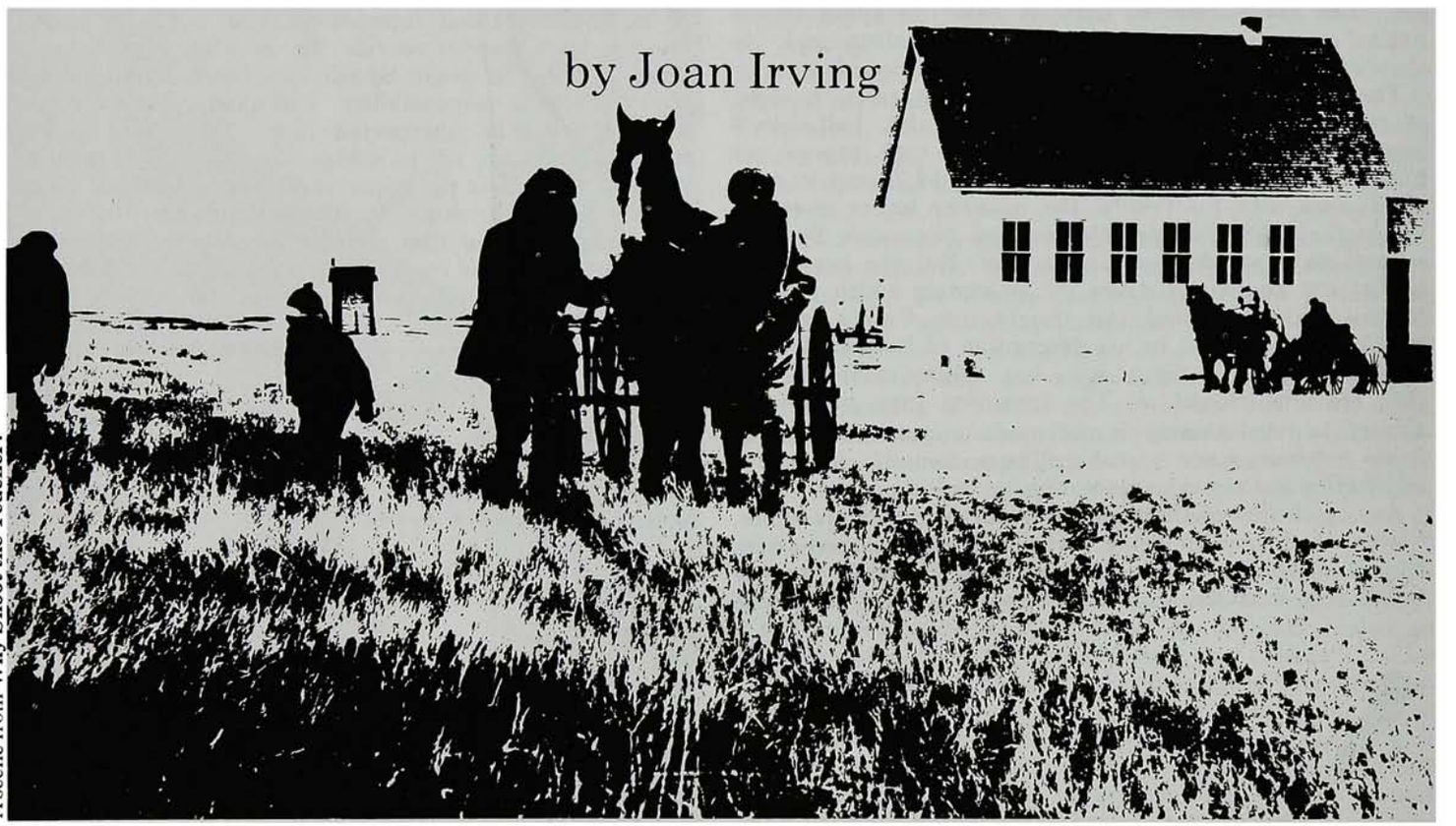
Alberta is booming. Over the past few years, a good number of important American features have been shot there, and the new tax incentives may well increase the number of Canadian features and co-productions to be filmed there. Joan Irving returned to the west to take the pulse of those in the industry, and to report on both the official and unofficial views in a province where excitement is palpable.

rustling bucks

by Joan Irving



A scene from **Why Shoot the Teacher?**

Apparently around the year 1920 there were a few people in Calgary, Alberta, who thought they might make their city the Hollywood of the north. For reasons it would take a historian to sift through, the company that expected to bring this about, Canadian Photoplay Productions Ltd., never made more than its one very successful film, **Back to God's Country** (1919).

