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"Take Five"

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Hope, British Columbia

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Dear Peter,

What difference does a border make? This is the general question that inspired dozens of more specific inquiries about life on a particular stretch of the 49th parallel during my two-week stint as associate producer on a documentary film crew. The major set-piece of our slice-of-life investigation was a dirt road extending eastward from the backside of a small complex of buildings that house Customs and Immigration officials from the United States and Canada, respectively, at the border crossing that joins Sweetgrass, Montana with Coutts, Alberta. As it happens, there are very few instances along the U.S.-Canada border where the north-south line of demarcation is coincident with an east-west roadway, so from beginning to end this modest production about a seemingly ordinary stretch of borderland is based on a quaint anomaly. Does it matter?

The subject of this film is the border itself, an immaterial object that is easier to characterize--passive, friendly, unarmed, etc.--than it is to get a visual fix on, especially since it is largely invisible. There are no brick walls or barbed wire fences anywhere along the 5,525-mile frontier between the two countries. The border is a line you can stand on and step across, unwittingly or on purpose, without anyone taking any notice. There is a chance, but not a very probable one, that your technically illegal transgression will be spotted from the air by one of the camera-equipped Cessnas of the U.S. Border Patrol, or that a gun-toting officer in a pale green station wagon will track you down on the basis of a telephone tip from a homeowner who belongs to an informal and unofficial network of informants. If you're traveling north, into Canada, on one of many cowpaths and dirt tracks that traverse the Montana-Alberta line, you might eventually meet up with a scowling mountie in a blue and white sedan. If you're planning a canoe trip on the Milk River, a tributary to the Missouri that originates in Glacier National Park, flows northward into Alberta, and then meanders back across the border, expect a hassle downstream--we heard it through the grapevine that last summer a dripping couple were detained for hours. And if you are an illegal alien, on the run from the brutalities of El Salvador

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

or the gang warfare in Los Angeles, the chances of your being picked up just short of sanctuary in Canada seem to increase substantially, because locals notice strangers in their fields--we were hanging around the U.S. Immigration officers' desk when a call came in and the alert went out.



The working title of our film is "The Invisible Border," and though it approximates reality in relative terms along this short section of gently undulating frontier, east of the foothills of the Rockies and just west of the Sweetgrass Hills, the phrase could not be accurately applied at other longitudinal coordinates. The jointly-administered International Boundary Commission cuts a six-meter swath through the forested areas in order to make the border observable from the air, and it also has the job of maintaining the unobtrusive concrete obelisks that mark the trail of official surveys at various intervals. But one rarely sees or hears about the routine work of the IBC; nobody we talked to had ever heard of it.

We took a less direct approach to the border as a physical entity and a mental phenomenon by conjuring-up visual images such as a curtain or a force field and suggesting them to people we interviewed along the way, and by drawing from the surprisingly rich record of rhetoric and commentary about borders in general and the unique aspects of the one in question. My favorite pertinent quotations are from Ambrose Bierce, whose **Devil's Dictionary** defines the noun "boundary" as "an imaginary line between two nations, separating the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of another," and from the more sanguine Winston Churchill, who once referred to the U.S.-Canada border as

"that long frontier from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, guarded by only neighborly respect and honourable obligations, is an example to every country and a pattern for the future of the world."

The intellectual backdrop of our effort is a jumble of notions about the psychological potency of what is perhaps the world's most pacific boundary at a time when more striking symbols of political and territorial division

lines such as the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain are being swept off the stage, and negotiations are underway in various corners of the world to deliberately fuzz the practical distinctions between ostensibly sovereign nations through the agencies of free trade, monetary union, and other outgrowths of economic interdependence. I don't believe any of us ever lost sight of the contrast (and the subtle links) between our short-lived filmmaking venture on an international border and the perpetually stark realities of world politics. We happened to be shooting barnyard scenes in the sweet golden glow of a prairie sunrise at just about the same time that Iraqi tanks were rolling across the desert into Kuwait.

The primary focus of our work was on two farm families who live across the street from one another about 5 miles east of the Coytts/Sweetgrass bordertowns. The Fords live in Canada. Their neighbors the Horguses live on the American side of the border road. As it turns out, most of the forebears on the Ford (Canadian) side emigrated from North Dakota back in the 1940s, while (American) George Horgus was born and raised in Saskatchewan. This was a bit confusing at first, and we haven't decided yet whether the unanticipated braid of family roots and branches should have a place in the film. (Do you think it should?) A bit of background reading revealed that one of the border markers in our chosen chunk of territory is about 1200 feet off plumb as a result of a 19th century surveyor's error. This means that one or the other's farm house, from an astronomical perspective, may actually lie on "foreign" soil. A few leading questions to this effect were launched at members of each family, with the vain hope of sparking a bit of controversy or latent patriotism. No go; grain farmers near retirement age aren't too keen on abstract hypotheses, and who can blame them?

