

Labrador **Life**

Vol. 12 No. 4,

Fall 2018

Footprints Everywhere

Remembering
Carol Brice-Bennett



ISBN 097831960-5



\$3.95 HST Included

Also in this issue:

Wolf in Dog's Clothing
Amazing Auroras
Miscommunication

Cutting-Edge Research
Reading Water
Capturing the Falls

Capturing the Falls

Labrador's first major film-making expedition

story by
Mark Turner

From its beginnings, documentary film has explored what is distant from us. Its cousin, narrative film, works differently. The story that binds it reduces the distance between us and its characters. At least part of the attraction of documentary film is that it shows us something whose distance cannot be reduced. Robert Flaherty, the troubled father of the genre, learned this quickly. His equally celebrated and derided *Nanook of the North* (1922) records Nanook's traditional Inuit lifestyle from igloo building to seal hunting. Now,

it is generally held those traditional activities were devised by Nanook with guidance from Flaherty. But for *Nanook's* audience, the distinction between what was actual and what was made-up, could hardly have mattered.

It is not surprising that Labrador offered fertile ground for generations of documentary filmmakers. Robert Flaherty himself would spend time here between 1911 and 1914 on multiple expeditions. During a 1913-14 expedition aboard the ship *Laddie*, he journeyed with cameras in-hand. His photographic depictions of Innu are celebrated. What Labrador offered early documentary filmmakers was a relatively accessible yet fuzzy geography. It was within reach of the population base of North America's Eastern seaboard, but also unknown enough to allow for license in how it was represented. A 1911 film by the Edison Company, *Eskimos in Labrador*, demonstrates the point. Despite its title, it is extremely unlikely the film was shot anywhere near the region.

What made Labrador even more enticing for early documentary filmmakers was its promise of natural resources. Since A.P. Low's 1895 report of his geological expeditions to the region, the known but unseen potential of ore deposits and hydro-electricity placed a premium on visible evidence of these resources. While ore is important, water makes for a more visually interesting subject, especially falling water.

The first major film-making expedition to what were known to Europeans as the "Unknown Falls" was made by Varick Frissell in the summer of 1925. Born in Boston in 1903 and raised in New York, like many affluent young men from the American northeast, Frissell first came to Labrador to work with the Grenfell Mission in North West River. That was in 1922. While working for the Mission, he became a pioneer filmmaker in Labrador. His un-released footage of Innu at North West River is some of the earliest film ever produced in the region after the work of Allan Evertz and Alfred Birdsall, Donald MacMillan and photographers for the Hudson's Bay Company.

continued...



history

Hearing stories of the “Unknown River” and “Unknown Falls” during his time in North West River, and inspired by A.P. Low’s report, Frissell resolved to make an expedition of both river and falls with his Yale classmate, Jim Hellier. They hired Robert and John Michelin from North West River as guides and were also accompanied by a Canadian geological prospector. Frissell travelled with both still and motion picture cameras.

In the months after the expedition, his first reporting of what he saw came in the form of text. Frissell authored extensive articles for publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Canadian Magazine* and the *Geographical Journal*, portions of which were widely re-published. The last of these would earn him entry into the Royal Geographical Society.

Despite his attempts at objectivity, Frissell was taken by the romance of his subject. “And so today when I think of McLean Falls,” he ends his article for *Canadian Magazine*, “the free and mighty, made a slave to turn the machinery of mankind; when I think that something so material as a locomotive whistle may soon disturb the peace of the “Unknown River” I remember with a feeling of regret that no frontier is safe from the invasions of mankind. It has been decreed that the silence of the forests, the sovereignty of the Indian must go, for they yield nothing more tangible than romance, and wilderness must be productive. And so “New



Footage of Innu at North West River by Varrick Frissell.

Quebec” must go the way of all wilderness.”

First shown in 1926, and likely re-edited as late as 1928, Frissell’s silent film of the expedition played upon these tensions, suggesting he was both an agent and critic of natural resource development. The publicly available version of *Lure of the Labrador* (the title is a clear nod to Dylan Wallace) sets up its subject as “wilderness [that] must be productive”. By way of titles, Frissell aphoristically describes the region as “the land God gave to Cain” before presenting news of the Privy Council’s March 1, 1927 decision to grant Labrador to Newfoundland. The “chief bone of contention,” he goes on, is “Grand Falls, twice the height of Niagara.” It is worth pointing out that by

this time, he has also settled upon the term “Grand Falls,” rather than “Unknown Falls”.