There were other companies, Canadian and American, making "feature" films in Calgary, Banff and Jasper during the '20s, but what local industry there was all but disappeared during the Depression. It has taken almost four decades to get it moving again.

The business of making films and the cities and people of Alberta have changed during those years. What attracted producers to that part of the country back in the '20s hasn't: the mountain scenery, the snow; the prairies, horses and a few odd real-life cowboys.

Last year six features and an estimated 40 (private sector) short films were shot in Alberta. Early predictions suggest '77 will be one of the best years yet for the province's film industry.

Having worked as an historical researcher, a community organizer, and a full-time staff reporter, Joan Irving is presently a freelance writer living in Montreal.

"You want to talk to somebody in Alberta about film? Start with Chuck Ross," advised Ted Rouse when I phoned him at the Toronto CFDC office to ask for leads. And that's exactly where I started.

If you're a producer or production manager searching for locations and have Alberta in mind, you can call Chuck Ross and he or someone he delegates, who knows Alberta as well, will pick you up at any provincial airport, read and discuss the script, then show you around the suitable locations. It was Ross who found the Hanna schoolhouse for last summer's shooting of **Why Shoot the Teacher?** It was he also who suggested that Robert Altman consider Morley Flats, west of Calgary, as the location for Altman's feature, **Buffalo Bill and the Indians.**

Chuck Ross is director of Film Industry Development for the province of Alberta. He has been since 1973 when the Alberta government decided to become actively involved in encouraging film producers to make their films in Alberta and moved Ross over from his post as director of government photo services.

Though their literature does not single out feature films, the underlying aim of the Film Industry and Development Office is to attract feature films. The bigger the budget and the more spent in Alberta the better. And though Ross has visited Britain, New York and Toronto trying to "sell" Alberta, the initial and major current focus of the office is directed upon Los Angeles.

When Chuck Ross arrived in LA in 1973 to start knocking on producers' doors (on a recent visit he contacted over 30 producers) there were already 16 states actively soliciting location work on features. There are now about 20 states and two provinces (Ontario appointed its Film Development Officer in 1975; British Columbia is reportedly considering the move) competing for Hollywood's business.

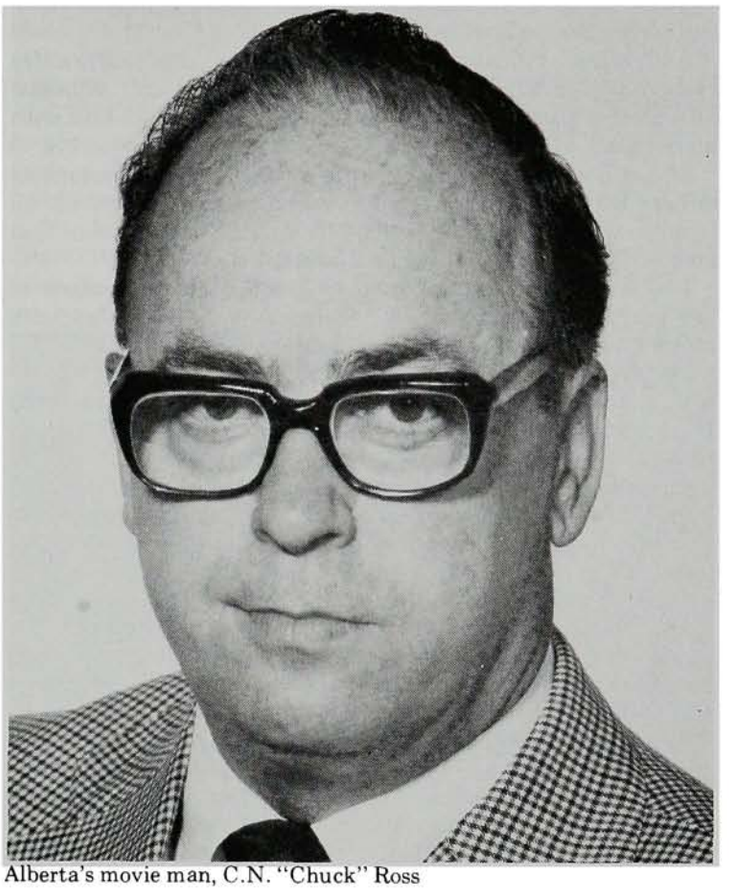
Alberta's advantage is its great variety of uncluttered terrain: the grass-matted foothills, the long flat horizons of the Prairies, the unbounded beauty of the Rockies – all within a reasonable distance of accommodations. That, and the assistance Ross himself can offer the producer. Ross calls whomever he has to in order to facilitate the producer's job and to cut through, as he puts it, "the damnable burden of red tape that accompanies any film production." Much of his work is done on the phone, from his Edmonton office, overlooking the North Saskatchewan River.

