

HOME COOKED REELS

Manitoba Documentary Shorts

curated by Mike Maryniuk

Curatorial essay accompanying the Home Cooked Reels program in the Open Vault: Independent Film Week series at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque, November 27 – 30, 2008

This program was selected in the spirit of the first Canadian filmmaker (1897), James Freer, a farmer and documentary filmmaker originally from the Brandon area. His early filmstrips focused on rural farming life, with such titles as *Harnessing The Virgin Prairie*, and the series *10 Years In Manitoba* in which he captured moving images of trains arriving in Winnipeg.

His films were so popular that the Canadian Pacific Railway sent James and his filmstrips to Europe on two occasions to encourage emigration to the prairies. The first trip was successful, but on the second he was accused of conveniently not mentioning the mosquitoes and the World Famous winters. He returned to Manitoba and relocated to the town of Ericksdale.

Havakeen Lunch by Elise Swerhone was filmed at the Country Café of the same name, unbelievably in Ericksdale, Manitoba, the home of James Freer. With *Havakeen Lunch* we witness the last day of work for a retiring couple at their small town restaurant. The viewers are served a home cooked slice of small town life, with a generous side of “things aren’t the same as they used to be”. The pacing of this film matches the subject matter perfectly and is a perfect portrait of day-to-day rural living. This film boasts a first of its own: the first independent film finished at the Winnipeg Film Group and the first Manitoba film with an all female crew.

Shawna Dempsey’s short documentary *Waitress* features interviews with waitresses from such Winnipeg institutions as “Harman’s” and the “Windmill”. The waitresses talk about the realities of minimum wage and the eccentric clientele. Shawna Dempsey, along with Lorri Millan, are a couple of Winnipeg’s most important artists. Not afraid to be at once: political, hilarious and thoughtful, whether it’s film, video, installation or performance art.

The Amazing Creation of Al Simmons features a look at the wacky world of another of Manitoba’s finest performance artists, Al Simmons. Al is on a quest to convert a bike into some sort of “horsecycle”. With his trusty sidekick-son Karl at his side, Al takes us along for the ride down the dusty trails of creativity. Sheldon Oberman couldn’t have found a more interesting subject; Al Simmons has the wide-eyed ambition of a six-year old inventor. His imagination is unparalleled and it’s easy to see why he is a favourite of young and old alike. Al’s heart and sense of humour are as big as his ten-gallon hat.

The Price of Daily Bread was made in 1985 by John Paskievich and Mike Mirus. In Hodgson, Manitoba a family fights to save the farm from foreclosure. They eventually have no choice but to auction off all of their farming equipment. “Everything must go.” Created with thousands of black and white photographs and live recordings of conversations amongst the bidding and bargains to be had, it becomes obvious that the lack of a large camera allows the subjects to relax and have real, frank conversations about the state of farming, and to express true emotion. The film is political yet never comes across as preachy or one-sided. It’s classic Paskievich patience; he just lets things happen in front of him.

At the height of the line dancing cultural revolution, Maureen Smith and Kris Anderson walked into the Palomino Club with camera in hand and Ken Gregory with recording device not far behind. *Slapleather* is a buffet of bolo ties, loud topaz western wear and a whole lot of Achy Breakin’ Boot Scootin’ Boogyin’. Kris Anderson later went on to found DOXA in Vancouver — a film and video festival dedicated to the art of the documentary — and is currently the festival director.

In Leon Johnson’s *Le Metif Enragé*, the line dancing turns to jigging at a fiddle competition during Le Festival du Voyageur. Local poet/fiddler George Morrisette is ripe with rebellion and treats the “Festival” crowd to his political poetry in the middle of his fiddling. The crowd quickly turns on him and proves his political point. Leon Johnson is, by far, one of the most important film-makers in Winnipeg’s history, as one of the founders of the Winnipeg Film Group and a filmmaker who took chances before the rise of the “experimentalists”. He can also be credited in part with the current film industry and should receive one of those tax credits that those “offshore” producers receive. *Le Metif Enragé* features some of the finest documentary cinematography in recent memory. Instead of staying out of the way to capture images, Director of Photography Charles Lavack chooses to get right in amongst the fiddlers, dancers and crowd members. This truly elevates the film to a full out experience. Charles Lavack is now the co-founder of “Les Production Rivard” named in honour of L’Abee Leon Rivard, a priest and the first “true” Manitoban filmmaker who made films during the 1930’s until his death in the 1960’s in the small town of Ile des Chênes, south of Winnipeg. He used his parishioners as actors and even constructed his own lenses.

Due to time restrictions, some other important short independent documentaries could not be included, but also merit being mentioned. *Main Street Soldier* by Leonard Yakir, showed the need for a filmmaking co-op in Winnipeg. *The Strongest Man In The World* by Halya Kuchmij and narrated by Jack Palance won several awards; It profiles an amazing man from Olha, Manitoba who was able to bend steel bars and hypnotize people, and was dubbed “the Strongest Man in the World” after joining “the Ringling Brothers Circus. The truly amazing *Dog Stories* by Shereen Jerrett is no doubt the most entertaining WFG film of all time. “Dancy, Dancy...” And lastly, *Rhinos Rule* by Cathy Collins and Michael Olito is a hilarious look at politics; Michael builds a log helicopter as a cheaper alter-native to the Conservative choppers.

Recently there has been a resurgence of diverse, independent documentaries in Winnipeg, from the wildly political in the tar sands of Alberta, to day-to-day living in Afghanistan, and of prominent Winnipeg institutions. I'm sure these young filmmakers will make James Freer and L'Abée Leon Rivard proud.

- Waitress by *Shawn Dempsey* | 1993 | 7:00
- The Amazing Creation of Al Simmons by *Sheldon Oberman* | 1986 | 10:00
- Havakeen Lunch by *Elise Swerhone* | 1979 | 28:00
- The Price of Daily Bread by *John Paskievich & Mike Mirus* | 1985 | 16:00
- Slapleather by *Maureen Smith & Kris Anderson* | 1995 | 5:00
- Le Metif Enragé by *Leon Johnson* | 1984 | 17:00

Mike Maryniuk was born in Winnipeg, but raised in the rural back country of Manitoba. A completely self-taught film virtuoso, Maryniuk's film world is an inventive hybrid of Jim Henson, Norman McLaren and Stan Brakhage. Maryniuk's films are a visual stew of hand-made ingredients and are full of home cooked wonderfulness.