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# Lincoln in the spotlight

By **MARTIN J. KIDSTON - Independent Record - 02/16/08**

LINCOLN - The old hound dog blocking Rollie Fisher's driveway sniffs the air and refuses to move. A little dog with a big bark comes down the road, followed by another dog, and yet another, until the woods come alive with barking beasts.

The snow sits two feet deep and there's a yellow glow spilling from the windows of a rustic cabin up ahead. The warm light casts shadows on the snow before fading to black, out where the darkness takes over and the woods stand creaking in the night.

Here, 48 miles north of Helena on the west side of Flesher Pass, roughly 15 miles outside Lincoln, a film crew from Los Angeles, Calif., is finding its feet, preparing to shoot a new version of "The Call of the Wild," an American classic scribed in 1903 by Jack London.

"I've always been a Jack London fan, and have always focused on making family films," said Richard Gabai, the movie's director. "Making an adaptation of London's book is a great way to introduce children to American literature. It's not necessarily a family-friendly book or a little kid's book, but by introducing them to that literature through an updated film felt like a good thing to do."

Gabai and first-time producer Nancy Draper have become fast friends with Fisher and his family. Stepping in from the cold, the filmmakers enjoy milk and cookies with an exuberance of children home from school. Cravings satisfied, they find a seat by the fire in the Fisher's expansive log home.

It's there where Gabai explains the gist of his movie, which follows a young girl (played by Ariel Gad) who leaves Boston, Mass., to visit her grandfather (Christopher Lloyd) in Montana. At the onset, the girl isn't keen on what she sees, all forest and snow — no satellite television and big-city amenities.

Shortly after arriving, however, the girl finds a wounded wolf dog. As in London's classic tale, the animal's name is Buck. The ensuing story introduces London's prose in increments. It also follows the girl and dog, along with a host of other characters that include a mountain man named Hatcher (Wes Studi), through mushing, hardship and adventure.

"Jack London's story had the perfect set up," Gabai said. "In his story, when Buck becomes the leader of the pack, he had many descendants. When our little girl runs into a wounded wolf dog, it's an actual descendant of Buck. It's logical that a descendent of Buck could end up right here."



IR photo by Martin J. Kidston - Call of The Wild film director Richard Gabai, right, and producer Nancy Draper, in red, have become fast friends with Rollie and Maureen Fisher, who will open their Lincoln home to cast and crew this next week. The Fisher home will also serve as one of the film's Montana locations.

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In fact, Gabai jokes, there could be several descendants of Buck wandering the woods around Fisher's property even now. Beyond the black-pane windows, however, the night is quiet.

With the wild landscape, the deep snow and the big cabin surrounded by historical outbuildings, allegedly erected by a bootlegger in 1927, it's easy to see why Gabai chose the Fisher home and the Lincoln backcountry to represent grandfather's place in the film.

This is where grandfather lives, and it's where the girl comes to find Buck, beginning their Jack London-style adventures. Exterior shots will take place here at the Fisher home in the woods, though Gabai will film interior shots at the Cane residence west of Lincoln.

Gabai, who broke into the movie business acting, also spent part of Thursday filming from a helicopter over Lolo Pass. The long, snowy drive up Highway 87 will represent a trip over Flesher Pass — a trip the girl takes when arriving in Montana. Where the script calls for a visit to "town," viewers won't see Lincoln, but rather, the community of Philipsburg.

"We're a small company making a big film on a small budget," Gabai said. "We could never even attempt this without the support of the community. If we didn't have Lincoln, the community of Philipsburg — if we didn't have the support of the film commission — we wouldn't have a chance. But with all that, we're going to make a terrific movie."

Gabai praised the towns and local residents (many who may appear in the film as extras or doubles) for making the film possible. He also lauded the Montana Film Commission and Gov. Brian Schweitzer's efforts to make Montana more attractive to filmmakers through the state's rebate program.

All the tricks and costs of filming a modern motion picture in rural Montana may go unnoticed to the viewing audience when the movie is released in 2009. Gabai also hinted at the logistical challenges of working with both children and animals, joking that it may send him to the asylum.

But the wheels are already turning and just as Gabai and Draper arrived at the Fisher home for this interview, Christopher Lloyd was en route to Lincoln. The cast and crew have booked rooms in several Lincoln motels and hired local caterers to feed a crew of 40 twice a day.

The entire affair has given Lincoln a welcome midwinter boost. Even the starring dog arrived Thursday — dogs being no stranger to Lincoln — ready to play his part as Buck's descendent.

"For the community, it's wonderful," said Fisher, Lincoln's unofficial mayor. "It couldn't be better. Lincoln badly needs this kind of stuff to keep it going. It's just exciting."

Gabai worked with writer Leland Douglas to integrate London's story into a modern movie. Last year, Gabai and others attended the Race to The Sky Sled Dog Race in Lincoln, shooting secondary footage for the movie, which involves its share of mushing.

"We needed dog-sled racing because there's dog-sled racing in our movie," Gabai said. "Back in Los Angeles, I started surfing the internet and found the Race to The Sky. It was really the Race to The Sky that brought us to Lincoln, and it was the Fisher family that brought us back this year."

Fisher, wearing a Call of The Wild hat while kicking back in a comfortable chair, grinned at the thought of landing a film in Lincoln, which has seen its share of ups and downs over the past few years.

"I wasn't expecting (Gabai) to do what he did when he did it," Fisher said. "I thought he was just taking a look at the place. I just about doubled over when he said, 'This is where we'll shoot.' "

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