazed.

Certain films had a way of getting a clandestine reputation over lunch or breakfast as the audio-visual aides would whisper

praise or damnation on something or other. The co-op ended up repeating certain films that had such a reputation ("When are you going to show the one with the woman and the snake making love?" – "Is the one with the guy vomiting coming up next?" – "Is it true . . .?"). A lot of people would then laugh or run out of the room because the consensus was that our films in most cases were not the kind of things a film librarian could justify to her boss. But we kept zapping film librarians anyway.

Aside from film librarians, buyers included school board people of all levels, university a/v coordinators, some film society types, teachers, and enthusiasts from all across Ontario. These little old ladies came with millions of tax dollars in their pockets for the education or enlightenment of the masses. Some of the individual budgets were over \$100,000. The distributors pretty well knew who had the big money and these people were sometimes driven to running down hallways backwards to avoid a zealous seller.

Of course everyone loved the attention. After a year of being mumbled at by kids with bubble gum in their hair, castigated by penny-pinching bureaucrats, and threatened by irate parents – they were suddenly loved and wanted. Eleanor of Aquitaine would have been at home in Geneva Park because she set the rules for the courtly love game.

The gallant distributors seduced teacher's dollars here, a librarian's dollars there. Most of the buyers, deliberately or not, ended up playing the role of the coquette – leading on without making a commitment. After three days of dark screening rooms punctuated by the larger distributors' hospitality suites, everyone was exhausted.

But what kind of films were these educators and librarians buying? Mostly sausage films ground out especially for them with teacher's guides and course outlines printed before the

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film is finished. Some teachers can't look at a film without knowing whether it is aimed at the grade nine or grade ten level social studies curriculum or family living program. Most of these films originate in the U.S.

Apocryphal story: A distributor presented the new extravaganza "Mary Queen of Scots" for the benefit of the people at the showcase. As the crowd was filing into the auditorium, one woman asked where the study guide to the film was. (laughter) Then it turned out there was a study guide prepared by Encyclopedia Britannica with appropriate questions and reading material mapped out. (more laughter).

The Showcase is an invaluable opportunity for everyone concerned to meet and see a lot of films. It is bursting at Geneva Park's seams as more distributors want to get a piece of the action and more buyers want to see what is happening (or maybe just be courted). Most of the buyers I met were very nice and extremely knowledgeable, but the ones who could look at a film without a teaching guide seemed to be a minority.

As for the commercial distributors (NFB, as usual, excepted), I certainly wouldn't buy a used car from most of them – but they don't care whether they are selling cars or films as long as it is profitable.

Apocryphal story: One librarian said she had stopped buying films from a certain company because all their material was completely out of date, as of eight years ago. At lunch I was sitting next to a representative of that distributor and asked if they sold much to libraries. He said no – only to schools, though they used to sell to libraries. It never seemed to occur to him to wonder why libraries had stopped buying his films. This doesn't say much for the school systems, but they do keep a lot of people in business ruining children.

I can't wait 'til next year.

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