

Labrador **Life**

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Labrador (Atlantic Films, 1963)

Documenting Labrador West

**More than a dozen films produced
in the area between 1936 and 1968**

story by Mark Turner

The development of Labrador West is one of the most richly documented episodes in the recent history of Labrador. There, between roughly 1936 and 1968, at least 11 films in English and two in French were produced by production houses in Canada and the United States. Between the development of ore deposits, power generating stations, a

575-kilometre long railway line, and multiple communities, there was much for cameras to document. When compared to the film record of other large-scale industrial projects from twentieth century Labrador, the diversity of this record and the people responsible for creating it are unrivalled.

There are a number of reasons for the uniqueness of this record. Film historians have often pointed out the deep relationship between film and technology. They argue that because it is a product of first industrial revolution, film is well suited to document industrial development. History gives evidence for this claim. The first film ever publicly shown in 1895 by August and Louis Lumière showed workers leaving one of their factories in Lyon, France. The so-called “industrial film” has been a thriving film genre ever since. Because the development of Labrador West would not have been possible without technological advances made during World War II and the years immediately after, it was inevitable that film cameras would be there to document the work. As the record shows us, cameras seamlessly mount on trains, planes and trucks. They easily document the scale of human achievement in what at that time was considered by outsiders to be barren an inhospitable land.

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There is also an issue of timing. Begun only a few years after Labrador and Newfoundland's entry into Confederation, the earliest films that capture the development of Labrador West were political. They emphasize the large amounts of money invested, the manpower mobilized, and the importance of the projects to Canada.

The basic idea, as one film asserts, is that only Canadian ingenuity would allow the riches of this region to be unlocked. *Documenting Labrador West* was a way to fill in the map of Canada. And in the years before the Quiet Revolution, it was easier to draw that map through Quebec.

By our understanding today, especially for anyone from outside the region, the idea of Labrador West that these films present is geographically fuzzy. It spans a corridor of land bookended by Sept-Îles to the south and Schefferville to the north, running the length of the Quebec North Shore & Labrador Railway. Within that corridor are communities and settlements existing and extinct: Gagnon, Fermont, Labrador City, Wabush and Knob Lake.

Unified by industry, the first films from this region focus less on the communities themselves and the people within them than the industry they serve. These early films are unquestionably industrial films.

While it is likely explorers and prospectors had earlier shot footage, the first finished film from the region is the twelve-minute long travelogue, *Dr. Wishart's Labrador Journey*. The film was taken during a 1936 geological expedition led by Dr. J. A. "Joe" Retty, the chief geologist for Hollinger and later known by his Canadian colleagues as the "King of Labrador".

The Rochester, NY-based James Wishart served as a geologist on the expedition and, likely as one three documentarians. The expedition itself was well-provided and included amongst its ranks a personal assistant to Retty, a cook, five canoemen and two pilots. Beginning on June 28 and ending September 22, the team set out by boat



Dr. Wishart's Labrador Journey (1936)

from Montreal and continued by bush plane from Sept-Îles. Their first point of entry in Labrador seems to have been Ashuanipi Lake on July 17.

Wishart's film picks up as the expedition passes through Trois-Pistoles, QC and focusses mostly on the group's travel between Sept-Îles and points north. The few titles offer little information about what we are looking at. But assuming Wishart has correctly squared his dates with his footage, the bulk of the Labrador material comes from the Ashuanipi Lake area. The film is a curi-

ous one. On the one hand, it has all of the hallmarks of an amateur film made by someone with little understanding of where he actually is. In the middle of the travelogue, there is an out-of-place sequence of still photographs of Inuit tents from Baffin Island. On the other hand, it seems to anticipate the approach of the industrial films that follow.

Often shooting from the plane, Wishart's long and wide shots lay the visual groundwork for an account of this region being barren and unforgiving. Today, there is little trace of where

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Wishart's film might have been shown after it was made. But it is clear that the conventions he used in filming the land became common ones. Wishart himself remains known within the industry. A geological formation in the Labrador Trough bears his name.

Eighteen years later, in 1954, the first commercially produced films from the region appeared. Made by the Cleveland, Ohio-based company, Cinécraft, *Up the Line in '53* and *Ore in '54* are short industrial films that focus respectively on the construction of the QNS&L and the development of the mine in Labrador City. In one way, these films are a direct result of the creation of the Iron Ore Company of Canada. Largely unknown in the realm of Canadian industrial filmmaking, Cinécraft had long made films for the Cleveland-based M.A. Hanna Company, which was one of the founding partners in IOCC. Little remains in Cinécraft's corporate archives about these films, but the reason for their work in the region is clear. Along with their 1954 industrial *The Iron Horse Goes North*, these are the only films ever made by the company in Labrador.