DeWayne and Doreen Ford and George and Marguerite Horgus are on the cusp of unintentional stardom. They each deny in their own words and ways that the border has made a significant difference in their everyday lives, but our intrusion into their routine is merely the latest in an unconnected series of media invasions: the CBC and the National Geographic Society have already hauled their equipment onto the lawns and into the kitchens of these plainspoken people who never asked for the attention. The border is threatening to make them celebrities. The pressure is discomfiting for everyone involved--we don't actually WANT to wear out our welcome--but the show must go on. George Horgus is reluctant to bring his new white Cadillac out of the garage not because he's only driven it twice in as many months and there isn't one single nick in the windshield or the body paint, but because he's afraid his fellow farmers along the border road (Fords included) might think he's putting on airs. But we're from a PBS affiliate, and we NEED to use that car in a film sequence. Actually, our compulsion has nothing to do with appearances, and everything to do with the interior quiet of the Cadillac's suspension, since ordinary rattles and squeaks wreck havoc with our high-quality sound gear. And lest I give you the wrong impression, George's fancy car is not attributable to his new-won fame; it is connected with the minor fortunes a hardworking wheat and barley grower can reap from secure contracts with the likes of Coors and Anheuser Busch.

Shane Horgus, on the other hand, makes no bones about wanting to be in the picture. This 6 year-old dynamo (George's grandson) rushes into the living room during a preparatory interview and announces he has just given his bicycle a bath in WD-40 and then begins to tear off his oil-stained jeans and shirt with the out-of-breath explanation that he has "to get cleaned-up" for what he fully expects to be a cameo appearance in the film.

As a thing of nebulous proportion and meaning in North American relations, the border is attracting increasing attention in both the United States and Canada. The entire coast to coast expanse of unguarded frontier was featured in the February, 1990 issue of *National Geographic* magazine (the Fords and Horguses appear in full color pose at the beginning of the article); it is also the subject of Vancouver journalist Marion Fraser's *Walking the Line*, an account of her transboundary perambulations at various innocuous crossing points from the Maine-New Brunswick frontier to the 141st meridian, which serves as the border between Alaska and the Yukon Territory.

Scholars from universities in both countries are at work on a cross-disciplinary, transregional research project aimed at a better understanding of the complex relationships that arise in the overlapping zones of border activity and interaction. The U.S.-Canada Borderlands study, initiated by the 49th Parallel Institute and now under the aegis of the University of Maine at Orono, has gathered support from several private foundations as well as government agencies, and gained a bit of notoriety in the June 25, 1990 issue of *Maclean's* magazine, Canada's foremost news weekly. Among the observations that have emerged thus far are a) that the border acts more as a sieve than a barrier, and b) that because of an understandable preoccupation with currents and flows south of the 49th parallel, Canada as a whole might be described as a borderlands society, whereas Americans' attention is more diffuse, and hardly ever concentrated on their northern neighbors.



The picturesque qualities of the U.S.-Canada border first came to light in 1976, when the Canadian government commissioned a stunningly beautiful photo essay entitled *Between Friends/Entre Amis* and presented it as a gift to the United States on the occasion of its bicentennial celebration. I believe our 30-minute microcosmic look at what goes on in the Coutts and Sweetgrass area will be the first documentary treatment of the border on television, but the entertainment industry is way ahead of us. "Bordertown" is a half-hour western series currently being aired on the CTV network in Canada and the Family Channel in the U.S. The action centers on standard

conflicts (bad dudes, barroom brawls, late-night gunfire, girl trouble, and trouble with Indians,) that are made more complicated by differing systems of frontier justice and related matters of jurisdiction. The two main characters are a U.S. Marshal who is of course a bit quick on the trigger and a more dapper and restrained officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (A third mainstay of the program is Marie, the nurse-of-all-trades from Quebec; her presence provides a bridge to various romantic encounters and visible proof of the French government's investment in the production.) The program is dopey, fun, and mildly instructive.

The 1940 Hollywood feature entitled "The 49th Parallel" exists on a different plane altogether. Essentially a propaganda film intended to stir up pro-British and anti-Nazi sentiments during the first phase of the Second World War, this action-filled melodrama traces the movement of a band of German U-boat servicemen all the way across Canada after going aground in Hudson Bay. They meet up with Laurence Olivier (playing a jovial French Canadian woodsman), Leslie Howard (an effete snob who fishes for trout and paints landscapes in his tepee near Banff while England burns) and Raymond Massey as a brooding and ultimately courageous customs officer at Niagara Falls. This is great and stirring stuff from a time when the border with Canada made a whole lot of difference, since it marked the dividing line between neutrality and solemn commitments to freedom and the British Empire.