From here, *Lure of the Labrador* follows the same through-line as his writings about the expedition. The film is presented as a day-by-day travelogue of the expedition. After an extended sequence at North West River, the film follows the Frissell, Hellier and the Michelins’ course to Muskrat Falls, up the Grand River, to Bowdoin Canyon and finally, the Grand Falls themselves. Quite unlike his writings, though, the film shows nothing of Frissell himself. We interpret his attitudes towards his subject by way of his camera work and the few titles he includes in the 14-minute film.

Frissell’s camerawork is intimate.



CRB
REBUILD & RECREATION LTD.
"You break it,
We fix it!"
497-8CRB
NORTH WEST RIVER, NL

Randy Edmunds
MHA Torngat Mountains

P.O. Box 133
Makkovik, Nunatsiavut AOP 1J0

Phone: 709-923-2471/2472
Cell: (709) 899-0399
Fax: (709) 923-2473
Toll Free: 1-877-923-2471
Email: randyedmunds@gov.nl.ca



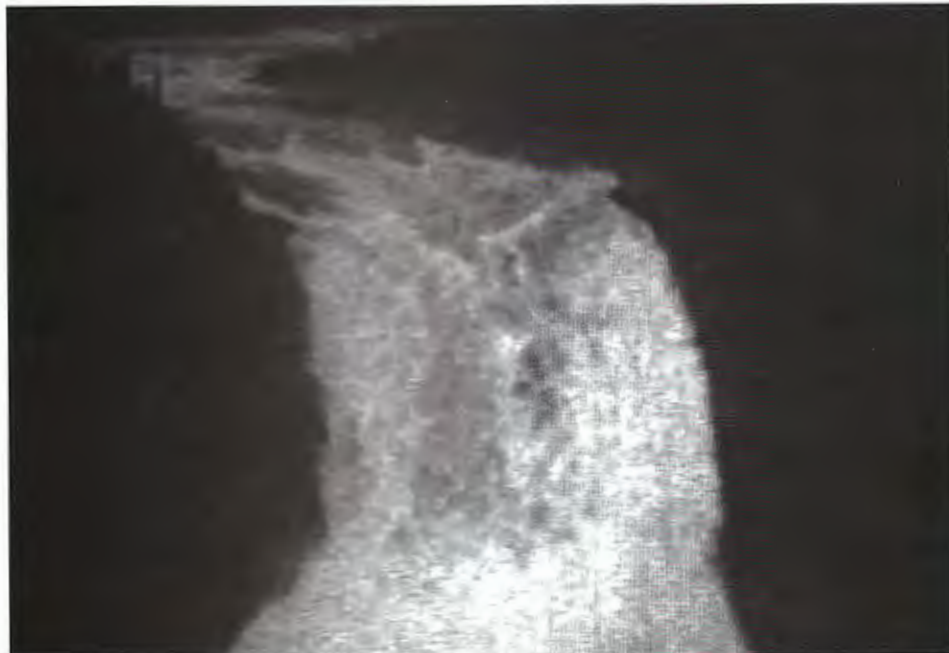
www.facebook.com/RandyEdmunds
[twitter@EdmundsMHA](https://twitter.com/EdmundsMHA)

history

Even for a film that is mostly made up of landscapes, each shot is remarkably close to the scenes they represent. In his Muskrat Falls, sequence, he sets up his shots from the banks of the falls, giving us a clear feeling of the texture of the Falls and how they interact with their environment. In the lining sequences, he provides an uncommon sense of the labour involved. We see how land and water conspire against the expedition party and even become aware of the dangerous position Frissell must have placed himself within to get the shot. For his reveal of the falls, he is careful to give us a sense of their scale by first showing them from the top and including a member of the expedition party in the frame to convey their scale. The detail is small but vital. Though the man is dwarfed by the falls, it is man who will ultimately tame them for his purpose. The moment is charged.

Little is known about where Frissell screened *Lure of the Labrador*, but it seems likely that his primary audience would have been via Wilfred Grenfell's UK lecture circuit in 1927 where, according to Frissell's diary, he "showed the film twice daily to huge and appreciative crowds." There are no accounts of him showing the film in Labrador.

