

P.E.I. CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE

Spring had tentatively arrived on P.E.I. and the brilliant March sunshine was melting the snow on the hills as I headed toward Charlottetown to attend the P.E.I. Centennial Film Retrospective, held March 20-25.

I had left the Island about a year ago to find the fantasy world of film in that place Maritimers ruefully refer to as "Upper Canada". Consequently, I wondered as I drove along what was in store for me at a film festival about the small province where I grew up. Where were six days of films about P.E.I. going to come from?

As it turned out, festival organizer and P.E.I. film-maker, Rick Hancox, with the help of the Charlottetown Confederation Centre staff, had unearthed approximately 70 films about or by Islanders. Some were unavailable, so about 50 were shown. These included every type of film from Hollywood features to documentaries, commercials and experimental films.

Hollywood

The biggest crowd of the festival turned out, predictably enough to see "Anne of Green Gables" on the opening night of the festival. This 1934 Hollywood production is the screen version of Lucy Maud Montgomery's classic novel about a red-haired girl adopted by an Island spinster and her brother. The story is a world-wide favourite and has been performed as a stage musical in Charlottetown every summer for the past eight years. The film starred Anne Shirley who, curiously enough, derived her stage name from Lucy Maud Montgomery's popular character.

NFB

The second night was National Film Board Night and nine films from the "Board" were shown. The evening could best be described as a study of the evolution of the NFB travelogue. "Canada's Cozy Corner" (1938) was probably the first Canadian film about P.E.I. and "Holiday Island" (1967), I hope will be the last travelogue done about P.E.I. The exercise was interesting in a historical sense, however, and two NFB films stood out above the rest. "The Rising Tide" (1949) told the story of the development of the first co-operatives for fishermen and farmers in the Maritimes. Through co-ops the producers gained some con-

trol over the marketing of their produce. "The Hundredth Summer" (1964) documented the celebrations of three Island communities during the 1964 Centennial of the Fathers of Confederation meeting in Charlottetown in 1864. This film, done in a cinema verité style, for the first time recorded some of the real hopes, interests, frustrations and peculiarities of the Island people.

CBC

Canada's other institutionalized film production house received equal billing with NFB. CBC films about P.E.I. took up the entire third night of the festival. The productions were mostly done out of Halifax in the early 60's and included "Portrait of Robert Harris" (1964), "Charlottetown: A City Story" (1967), "Birthplace of a Nation" (1967), "Room of Destiny" (1961), "Canada's Kentucky" (1963), "A Remembrance of Lucy Maud" (1964) and "Memories of Green Gables" (1972). A lot of the documentary camera work was of the pre-women's lib genre and tended to follow the pretty girls around, ending up on a close-up of some part or other. Rather embarrassing to watch, but nicely nostalgic.

"A Remembrance of Lucy Maud" is a jewel of a film about a red-haired girl who visits present-day Green Gables, house of Lucy Maud's books and finds herself transported in the magic world of Anne. The film was written and co-directed by Jack McAndrew, manager

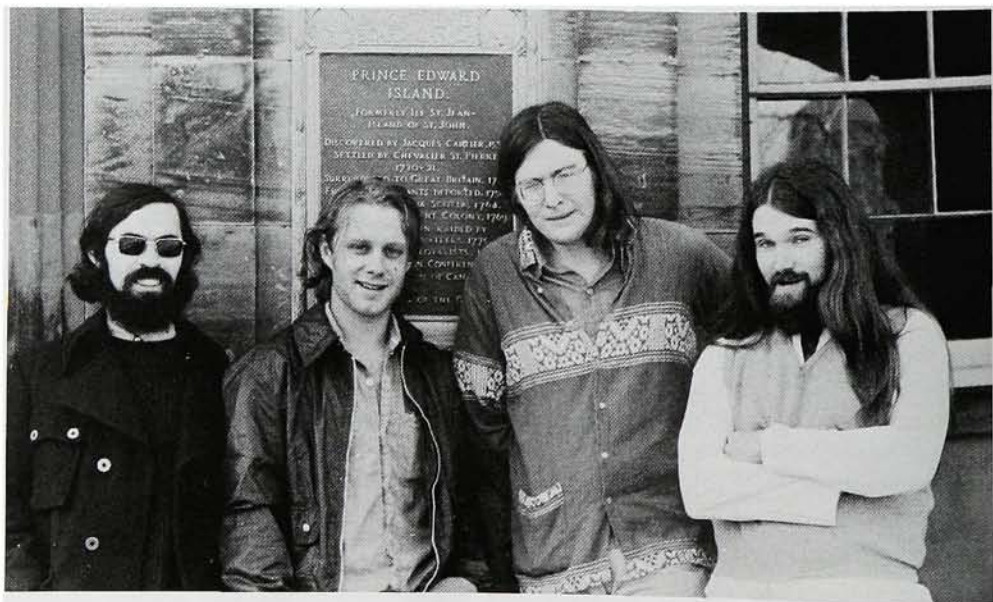
of Confederation Centre, who was present to discuss his work. McAndrew was also involved in other CBC productions shown about P.E.I., including "Memories of Green Gables", a high quality documentary done for CBC's Telescope. The film focuses on the traditions of the Island as illustrated by the Anne books. It also showed for the first time, scenes of the Island during the winter. It is bleak, but beautiful.

Super 8 Documentary

One of the technical highlights of the festival was a series of super 8 films done by film-maker Jeremy Bisley for the P.E.I. government. Bisley who is employed by Island Information Services, has a highly advanced super 8 system capable of sync sound shooting, multiple track sound mixing and everything necessary to produce professional quality films at an extremely low cost. One of the films shown was a 30-minute documentary on Island Tuna fishing which cost approximately \$60, not including Mr. Bisley's salary. Mr. Bisley noted that the film had recently been transferred to 2" videotape to be shown on several U.S. television stations.