The border has made a different kind of difference to Hollywood in recent years. When the Canadian dollar was a bit weaker than it is now, it provided film producers with a strong incentive to shoot above the line, as it were. Toronto served as a stand-in for New York on several occasions, and, as the story goes, city sanitation workers were ordered to strew garbage in the streets in order to make the switch convincing. Nelson, British Columbia was made up to be a place called Nelson, Washington (that was easy) in the Steve Martin comedy "Roxanne," and the quiet town of Hope, B.C., where I am right now, provided the perfect setting for Rambo's first appearance on the screen in "First Blood." Some of the townspeople apparently harbor fond memories of that occasion: the Chamber of Commerce suggests a walking tour of Rambo sites; an ad for Ken's Esso welcomes you to "Kenbo Country" and adds a little advice that "if you want to get ahead, don't be Sly."

CUT TO CREW

We are a bunch of odd ducks masquerading as ordinary people. There are 5 men and 2 women. I won't name names right now, but one of the guys has been married three times and will start (or is it finish?) round four in two weeks' time. The producer suffers from some sort of gastrointestinal complaint that compels him to order a cold beef and butter sandwich on white bread every time we sit down to lunch. He's taking pills for an abscessed tooth and he wears underwear emblazoned with pictures of Garfield the cat. He is also at times hilarious--his imitation of Japanese film star Toshiro Mifune picking flies out the air with chopsticks while making guttural sounds over a plateful of sushi and sticky rice at a restaurant in Lethbridge was only one of several surprising comical performances by the boss.

The cinematographer starts and finishes each day with an unfiltered cigarette. He lights up before he gets dressed in the morning and does it again as soon as his head hits the pillow. We are all addicted to coffee.

None of the men like to shave, and it shows. We wipe the shower steam away from the bathroom mirror and see Humphrey Bogart, or The Man With No Name. The sound technician has been working on a ranch and her biceps are bigger than anyone else's; when we're finished shooting she plans to drive a truck full of donated tools, toys and medical supplies from Bozeman, Montana to a sister city in Nicaragua. The camera assistant used to be a stockbroker in Spokane. Now he rides a big motorcycle, and hopes to get work this fall in Kirghizia, where a famous Soviet director is making a Cecil B. DeMille-type epic about Genghis Khan.

Our field accountant used to work at a Target discount department store in the States, and she hasn't fully recovered. While the rest of the crew goes out to shoot pool and drink Kokanee beer at the Hillview Pub she watches Elvis Presley movies on cable. The writer/associate producer got hooked on television in the era of "The Fugitive" and "The Wild Wild West." He arrived in Coutts with two cardboard boxes full of marginally useful research materials and a case of hard dry cider intended for a friend in Montana. (The rest of the gang toasted his naivete over a campfire near the Milk River.) The youngest accomplice, who is also the producer's younger brother, has been hanging out in Hawaii throwing frisbees and selling real estate since leaving the U.S. Army with an honorable discharge. He eats a lot, and is chronically short of cash. This is also the only guy whose face didn't fall five notches when two young babes from the U.S. side of the border suggested we switch from standard cutthroat to something called "strip pool." The rest of us, geezers by comparison, quickly found lame excuses to rush back to the safety of the Starlite Motel, but our more adventurous friend didn't show up again until four in the morning, fully clothed. We heard nothing about his exploits except that he had jumped three chain link fences and snuck down a dark alley in his clandestine return across the border.

I suppose the only thing really that sets us apart from the rest of the madding crowd is an infatuation with film and television. In any conversation, there are at least half a dozen allusions to something we've seen in the screen dimension. Example: We kill part of a slow morning watching an old episode of the Andy Griffith show. This leads to a general discussion over breakfast about the pitiable fate of the actress who played Aunt Bea (she reportedly died a bitter recluse), which in turn engenders fond recollections of Don Knotts' finest hour, as the Incredible Mr. Limpet (an animated man-fish with thick lips.) Before getting up from the table, someone has mentioned "Scanners," a macabre, low-budget science fiction film by Canadian director David Cronenberg, someone else has recalled his days of mourning the death of Luis Bunuel, we have fixed a date to drive up to Lethbridge to see Jack Nicholson's long-awaited sequel to Roman Polanski's "Chinatown," (it turns out to be a bomb) and each of us has used the terms "backlit" and "montage" at least once in a sentence.

Later, out on the border road, waiting for some ducks to fly from a sludge pond on the American side to the one in Canada, the producer sticks a toothpick in his mouth and glints into the setting sun. Three of us immediately and simultaneously, without any prior signal or premeditation, constrict our throats to construe the shrill opening bars to the Ennio Morricone soundtrack of "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," arguably the best spaghetti western Clint Eastwood ever made. The choral performance continues with impromptu renditions of the theme songs from "Branded," "The Guns of Will Sonnet," "Gunfight at the OK Corral" and "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."

