



Montana hospitality at core of 'Call of the Wild 3D'

By BRENT NORTHUP - Independent Record - 06/11/09

Montana opened its heart and its land to filmmaker Richard Gabai.

In return Gabai brought his cameras to the Treasure State to film "Call of the Wild 3D."

And thanks to this productive partnership, Helena staged its first world premiere on Wednesday night as "Call of the Wild 3D" played to a crowd of grade school kids and selected guests who contributed to making the movie.

"Everyone in Montana was thrilled and helpful," Gabai said. "Even the governor said if we needed anything just to ask. I had to convince people they might get sick of us after awhile, but they were wonderful. In L.A. when you block a street, people get annoyed. Here they were just thrilled."



IR file photo - Rollie Fisher, center and his wife Maureen, back left, pose with "Call of the Wild 3D" director Richard Gabai, right, and producer, Nancy Draper, front left, at the Fisher home in February 2008. Rollie Fisher passed away Friday, May 22, in Helena at age 71.

The journey to Wednesday's screening began 34 years ago when an 11-year-old Richard Gabai read Jack London's "Call of the Wild."

Fast-forward 30 years, and producer-director Gabai and screenwriter Leland Douglas drafted a script inspired by the London book. Since the story involved sled-dog racing, Montana, home of Race to the Sky, popped onto Gabai's radar.

Starting in late 2006, Gabai quickly put the pieces in place to turn Montana into his soundstage.



The Cains and the Fishers of Lincoln offered their help, their homes, their snowmobiles and their sled dogs to make it happen.

Sten Iversen, manager of the Montana film office in the Department of Commerce, offered to help in all ways possible.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer personally promised his support.

Cinemark's national office, headed by president Tim Warner, a native of Butte, agreed to install digital 3D equipment at their Helena theater for the world premiere.

And Dyan Walker of Helena said that she'd happily allow her Siberian Husky Merlin to stand in for the LA star dog in some scenes — and she even agreed to let them put make up on Merlin so he'd look the part.

To Gabai's delight his childhood dream was coming true.

The dream took shape in late 2006. Gabai visited Montana in 2007 on a scouting trip and shot footage of the Race to the Sky. Then, in 2008, Gabai returned to shoot the complete film in digital 3D.

"This is the first all-live action, dramatic, digital 3D film," says Gabai, proudly. It's also the first Helena world movie premiere, at least the first anyone at the Montana film office can remember.

The economic impact of such a project is undeniable.

"Fourteen Montanans were employed through the filming of this movie and over 30 Montana businesses in Helena, Lincoln, Phillipsburg, Missoula and Kallispell directly generated business as a result," Schweitzer said.

But beyond the money, the most memorable parts of this venture involved a gaggle of small-town Montanans who put their lives on hold and threw caution to the wind to make this happen.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in Lincoln, where Liz and Jerry Cain joined with Rollie and Maureen Fisher to provide houses, dogs and sled trails.

The Cains own 250 acres near Lincoln which are full of beautiful animals, including wolf dogs, dressage horses, Italian greyhounds and sled dogs.

Former Californians, the Cains retired to Montana and were inspired by four-time Iditarod champion Doug Swingley. Swingley put two of Cain's wolf dogs on one of his teams for a run and then subsequently offered them a few of his retired racing dogs.

The Cains were an obvious choice to be part of the project — and they offered their home and their dogs to Gabai and his team.

"We were hooked right away when we were approached about helping with the film," Liz said. "We're adventuresome. And we're so glad we did. Everyone was so generous and loving."

The Fishers, two of Lincoln's most beloved and dedicated citizens, also offered their land and home. Rollie served as a board member of the original Governor's Cup Sled Dog Race and later

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nome. Rollie served as a board member of the original Governor's Cup Sled Dog Race and later became the start-of-the-race announcer for the Race to the Sky. In 2007, Rollie was honored with a 20-year trophy for his many years of service to the race.

Sadly, Rollie, who grew up in Helena and graduated from Helena High, passed away on May 22, just 19 days before his home appeared on the Cinemark screen. There's a celebration of Rollie's life planned for Saturday, June 13, in Lincoln.

Maureen has nothing but fond memories of the filming.

"When they asked if they could do some shooting here, I just said, 'Well, I guess,' " smiled Maureen. "Rollie majored in film and television at MSU so he found it all very, very interesting."

The Fisher house became a soundstage.

"Our kitchen was the computer room, all four bedrooms were for the stars, the sewing room was the costume department and the big family room upstairs became the dining room with tables and couches and a TV. They were using our bedroom for filming, so I slept on the couch," Maureen said.

There was also a place set aside for the child star, Ariel Gade, to study with her tutor every day. Ariel's parents were on the set, looking out for their daughter.

"I wish everyone would raise their children the way Ariel was being raised," Maureen said.

One of her fondest memories was giving Bubba a bath. Not to worry: he's the star dog.

"I gave him a bath in our Jacuzzi. To make him look injured, we covered parts of him with peanut butter, jam and dirt. Then we had to tell him not to shake when he got out. We had to do that three nights in a row. I felt so sorry for him. But he loved me."

Even though the house was packed with visitors from Los Angeles, Maureen found everyone as friendly and as nice as the folk in Lincoln.

"They did not have that Hollywood persona," she said. "You couldn't have asked for nicer people. They were everywhere, but nobody took anything or destroyed anything — except maybe for a dirty carpet or a couple ice spike holes in the wood floor."

The month-long visit was taxing, but Maureen wouldn't trade it for the world.

"It was one of the most emotionally draining things I've ever done," she recalls. "And one of the most rewarding. I wouldn't do it again right away, but a little later I would do it again for that type of people. They were full of hugs and love."

When Rollie became ill long after filming ended, envelopes and packages started arriving from Hollywood.

"They all sent hand-written notes, cards, flowers, candy and prayers," Maureen said. "They had become family."

Maureen would welcome them back, if Gabai decides to film "White Fang" in this area, something he says is "very possible."

Lots of others contributed to the success of the project, including the Legislature which passed the Big Sky on the Big Screen Act, spearheaded by Schweitzer, in 2005. That act was enhanced in both the 2007 and 2009 sessions. That program, which provides tax credits for hired Montana labor and for production costs, was designed to bring projects like this one to the state.

"Producing independent films can be a difficult job, but it's the great spirit of Montana's citizens, its film crews, and my dedicated staff to make this sort of movie happen," said Sten Iversen, manager of the Montana Film Office.

And Lincoln wasn't the only town throwing out the red carpet.

Phillipsburg actually stood in for Lincoln for all the town shots. The Sweet Palace candy store, the Doe Brothers soda fountain and the Moose Mercantile all have shining moments in the film.

Shirley Beck, co-owner of the Sweet Palace, helped coordinate the Phillipsburg logistics. She enjoyed every minute.

One day the director learned something about Montanans and their guns, according to Beck.

"Richard was filming a scene in front of the Sapphire Gallery Jewelry store and needed a gun. So he turned to our staff and asked if anybody had a gun, preferably a long rifle," Beck recalled. "You can imagine what happens when somebody says that in Montana. Within seconds everybody ran out the back door and came back with a half-dozen long rifles. And these were mostly women!"

It's clear that everyone who came in contact with this project has fond memories of the experience — and wouldn't mind a sequel.

"I cried when they left," Maureen Fisher said. "And I miss them terribly."

Maureen can think of no better place than Lincoln to film "White Fang."

"If you don't feel God's presence in any other place," she said proudly, "you'll feel it around here."



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