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When Hollywood came to town

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Film caught stars, locals in '69 action-drama

By Joe Stumpe

BENTON – When a Hollywood movie crew arrived here to make *The Gypsy Moths*, the project seemed to have everything required for success: big-name stars, an acclaimed director and spectacular stunts.

As it turned out, the 1969 flick bombed – unless you happen to be a big fan of skydiving. But its filming in and around the airport here still stirs fond memories for residents who took part or just watched it happen. After all, it's not every day that Burt Lancaster, Gene Hackman, Deborah Kerr and a full-blown Hollywood production crew show up in town.

"I think everybody in Benton who was here at the time and who wasn't working were extras in that movie," said Rex Corbin, a retired commercial pilot and longtime resident who lives just off the airport.

And not just Benton.

Bill Goffrier was 11 and living in Wichita when his mother managed to get roles as extras for herself, Bill and his sister, Mary.

"She was a traditional housewife and homemaker," Goffrier, an artist known for his paintings of Wichita, said. "I think she just thought it sounded like a lot of fun and we'll make a little money."

For two weeks, the family joined other extras at Nelson Field, as the airport was then known. Goffrier took photos and filled an autograph book with signatures, including one from the casting director wishing him "Good luck in your motion picture career."

Corbin's wife, Candice, was another extra. Her most vivid memory isn't of brushing shoulders with movie stars but rather a trick that the movie's director, John Frankenheimer, played on extras who thought they were watching a skydiving scene.

"A plane took off," she recalled. "We didn't know what was going to happen. All of a sudden this body comes out of the plane and never opens the parachute and hits the ground. People were running and screaming, just horrified."

The body turned out to be a dummy. "They were training us to do that for when they were filming it for real," Corbin said. "They said, 'Your facial expressions were wonderful, your reactions were great, but don't run to the field like you were going to help him.'"

Filmed in the summer of 1968, *The Gypsy Moths* opened 50 years ago this month at Radio City Music Hall in New York. In addition to Benton, scenes were shot in El Dorado, Strong City and other locales. Hundreds of Kansans took part, including Wichita East High band members who marched in two scenes, sweating inside their wool uniforms (everybody remembers it being hot during production). Most of the cast stayed in a Wichita hotel, frequenting its club at night, although Hackman rented a house in El Dorado.

The movie, which is available online and still occasionally shows on TCM, is based on a novel about a trio of barnstorming parachutists and sky divers who visit a small midwestern town where one had lived as a child over the Fourth of July weekend. A location scout for Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer was quoted at the time as saying he had toured every landing strip in Iowa, Illinois and Kansas before deciding on the one here, largely because its runway "looks like dirt" (it was actually gravel).

Back then, the airport held a couple of buildings and a T-hangar for 10 planes – a far cry from the Lloyd Stearman Field of today, which boasts the popular Stearman Field Bar & Grill and numerous taxi-in hangars, many with luxurious living quarters, lining the paved runway.

Lancaster and Kerr were household names whose beach scene in *From Here to Eternity* is often referred to as the greatest cinematic make-out of all time. Hackman was coming off an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor in *Bonnie and Clyde*. The actor playing the third daredevil parachutist/skydiver had to be replaced by Scott Wilson after breaking his wrist while filming a scene (a stunt double was injured in another accident). Bonnie Bedelia played a young woman who falls for Wilson's character and onetime *Life* magazine cover girl Sheree North played a go-go dancer.

The director, Frankenheimer, attracted as much attention as the actors. He was then one of the hottest directors in Hollywood, having made films such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Birdman of Alcatraz* and *Grand Prix*.

Shortly after filming got underway, Frankenheimer was arrested by a Kansas highway trooper for driving 120 miles an hour in his Ferrari along K-254, heading from Wichita to Benton. Frankenheimer was fined \$100 and spent the day in the Sedgwick County jail before being released.

Rex Corbin said his younger brother worked as an extra and their father got paid just to park his 1953 Chevy at the airport here. He remembers the family earned about \$50 a day, "which back then was quite a bit of money."

