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## Premiere of movie made in Montana to show at Myrna

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By BRENT NORTHUP For the Independent Record | Posted: Wednesday, May 5, 2010 12:00 am  
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Photo provided - Cast and crew on site in Montana.

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Have you heard the one about the two cousins from Darby who decided to make a Hollywood movie right here in their home state?

Pretty simple plan really: “I’ll write and direct if you raise the money! We’ll tell a story about Montana, shot in Montana and using a mostly Montana crew.”

So what odds do you give them of succeeding? About the same as President Obama carrying Ravalli County?

Well, Obama did lose badly in Ravalli, but the Darby cousins’ dream has come true.

On Thursday night the Myrna Loy hosts the Montana premiere of “A Fork in the Road.”

“Fork” was screened at the Cannes film festival, but few American audiences have seen the

finished cut. A rough cut was shown in Hamilton, but since then the film has been recut and crafted into its final form.

There will be only one public showing — at 8:15 p.m. Thursday. And the tickets are free.

They will be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis starting at 7 p.m. Thursday night at the Myrna box office. No tickets are available beforehand.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer will be on hand, as will writer/director Jim Kouf, producer Lynn Kouf, co-writer Al DiFiore, executive producer Clark “Bart” Bartkowski, and a cast member, Missi Pyle.

Kouf calls “Fork in the Road” an “action romantic-comedy” which finds a man, Will (Josh Cooke), on the lam after being falsely accused of a crime.

He teams up with April (Jaime King) for a run through Montana. The film was shot in the fall of 2007 mostly in Bozeman, Laurel and the Paradise Valley.

The cast includes Capt. Tony Lecce of the Montana National Guard who plays a Montana Highway Patrolman.

So just how did these country cousins, Jim and Bart, manage to make this happen?

Well, truth be known, these Darby folk are both transplants from the Golden State to the Treasure State.

Jim Kouf is a major Hollywood writer and director whose credits include blockbusters such as Jackie Chan’s “Rush Hour” and Nicolas Cage’s “National Treasure.” Kouf, 58, was born in Burbank, Calif., and built his career in Hollywood, but in 1985 he bought land in Darby.

Kouf wanted his children rooted in the mountains and prairies, too — and so he and his wife, Lynn, and the four kids have spent many summer vacations and holidays on the family ranch in Darby.

“Being on the ranch and being out in nature grounds them in reality, so life isn’t just about being in the city,” says Kouf.

Kouf really loves ranching. But like many Montana ranchers, he became frustrated trying to make a full-time living raising cattle. So he kept his day job in Burbank at the studios.

“I had about 700 acres here in Darby and was raising Red Angus cattle for 20 years,” says Kouf. “We had our own butcher shop and we were selling a gourmet product — all natural beef with no antibiotics and no hormones. But we found out it’s too hard to make a living in agriculture.”

Kouf’s love of writing and of Montana led to this film project. But films cost money.

And that’s where the second Darby cousin comes in: Jim’s older cousin, Clark “Bart” Bartkowski.

It was Bartkowski who raised the \$1.4 million to make this low-budget film.

“I was able to raise the money because of Jim,” he says. “I was able to sell Jim, his experience, the caliber of his work. I have some of my money in this, and I found some investors in California and Montana.”

But once the film was finished, the economy collapsed and the market for independent films shrank. Finding a distributor proved difficult.

As a result, “Fork in the Road” has been released on DVD before being distributed.

Kouf and Bartkowski still hold out hope for a major distribution deal, but the more realistic path, says Kouf, is simply to build support for strong DVD sales — plus a television deal. That, in turn, would pay back investors who would then be willing to finance other Made in Montana projects.

“I want to come back to Montana to do another story,” says Kouf. “I want to tell stories that aren’t being told by studios anymore — crowd-pleasing stories for the general public.”

Although the cousins built careers in California, both now have deep allegiance to Montana.

“My heart’s here,” says Bartkowski, a permanent resident of Darby since 1995. “Every time I go back to California, I can hardly stand it. I love mountains. I love to fish. I have a couple horses and whitetail deer in my front yard.”

Jim’s that way, too, although he’s still making Hollywood movies.

“I think if Jim could have made the cattle business work, he’d have been happy to make that his life,” says Bartkowski. “Jim is a real person. He’s really not your typical L.A. guy. He never got caught up in the Hollywood glamour part. He’s very genuine, never aloof, and tries to get the kids interested in the cows.”

When asked about how he’s managed to keep from being sucked into the Hollywood culture, Kouf credited his livestock.

“It’s hard to be arrogant and raise cattle,” he laughs. “They don’t give a s—. I am kind of a low-key guy, I guess. I care much about my family. Being in Montana keeps us all grounded.”

On Thursday, the cousins get to show off their Made in Montana movie, and they are excited.

“We’re proud of it and we’re eager to show it,” says Bartkowski.

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