By today's standards, *Up the Line in '53* seems quaint. Focussing on the development of the QNS&L in order to deliver *Ore in '54*, *Up the Line* uses the surface of an office desk as a visual anchor. On that desk are a calendar, an ash tray, portraits of children and the bodiless arm of the narrator. The idea, it seems, is to tell the story of this development from the perspective of its distantly removed managers. With no musical score, the consistent narration film makes it feel a more like an illustrated lecture than a movie. By comparison, *Ore in '54* is slightly more dynamic. Letting the imagery of the development speak for itself rather than through the perspective of its managers, the presence of a musical score helps to drive the film.

The visuals in both films are spectacular. They are the work of a film crew that has clearly spent time in the region. Both *Up the Line in '53* and *Ore in '54* make use of the same kind of aerial pho-

tography as *Dr. Wishart*, but alongside those images are low angled close shots taken on-site. Some of the sequences could only have come about from a long commitment to documenting the project. Two-thirds of the way through *Ore in '54*, there is a short sequence documenting the washout and destruction of a bridge at Menihék. The heightened tone of the narrator and over-the-top musical score are designed to give the moments maximum effect, but these only underscore the striking visuals.

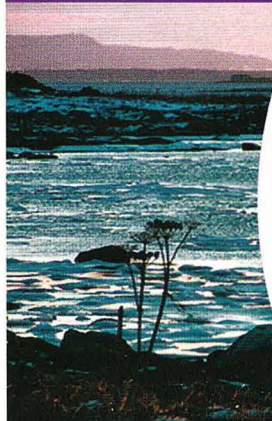
In 1955, one year after the release of *Up the Line in '53* and *Ore in '54*, the National Film Board of Canada released *Road of Iron*. Directed by Walford Hewitson, it was the first widely-distributed film documenting the development of Labrador West not directly commissioned by IOCC or one of its subsidiaries. The distinction means little when it comes to the finished product. Of all the films that chronicle Labrador West, *Road of Iron* might be the most effective industrial film. Its heightened narration, musical score and visual contrast (the film is black and white) all reinforce the importance of the development. The only people that speak on camera are project managers. Even the

narrator, John Drainie, brought his own prestige to the film. At the time he was considered by Orson Welles to have been the "the greatest radio actor in the world". Everything about Hewitson's film was designed to show the importance of this development to Canada. So significant was the film that its footage was re-cut that same year to make another, shorter film called *Iron from the North*.

After Hewitson, films documenting Labrador West changed slightly. The scale of the development remained front and centre, but throughout the 1960s the focus became more precise. Films like *The Carol Operation* explained technical aspects of ore processing while other like *Accomplishment in Northern Quebec* were designed to attract people to work in the industry. Throughout the decade, the Iron Ore Company of Canada was continuously shooting footage, which made its way into its own commissioned films as well as other industrials that documented the North American steel industry. Some of this footage appears to have made its way into Richard Finnie's 1963 film *Iron from Labrador*.

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film

Finnie, a noted Canadian filmmaker and photographer had shot footage in Hebron for *Patrol to the Northwest Passage* (1937). Other IOCC footage appears to have made its way into a 1965 short industrial co-produced by the American Iron and Steel Institute and Walt Disney Productions called *Steel and America* in which Donald Duck explore the history and contemporary importance of steel in the USA.

The 1960s would also see other types of filmmaking in the region. In 1964, IOCC provided funding for Guy Maguire's *Sept-Îles à la recherche de son passé* (*Sept-Îles in Search of the Past*), a short documentary about archaeological work on early European settlement in the development area. In 1968, Arthur Lamothe, the celebrated French-born, Quebec-transplant documentary filmmaker released *Le train du Labrador* (*The Labrador Train*), which explores the significance of the QNS&L to the Innu. These were the first films to

explore the deeper history of people within the region.

It is interesting that in the early film record of Labrador West, these types of films are part of a minority. For all the people that figure in these film records, their individual stories are never the focus of these films. Nor, for that matter, is the relationship between Labrador West and the remainder of Labrador. The only film that addressed this subject is Atlantic Films' 1963 picture, *Labrador*. Produced for the Smallwood Government, *Labrador* remains the only film that attempts to represent all of Labrador's regions. As such, it is worthwhile to see how the film re-frames development in Labrador West as part of (former Premier) Joey Smallwood's modernization program.

By the 1970s, industrial filmmaking in Labrador West all but dried up. Rather than direct resources into broadly focussed industrial films, the IOCC narrowed its commissions to television

commercials and corporate video production. Other types of filmmaking that focussed on industry slowed as well. Released by the National Film Board, Diane Beaudry's 1984 documentary *Too Dirty for a Woman* is one of the last films to focus on some aspect of mining in Labrador West. Her film is also the first to tell the stories of individuals in that development.

Together, these films make for strange history. A vivid part of the documentary record, these industrial films tell the story of a region that was developed through ingenuity and grit on a vast scale. But they do not tell us much about the people that built, lived and worked in these communities or the people that called this land home before trains, trucks and even cameras arrived. Those stories continue to emerge with films like and Caroline Monnet's short doc *Tshiuetin* and through the emerging record from home moviemakers from this region. ↗



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