There are no financial enticements other than the fact that Alberta remains the only province without a sales tax – no hidden grants or subsidies. If producers can't expect any financial consideration for "locating" in Alberta, neither are they bothered by provincial government industry regulations and restrictions. Local crews and actors are hired voluntarily. There is no stipulation that the producer indicate the film was shot in Alberta.

According to Ross, the majority of producers are gracious enough to credit locale. He cites Altman's **Buffalo Bill,** a film that indicated "shot in Alberta" up front in its publicity campaign. "That's the kind of publicity you can't buy." To understand the comment it helps to know that Ross's one-man shop is part of a government department known as Industrial Development and Tourism.

Some producers, of course, aren't so gracious and if their films aren't doing much to promote tourism, neither is Ross really concerned with the tourist end of things.

In January, 1973, *Variety* carried an article estimating that over the previous 18-month period $2 million had been pumped into the Alberta economy through feature film production. Ross calculates the 1976 figure at around $4.7 million. (Statistics are supplied by the production companies and do not include the miscellaneous expenses of non-Albertan crew members during their stay in the province.)



Alberta's movie man, C.N. "Chuck" Ross

Not a Kongian figure to be sure, but the investment does create employment in the areas of goods and services. "It directly generates a great infusion of capital, for a short period of time, in the locality where the film is being produced. It's good for the business community, particularly that part of it dealing in accommodations, transportation, building supplies..."

Ross is interested in attracting feature productions, be they American or Canadian, for another reason. "If this industry is ever to become established and viable our people in the various crafts that make up the industry must have exposure to feature work and be able to work alongside others who are highly professional in their fields. Over the past three years this has happened in Alberta."

When Edmonton producer Fil Fraser was looking for a crew to work on **Why Shoot the Teacher?** this past summer, for many of the posts he didn't have to go further away than Calgary. "You can find people in Calgary who have worked on six or seven features," Fraser says. "There's an attitude developing here, you might call it western chauvinism, a feeling that yes, we can do it here.

"I decided two years ago to go ahead with the **Why Shoot the Teacher?** project and just kept plugging until it came together. I can't say it was easy, what with the complexity of the project and the money handling, but I would say it was no more difficult to do here than anywhere else. In fact it may have been easier in some ways than to try and make the film in Toronto. There's a lot of cynicism in Toronto. They have made so many amateur films there under the guise of professional features."

Fraser likes Alberta and wants to continue living there. More important, he wants to continue making feature films from, but not necessarily in, Alberta. Part pragmatist, part hustler – "The question of whether or not there can be a Canadian or Albertan film industry is part of the problem" – Fraser has maintained the momentum behind the making of his first feature and has slated a second, **Back to**

Beulah to be shot this summer. (A W.O. Mitchell story and screenplay to be directed by Eric Till.)