The pace of our activity ranges from frenetic to listless. Since most of the action on a shoot revolves around the camera, the position of the sun is more important than the hour on any clock face. The producer and cinematographer are but minions of a dictator called light, and the rest of us are thus slaves to a yellow legal pad schedule that starts with nerve-wracking alarm bells at 5:00 a.m., stops dead about noon, and gets going again around four or five in the afternoon, providing there are no pesky clouds fouling the horizon. This is my first experience working in the field with a film crew. Not accustomed to the on-off-on again rhythm, and unpracticed in the art of napping, I spend most middays skulking in the shade with a notebook and a Koala brand soda. I reflect on the meaning of the phrase "reel time," which keeps winding through my mind as I spend countless spans of "just another 10 or 20 minutes" getting chummy with the Fords and the Horguses and the other border people we want to include in our story.

I keep having to explain that everything takes time in the process of making a film: the light has to be metered, the sound has to be checked, the camera has to be leveled, the film has to be reloaded, and extraneous objects--like Shane Horgus and the Ford's turkeys, which kept wandering into the frame--must be removed from the scene. Some things have to be done over again; there's a lot of repetition and overlap when the ratio of takes to usable footage is 12:1. Moreover, film is an expensive medium (much more costly than videotape), and every botched shot is money down the drain. These people--our subjects--they are very patient with us. We say things like "just be yourself" and "we just want to capture you doing what you ordinarily do" while aiming a camera at their faces, shoving wires and a tiny microphone up their shirts, next to the skin, and herding them into unlikely situations at ungodly hours--and we keep calling this a documentary. At one point, Doreen Ford got tired of the whole thing. "I've got housework to do," she said, and for a second or two an invisible subtitle flashed into view: "This is as me as I can be."



Inevitably, some of the best shots never make it onto film, because people say and do amazing things when we've left the equipment in the back of the Cherokee wagon, or the light is bad. A golden opportunity was missed at the very start, over a year ago, when the producer and I appeared before a legislative committee to ask for money to get the film project underway. Several of Montana's more canny Representatives were skeptical at first, and peppered us with questions. Within minutes, however, the grilling turned into a storytelling jamboree. "It doesn't seem to me that the border with Canada makes any difference at all," said one wizened citizen-politician, and then he proceeded to tell his captivated audience how he had once unwittingly wandered across the border while on the campaign trail. A Saskatchewan housewife set him straight after serving up a cup of tea and suggesting that she "mightn't oughta vote for an American this time 'round."

A camera should have been rolling then, just as it would have been handy on the safe side of the chicken wire backstop at a baseball field in Coutts. We were there to film a game between Canadian Customs and Immigration officials and their counterparts from Sweetgrass, hoping that someone would hit the ball out of the park and thus literally out of the country. (The left field fence was a stone's throw from the border.) Much to our dismay, the men, women and children playing the game had the good sense not to divide teams along national lines, but mixed everybody up so as to allow them a chance to get to know each other. And then of course nobody hit a home run. The whole thing was a bit of a flop, actually. But it would have been great to get a shot of the youngest team player, a tow-haired boy with a t-shirt that read "Coutts Kindergarten, Class of '89" just being himself when he climbed on deck, took a practice swing or two, and ambled over the backstop, where his baby sister was poking her nose through the wire. "Angela," he said, "I'm going to be on television." He smacked one past the pitcher's mound and made it to first base.

The border means surprisingly little to some people. They have an extra line in their lives, but after awhile it gets taken for granted. When George Horgus wants to borrow a crescent wrench or a cup of sugar from his neighbors, he is supposed to drive 5 miles down the border road, go through Canadian Customs, and then drive the same 5 miles back. Strictly speaking, he should do the same thing going home, stopping this time at the U.S. border post. He doesn't do this of course, except when a wild-eyed film crew shows up and sees audio-visual merit in the exercise. (That's when we used the Caddie.) But it was interesting to note that he had an awful time admitting to be a lawbreaker, and just wouldn't do so on camera. The border is in many respects invisible, but it's there.

Most of the real differences between the American way of life and the Canadian alternative in this region are not visually attached to the boundary. They crop up in discussions about grain marketing systems; they emerge, out of camera range, as hanging portraits of the Royal Family or Confederate stars and bars painted across the grillwork of an 18-wheeler. We made sure to put "hand turning car radio dial--to CBC and American stations" on our shooting list: how else to frame an image of an audible zone of cultural differentiation? Many of the people we talked to on both sides of the border had in mind another invisible line marking the boundary between cultural nations in North America, the one that divides the West from the East. Is it fair to say that borders will always make a difference, but that there's no telling how long the ones we are familiar with will last?

Cheers,

Stephen Maly

Received in Hanover 9/24/90