Candice Corbin recalls the film's stars being nice – "They always said 'hi' if they walked by – and the heat.

"We didn't have bottled water back then. Everybody was putting water in everything they could put water in and freezing great big blocks of ice to try to keep cool."

Goffrier seconds Corbin's recollection about the temperature, saying the crew "was handing out salt pills left and right" instead of water. "Nobody thought about sunscreen or anything like that."

For the El Dorado scenes, MGM chose the Frazier House, which had been built by a wealthy lumberman in the 1890s and still stands at 403 S. Star St. A construction crew added a screened porch to the house's north side and painted playground equipment in a park across the street. A rain-making machine was used to produce a thunderstorm, and the house was brilliantly lit from the outside for a night scene. Needless the say, the activity attracted a lot of attention from El Dorado residents.

A typed 1968 letter written by the home's owner, Frances Farmer, is available at the Butler County History Center/Kansas Oil Museum. Farmer, who lived in her home during filming, described Frankenheimer as "lord of all he surveyed... when he commanded, the troops jumped." She noted his "beautiful skin" and said Frankenheimer, despite favoring a battered, big-brimmed hat, "looked more like the actors than they." He was soft spoken, unpredictable and totally absorbed in his work.

Farmer confessed that she "fell in love with Deborah Kerr," who in addition to being beautiful had a soft, refined voice that "set her apart from all the others." Hackman "grew on you" but Lancaster "was a disappointment, as a man, to most everyone," alone among the cast refusing to sign autographs for children. She sensed that the rest of the cast felt the same way about him but respected his acting.

At one point, the casting director met with "approximately 60 of El Dorado's most attractive women" while looking for extras for a scene to be shot at the El Dorado Country Club, according to an article in the *Walnut Valley Times*. The filmmakers also erected a sign for a fictitious go-go bar called the "Paradise Club" in downtown El Dorado, much to the consternation of some residents.

The Gypsy Moths opened at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Initially, nudity in a love scene between Lancaster and Kerr was cut, along with some footage in a go-go bar, but it was later restored, earning the movie a "M" rating, the equivalent of "R" today. Neither version succeeded with many critics or the public when it was released nationally.

"When it came out, everybody was a little shocked at some of the scenes, I do remember that," Rex Corbin said. "In the movie, Deborah Kerr, her bosom is actually showing in one of the scenes. Back then, that was pretty risqué."

On the other hand, Corbin said, the aerial scenes "were really good. They had some really neat airplanes that they were jumping out of. That's the best part of the movie."

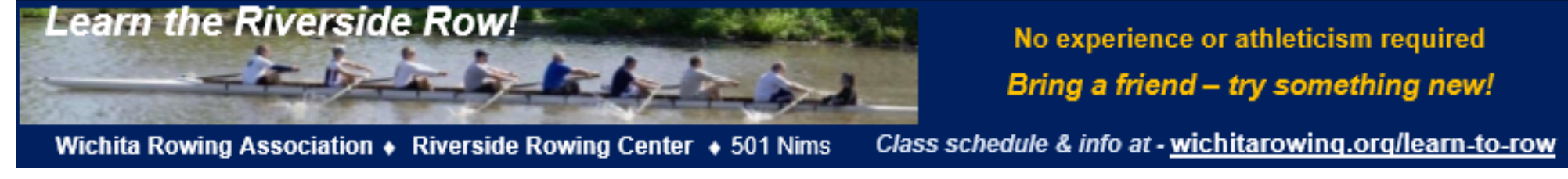
Frankenheimer, who died in 2002, called the movie one of the two favorites he ever directed. It was credited with pioneering new aerial camera techniques and also featured the first appearance of a "batwing" flying suit in a major movie. The film became something of a cult favorite in skydiving circles.

Goffrier, the former 11-year-old extra, remembers being "enamored of the whole magic of the movies. I wanted to be a movie maker."

He's not sure he would have had quite the same experience on location if his mother, Bernadine — better known as "Bernie" — hadn't been the funny, innocent soul she was.

"She was so sociable. She'd just make friends with everybody and anybody."

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