And while industry people in Alberta don't all share Fraser's optimism about the growth of a local, Alberta-produced feature film industry, many have helped him with more than just their goodwill.

Not so long ago the media tended to portray Albertans as either Bible-belters or cattle barons. The rustle of oil money set off a realignment of images – the one that cleared first was the image of Alberta the rich.

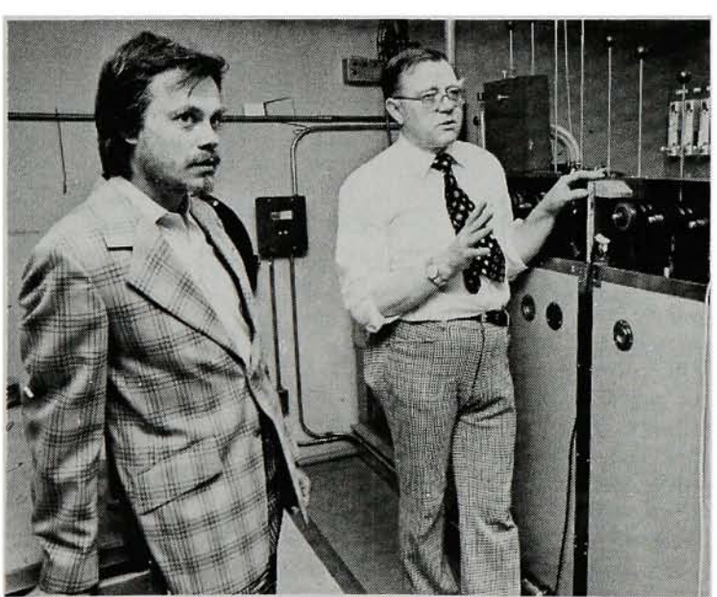
It's true you don't have to look far to see the signs of prosperity and growth. In Calgary in every direction, former hayfields are covered with houses, more houses, more expensive houses. It's the same in Edmonton. Lethbridge won't catch up for a long time but it too is growing. It is not the houses, however, that impress. One of the finest theatre complexes in the country, the Citadel, is newly opened in Edmonton. Calgary has a new museum building to house the extensive Glenbow collections. In fact almost all the buildings in downtown Calgary are under five years old.

Until recently almost none of the available private investment money in the province found its way to the local film industry, and only slowly is this changing. Money invested in films was most often collected by national brokerage firms and slapped onto "anonymous" tax shelter films. One estimate was that several millions of dollars had left the province this way in the past couple of years.

On the other hand, Mickey Bailey, whose feature **Wolfboy** was shot this fall on his animal farm (Wildlife Enterprises) west of Calgary, says most of his films have been financed from outside the province. "Business here has been outstanding. So far all the money has come from the outside but the local people are starting to get the idea."

Bailey returned to Alberta in 1966 after working for 23 years in the United States, 13 of which were spent at the Walt Disney studio. His natural-habitat animal farm (326 animals, 31 of them wolves), though open to the public, specializes in trained animals for film and television.

"We westerners have got a little chip on our shoulders because we haven't been able to get federal money to get the industry going. The only good thing the government has done for us is the 100% tax write-off. It's beautiful; it should be that way," he says.



Len Stahl, secretary of the AMPIA, learns about a film processing machine from Nick Zubko of Cine Audio

Bailey was the one who estimated that over the next five years Alberta would double or even triple the number of features made there. "The trend now is to go on location, to use natural settings. Ontario can't compete with us when it comes to terrain... I can duplicate any scene except desert on my own land." Processing? "We've got a one-day air express service to Vancouver; it's not much of a disadvantage..."

It seems everybody in the industry is talking boom these days. Some are guarded in their assessment not of the value of the tax law but of the way Canadian producers are going to respond to the situation. Will we see a sudden production boom, not of Canadian films but of films that "look" Canadian – the six points out of 10? Chuck Ross applauds the law and stresses that the only way it will have a lasting effect on the development of the industry is if the federal government leaves it to work for between five and 10 years. Across the country, the phones are starting to ring.