Selling Out

It did not get the biggest crowd, but "Selling Out", the drama documentary by Tadeusz Jaworski of York University created the biggest stir of the festival. Judged the best documentary at the



P.E.I. filmmakers, left to right, Barry Burley, Rick Hancox, Kent Martin, and Niall Burnett.

Photo: Chuck Lapp

Canadian Film Awards and nominated for an Academy Award, "Selling Out" has gained a formidable reputation since it was shot on P.E.I. last summer. It tells the story of an aging Island farmer who is alone and must auction off his farm and possessions to retire to the city. Beautifully photographed and poignantly directed, the film at its best is incredibly moving; even at its worst it's just overly sentimental.

Apart from the humanity of the story, the film makes a political point when the old farmer's land is bought by an American. Foreign ownership of land resources on P.E.I. is a matter of grave concern because the Island is so small. It is possible that the "Million Acre Farm" could soon become just a summer home for people from outside the province, and outside the country.

The discussion following the film proved to be quite lively. Film commentator Gerald Pratley was present and gave a brief account of the film's history. He said that Islanders should not think that the film showed them in a bad light, and that all the publicity the film is getting proves that the problem of foreign ownership is widespread. According to Pratley, people everywhere identify with the Island situation. He noted that the film is a re-creation of a situation and not an actual recording of an event in traditional documentary style.

Vernon McGoogan, the retired Island farmer who played the central character in the film, was also present. He felt that the situation depicted in the film was getting worse on P.E.I.: he has had to rent his own farm out because it would have required a lot of new equipment and more land to make a living as a farmer.

Also participating in the discussion were some Americans who had bought land on P.E.I. Sparks began to fly at one point between those who favoured banning all selling of land to foreigners and those who favoured a selective approach. Comparisons with the Detroit-Windsor crime situation were brought up and rather heatedly debated.

Personal Films

Particularly noteworthy during the festival were nine films by Rick Hancox who started in film while attending Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown

during 1968-69. His films range from extremely funny to intensely personal statements about his life and the lives of people around him. "Cab 16", his first major effort is a black and white documentary about a cab driver in Charlottetown who is involved with helping handicapped children. Although "Cab 16" is rough in technique, his next film "Tall Dark Stranger" is a structured, technically polished colour film about a young freak dressed like Christ who turns on a farmer. This amusing film won grand prize at the National Student Film Festival in 1970 and two awards at Oberhausen in 1971.

Hancox' work at New York University "Rooftops", "I a Dog", and "Next to Me", reflect the haunting desolation of the cityscape and the ludicrous life of people who live in the confines of a jungle city. "House Movie" done in 1972 is probably his most significant film to date. Set to a Rachmaninoff symphony, the film is a diary of a period in the life of the film-maker and his wife. The film achieves a remarkable warmth and intimacy as it records significant objects and events in their lives, leading to their move to another house and a temporary separation.

Another personal film shown was a "home movie" of a remarkable family now living on P.E.I. after travelling all over the world with a brood of 17 children. The film was started in 16mm by the father while the children were very young, and has been taken over by one of the sons. Lawrence Casota, who narrated the film in the absence of the unfinished sound track.

"Shotgun" Films

A number of short films were shown which came out of a film course given by George Semsel in 1968-69 at Prince of Wales College. The course started out with a large amount of exposed blank set stock and students were told to make films by doing something to the stock. Semsel was fond of saying "If you can't think of anything to do with it, throw it up in the air and fill it full of buckshot." He backed up the spirit of his suggestion with some of his own films which used a variety of techniques such as hand-painting, hand drawn sound tracks, dyeing, and holes punched in the film.

Some more recent experimental films, by Barry Burley and Niall Burnett, were shown as well. They were "conceptual"

or "structural" in style, somewhat along the lines of Michael Snow's work.

Documentary

Independent film-maker Kent Martin who works out of Charlottetown was on hand to discuss his finely-crafted documentary: "Milton Acorn: The People's Poet." The film has been shown on CBC and is due for another showing soon. Milton Acorn, the former carpenter from P.E.I., is becoming something of a living legend on the Canadian scene both for his rugged, beautiful verse and his radical nationalist views about Canada and the condition of the working class. Kent financed the film on his own and is making a living as an independent.

Commercial

One former Islander, Don MacLeod, who got kicked out of Prince of Wales for his undue interest in film in 1945 now is a successful producer in New York. One of his films got an Academy Award for best documentary in 1966 but the film shown during the festival was a colossal commercial starring Catherine Deneuve. Shot for Japanese television the film is a lavish 4-minute ad for a famous wig-maker. It included a huge studio set-up in New York and location shooting in Paris. The budget? \$800,000. That equals two "Wedding in White"s!!!

Hollywood Again

There has never been a feature film shot on P.E.I., but Hollywood almost made it across the Northumberland Strait back in 1948. Apparently the Island Board of Trade did not take kindly to strangers from Hollywood and wouldn't let them over to film the P.E.I. story "Johnny Belinda". The film producers then decided to change the script a bit and make the film in Cape Breton. The resulting film starred Jane Wyman as the deaf and dumb Belinda who is raped by one of the locals and is befriended by the new doctor in the community. Also starring in the film are Charles Bickford, Lew Ayres and Agnes Moorehead. The film drew a full house and wound up the six days of film activities which included discussion periods following each film. ●