Three years after Frissell's expedition, another American, Howard Taylor, led a new expedition to the falls. Taylor was joined on his expedition by J.D. Kernan, Ralph and Philip Rogers with Wally Chambers and Philippe Colombe as guides. W. Gillies Ross charts their



A shot of the Grand (now Churchill) Falls from *Unknown Falls*.
(Smithsonian Institution)

expedition beginning on the north shore of the St. Lawrence, ascending the St. Jean and Romaine Rivers, crossing the height of land and then followed the Atikonak River to Ossokmanuan Lake. From there, the party descended the Unknown River to a waterfall, returned to Ossokmanuan Lake and then to the Grand River where they portaged around Grand Falls and on to Lake Melville. Philip Rogers served as the cinematographer for this expedition.

In spite of the public appetite for accounts of travels to the Grand Falls, little fanfare appears to have been made of what is sometimes now referred to as

the Taylor-Rogers Expedition. Its members appear to have published no written accounts of their journey, nor is there any evidence that they gave interview accounts. All that survives are references to their expedition in accounts of other expeditions. This may have something to do with the nature of their expedition, suggested by the more difficult routing they embarked upon. Eight years later, Dr. J.S. Wishart would create an expedition film of a similar routing by plane, part of the groundwork for what would become the Quebec-Labrador iron ore mining region.

continued...



**GUILLEVIN
INTERNATIONAL CIE
CO.**

ELECTRICAL INDUSTRIAL WHOLESALE

396 Hamilton River Road
Happy Valley-Goose Bay
Labrador, NL A0P 1E0
Tel. (709)896-3361
Fax. (709)896-3362

Orville Crocker
Manager



P.O. Box 46
31 Main St.
Forteau, NL
A0K 2P0

Phone: (709)931-2743
Fax: (709)931-2842
Email: info@labradorseaview.ca
www.labradorseaview.ca



The Grand Falls, from Varick Frissell's *Lure of the Labrador*.

This makes the film all the more curious. The version in the Smithsonian Institution's collection is presented as a 30-minute travelogue called *Unknown Falls: John Kernan's Exploration in Central Labrador*. It gives the sense of a coherent, chronological journey beginning on the St. Lawrence and ending at North West River. With no titles to help us interpret what we are seeing, the only

evidence we have is Rogers' photography.

Unlike *Lure of the Labrador*, *Unknown Falls* film finds little intimacy in the landscape. Favoring much longer shots than Frissell, Rogers fixes his subjects at a remove. The rivers and forests are not things his party interact with, but rather fields to be crossed. His lining sequences seem to make the difficult

action pleasant, pushed to the edge of frames that emphasize their landscape. The falls themselves are presented symmetrically, a cascading rectangle directly in the centre of the frame. But what is most noticeable about *Unknown Falls* is the absence of people from the region. While *Lure of Labrador* begins with an extended sequence of Innu in close and medium shots at North West River, Rogers' film shows us no one in detail other than the expedition party. The absence of Labradorians here is unmistakable. Frissell may have been uneasy of how it was his film would be used, but Rogers' intent seems clear.

In keeping with the tradition of early documentary, both films are not exactly certain of what it is they document, something both Frissell and Rogers could not clear up between themselves. In spite of their mutual belief that they had filmed the Grand Falls, it seems likely that Frissell had filmed the Grand Falls while Rogers had filmed the nearby Twin Falls. Like *Nanook*, though, for their respective audiences, the distinction did not matter. Both Frissell and Rogers had provided visible evidence of a natural resource that, by the logic of their time, made a case for its own development. Today, we understand the outcome of that line of reasoning. †

POOLE ALTHOUSE

BARRISTERS AND SOLICITORS

Proudly Serving the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Area

Our Practice includes:

Personal Injury
Real Estate
Criminal Law
Corporate and Commercial
Labour and Employment Law
Family Law
Wills and Estates
Family Trusts
Civil Litigation

49A Grenfell Street
P.O Box 1450, Stn. B
Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL
A0P 1E0

Tel: 709-896-8777

Toll-free: 1-877-634-3136

(Corner Brook office)

Fax: 709-896-8779

Email: goosebay@poolealthouse.ca