Les Kimber in Calgary says, "People have been phoning to inquire what business is like here. Some of them want to come back, just when it's getting better. How many of them stayed here and went broke, pioneered... Well, I guess competition is always good."

Kimber has been working in Alberta as a production manager for the past 10 years. He put in 11 months in 1976 on feature productions and planned to spend the twelfth on a beach in Hawaii. Working year-round in film production in Calgary is rare; Kimber obviously savors his position.

Most of his experience has been on American films – **Little Big Man** and Altman's film, to name two oldies – and most recently the Dino de Laurentiis feature shot in Newfoundland, **Orca** (with another Calgarian, Rob Lockwood, as AD). In the early years Kimber might have been one of a few Canadians working on the American productions. Now he estimates it is usually 50-50. "If Canadians are available who have the credits and can do the job then they'll get hired. It's all a matter of their track record. The big problem here is finding people qualified in electrical work or carpentry."

And then there's the question of unions. Some skirted the issue, "Unions will be unions everywhere," while others were more outright in their criticism: The Calgary IATSE local has a reputation for running a closed shop. Kimber spoke of the need for training programs. "They need more people and better training in every department. I can understand that it's tough for people in the unions to make a living year-round but it seems to me the unions should try to help the industry more in this country. A lot of guys aren't interested in film, they're just in it for the money." Unions will be unions and union critics will be union critics everywhere. But enough said about features.

Documentary and industrial – short subject work – remains the largest employer of Albertan filmmaking talent. Even commercials aren't an important revenue source since the majority or the national big-budget commercials originate in the East.

Nick Zubco, the respected 54-year-old grandpapa of filmmaking in Alberta, says it was television that set the industry on its feet. "CBC contracts and documentaries kept people going."

Zubco now owns and manages film processing plants in Edmonton and Calgary (Cine Audio Ltd.). In 1945, with a couple of years of NFB experience under his belt, Nick bought a Kodak 16 mm Cine Special and became the owner of one of three motion picture cameras in the province. He freelanced for Movie Tone News, the NFB and the University of Alberta where, in 1957, he pioneered in medical (heart surgery) films.

Zubco spoke enthusiastically about several Edmonton filmmakers, including Anne Wheeler and Lorna Rasmussen whose film **Great Grandmother** (Filmwest Associates Ltd) won top honors at the Alberta Film Festival (1976).

Regarding the future of feature films in the province, he was somewhat skeptical. "Having seen things from the beginning I'm aware of the fluctuations in the industry. There have always been a few American features done here, in the mountains. The same thing is happening now. It comes and goes..."

In 1973 Zubco became the founding president of AMPIA (Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association); it now lists 14 member companies and 60 associate members. AMPIA has had two main areas of involvement. It has organized a series of technical seminars (lighting, sound, editing, etc.) to upgrade Alberta filmmakers. It has also, over the past three years, been entrenched in a freud with ACCESS, the Alberta government radio and TV corporation (comparable to OECA in Ontario). AMPIA claims that by stepping into areas formerly dominated by the private sector, ACCESS has retarded the growth and even damaged a viable private-sector film industry in Alberta.

The essence of this debate has been aired on a national scale with the recent publication of the BMC or Tompkins Report (excerpts of which appeared in **Cinema Canada** volume 32).

In a brief released this fall AMPIA denounced ACCESS for allegedly setting up a "media empire". ACCESS is budgeted at between $6 and 7 million per year and employs over 200 people. The corporation buys time on various TV stations throughout the province to air its programs.

Bill Marsden, current association president, says the big problem has been ACCESS's definition of the word "educational". "Their definition is all-encompassing. They are constantly in search of subject matter and they make films on anything. ACCESS is invading markets which might have been available to the private sector. I've seen ACCESS programming in prime time opposite a major movie on another station... are they trying to be an Alberta CBC?

"In this business we're all alternately healthy and unhealthy. We can't seem to find a leveler; I felt educational films could have been that leveler."

