

Pennsylvania: Backlot for Hollywood

by Larry A. Portzline

The Pennsylvania State Film Bureau, abolished last fall by former Commerce Secretary Donald F. Mazziotti, is back in action again after a seven-month hiatus. Solid reasons for the bureau's temporary demise are scarce, but many individuals behind the scenes point to a simple matter of priority as the culprit.

In its reorganization of the Commerce Department, the Casey administration decided that the two-person bureau was not contributing significantly to Pennsylvania's overall economic progress. As a result, the bureau was dismantled and absorbed into the Office of Communications, drawing strong reaction from tourism officials and the film industry.

Critics of the move point to the bureau's decade-long success story for proof of its importance.

Current commerce Secretary Raymond Christman, who spearheaded the Bureau's rebirth, notes that 53 major motion pictures

and 55 television movies and series were filmed in Pennsylvania during the bureau's first 10 years, generating over \$90 million for the communities in which they were filmed. Perhaps just as important, he says, are the "intangible" benefits of filming in

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Pennsylvania. "It has to do with developing a positive image of ourselves and the state we live in," Christman emphasizes. "These are things that really can't be measured."

Christman refuses to criticize Mazziotti's reasons for scrapping the bureau. "It's a moot point," he says. "Everyone has his own views on various issues and priorities. Mr. Mazziotti made what he thought was the right decision in terms of how resources were best employed."

Christman was first approached about reestablishing the Film Bureau at a confirmation hearing last November. At that time he "hadn't really examined" the possibility, but responded that he felt quite strongly about Pennsylvania's ability to promote film and television production. The state "needs to have a comprehensive economic development program," he points out. "In the weeks and months afterwards, I looked at the situation, reviewed some of the numbers, and talked to various people to confirm my initial instinct. I then set about looking for someone to hire in the position of director . . . and coordinated that with the formal re-estab-

lishment of the bureau."

Christman's choice to direct the Film Bureau is Ted Hanson, a Harrisburg resident who previously worked as an editor and information specialist in the Office of Legislative Information. Hanson brings "a lot of personal energy" to the job, says Christman, along with vast experience in public relations, communications, and state government.

According to Hanson, the Film Bureau "is an economic development tool that can ill afford to go unused."

Currently operating on a budget of less than \$100,000, the bureau can expect to bring in \$2 million or more per film. And despite only recently starting operations, there are already five projects on Hanson's desk. They have simply "flown over the transom," he says, and Pennsylvania is "top contender" for two of them.

A production company on location in Pennsylvania must spend large sums of money on food, lodging, transportation, and supplies, says Hanson, and will quite often

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hire local people to help with the production. In the minds of many, the resulting combination of economic benefits, pride, and increased tourism is what makes the bureau indispensable. "It makes people feel good about themselves," says Hanson. "You go to the movies and you see your neighborhood on the screen . . . That's kind of a nice thing. You can't put a dollar value on that."

As director, Hanson's first step in assisting a film company is to "read the script, not for artistic merit, but for a feel of the kind of locations they're looking for." Pennsylvania is valuable to the film industry, he stresses, because of its ability to double for many various places: the Midwest, New England, Canada . . . even parts of Europe. "We have more of a variation in topography than many other states," he says. "Pennsylvania has a remarkable variety of locations."

Our other resources are plentiful as well, says Hanson: "Do you want a school? A town from the 1890's? Do you need a church? A train station? We can't deliver a desert, palm trees, or volcanoes, but we can give them the ocean. It'll be Lake Erie, but who will know? You can't see the other side and you can't taste it."

Hanson makes special note of Harrisburg's potential as a film location. A common practice in the film industry is to use a large sound stage for production, and

Hanson is currently studying the possibility of using vacant sections of the Farm Show Complex for just that purpose.

"A sound stage is nothing more than a very large space," Hanson explains, "where a production company can build anything they want, light it any way they want, and move the cameras. I see no reason why a film couldn't be shot in the Farm Show. It's close to transportation, it has truck access, restaurant facilities, showers . . . It has everything." Filming at the Farm Show would also be far less expensive than filming in Hollywood or New York, he adds.

State Representative Allen Kukovich, D-Westmoreland, says that the trend towards location shooting creates "a real market" for Pennsylvania.

Kukovich was very disappointed by the Casey administration's decision to abolish the Film Bureau and subsequently did some personal lobbying to have it reinstated. "I'm not sure they realized the Bureau's importance," he says. "Apart from helping the economy, it increases exposure to the state and promotes tourism. It gives the rest of the country a chance to learn about Pennsylvania."

An example that nearly everyone points to is the success of the movie "Witness", filmed in Lancaster County in 1984. According to Paramount Pictures, more than \$2.1 million was spent to film "Witness" in the county, a fact that is overshadowed by the phenomenal growth of the local tourism industry since the film was released.

Harry Flick, president of the Lancaster County Visitors Bureau, refutes a report by the United States Travel Data Center which says that over 8,600 jobs were created in the county in 1987. "I think we're just scratching

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the surface," says Flick, insisting that the true figure is somewhere closer to 15,000.

Additionally, he says, "Witness" has not yet run its course. It's been seen in theatres and on video tape, but it hasn't yet been released for network television. When it is, I think it will cause even more awareness of Lancaster and the community."

Former "M*A*S*H" star Mike Farrell,

who played B. J. Hunnicutt for eight years on the series, says that the Film Bureau was very helpful during production of his company's movie "Dominick and Eugene." Released in March, the film was made in the Pittsburgh area during Spring 1987, and stars Tom Hulce ("Amadeus"), Ray Liotta ("Something Wild"), and Jamie Lee Curtis ("Perfect").

"My experience with the Pennsylvania Film Bureau was a very productive one," Farrell said in a recent telephone interview. While considering various cities in the state, the bureau sent him photographs, lists of services, and "an assessment of who would be most useful" for the company to "know, contact, and utilize" while it was filming.

"We had a big problem," says Farrell, "with one of the state laws with regard to the employment of children, and the bureau was tremendously helpful in pointing out our options. When you're in a state where you don't have a lot of personal contacts, that sort of thing is essential . . . I'd like very much to come back again."

As for the future of the Film Bureau, it will remain a two-person operation for the time being, with Director Hanson and Administrative Assistant Marsha Logan running the show.

However, according to Hanson, there will come a time when the bureau "won't be able to handle" all of the requests coming into their office:

"We've got suburbia, we've got urban decay . . . We've got everything." ■