Marsden, an Edmonton producer whose career in films spans two decades, is also critical of the regional policies of the NFB. He charges that the opening of the NFB regional offices was the "worst thing that ever happened to the film scene in Canada. It dried up work previously filled by the private sector... It fragments companies, hiring one or two people and not the whole creative team... What gives mandarins the idea that only civil servants can make films? I mean the NFB people come out as if they're God's gift to the film industry; they're going to teach the natives how to handle a camera. There was a time when the public sector was a pace-setter in filmmaking. Now the quality of films produced by the private sector is much higher."

The Edmonton desk of the Prairie studio of the NFB is presided over by Tom Radford. Radford is a freelancer contracted to the Film Board where he works as a producer. The Edmonton office houses the distribution section as well as the staff producers (Radford and Anne Wheeler; there is no other production staff to date). Of the five documentary films in production in December, all were being directed by freelancers.

"A small office is a blessing but it's also a curse. We have the possibility of a direct relationship with filmmakers – they can walk in the door and explain their ideas. At the same time, it's often hard to cover the work."

According to Radford, approximately 30 per cent of the work in progress was being done in association with ACCESS; he also spoke of plans, soon to be finalized, to co-produce a drama series with ACCESS. "We tend to trade a lot of people and equipment, and in some instances have shared research money with them." The advantage to the NFB seems to be through distribution. "We have a direct line to the audience through television. ACCESS finds us useful because we supply them with programming material."

President of the AMPIA, William Marsden

Over at Filmwest, the award-winning Edmonton company founded in 1971 by seven young filmmakers, one of the originals – Dale Phillips – commented that during discussions with Hugh Faulkner (then Secretary of State) last January in Edmonton a number of filmmakers asked Faulkner what decentralization of the NFB meant. "He assured us the NFB would take advantage of local resources – equipment and people. Quite the contrary is happening. They're using some local people but they use their own production facilities. That kind of thing rankles people who have worked as independents for 20 or 30 years trying to build up the industry. The NFB seems to hold a black and white view – that they should leave the private sector to do commercials."

Hassles aside, Phillips, Stein, Pappes and company say things aren't so bad. "Relatively speaking Alberta is one of the best places for filmmakers in Canada," ventured Stein. Why? "Because there's work."

"There's not the turnover in companies that there is in Toronto," Phillips added. "I usually bring back a copy of the yellow pages when I'm visiting Toronto, to keep track of the changes."

The tide that carried so many talented people out of the west to filmmaking centres in Eastern Canada and the U.S. may be turning. Problems exist, as they do everywhere, but in this "next year" Alberta filmmakers seem to be finally catching up to their long-laid hopes and plans. □

salutes

The Juno Award Winners 1977

Awarded by the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences

Female vocalist of the year, **Patsy Gallant**
Male vocalist of the year, **Burton Cummings**
Group of the year, **Heart**
Best-selling single, **Roxy Roller (Sweeney Todd)**
Best-selling international single, **Tina Charles: I Love to Love**
Best-selling Canadian album in Canada, **Neiges (André Gagnon)**
Best-selling international album, **Peter Frampton: Frampton Comes Alive**
Producer of the year, **Mike Slicker: Dreamboat Annie (Heart)**
Engineer of the year, **Paul Gallant: Are You Ready for Love? (Patsy Gallant)**
Best jazz recording, **Phil Nimmons: The Atlantic Suite (Phil Nimmons and Nine Plus Six)**
Best classical recording, **Beethoven's Complete Sonatas, vols. 1, 2 and 3 (Anton Kuerti)**
Best album graphics, **Ian Tamblyn**
Best new group, **T.H.P. Orchestra**
Best new female vocalist, **Colleen Peterson**
Best new male vocalist, **Burton Cummings**
Composer of the year, **Gordon Lightfoot**
Instrumental artist of the year, **Hagood Hardy**
Best country female vocalist, **Carroll Baker**
Best country male vocalist, **Murray McLauchlan**
Best country group, **The Good Brothers**
Best folk singer, **Gordon Lightfoot**