

A film on birds becomes a film about people

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
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Susanne Swibold and Helen Corbett went to the Pribilof Islands in 1981 intending to spend eight weeks working on a film about the famous bird rookeries on St. Paul Island.

They ended up staying four months on their first trip and returning to record the entire year's life-cycle of not the birds but the people of St. Paul Island.

The first results of that year-plus work were shown in Anchorage and St. Paul two weeks ago as "Peter Picked a Seal Stick," a film documenting the St. Paul fur seal harvest, made its debut.

The film is an accurate and frequently graphic documentary of the annual seal harvest but it is different in that the film script was written and narrated by St. Paul residents Michael Zacharof and Timon Lestenkof. As such, it is the first time that an Aleut had a hand in films about his own island, says Swibold.

Swibold says that she asked the St. Paul people to write and narrate their own film because it gave them the opportunity to say what they wanted to say. That opportunity went as far as allowing an inconsistency in the film between the narration and what appeared on film, she says.

The partnership is one which Swibold would like to continue. "We do this with them. We provided the celluloid for them to say what they wanted

to say and I hope the Aleuts do the second film."

The second film is second of a series of four and possibly five films that have come from the cameras of Swibold's Flying Tomato production company. The original plan was to produce one film on the birds with the theme St. Paul, Guadalupe of the Bering Sea.

But, as she and Corbett became acquainted with the people of St. Paul, they became convinced that there was much more to show than just the birds.

They plan to produce four films. The second film will be a film on the natural history of the fur seal; the third, an anthropological film on the people of the Pribilofs and the massive challenges they face.

The fourth film will be the one which originally drew Swibold, a wildlife photographer, to the islands — a film on the birds of the Pribilofs as indicators of what is happening to the food chain of the Bering Sea.

But getting to the fourth film meant much groundwork for the first and that was difficult work indeed for the two women.

The Pribilof seal harvest has been the subject of many crews' cameras and few of them generated good feelings among the Pribilovians.

Swibold mentions one national news film crew in particular which showed the seal harvest in as bloody a manner possible and earned everlasting anger of the Pribilovians.

The almost seasonal trek of cinematographers worked against the women because they wanted more, they wanted to do work in such a manner that they would be invited back, says Swibold.

They feel that the fact they were women tended to work in their favor because they were patient about becoming acquainted with the villagers.

For one entire day they sat with an experienced woman basketweaver and watched her craft her baskets without picking up a camera. They wanted to learn, she says.

They also took care not to intrude on the activities of the villagers during the harvest and, hence, lost many "shots" that could have been attained by barging in and getting close to

the action, says Swibold.

"But we don't operate that way."

They filmed the harvest as best they could and the final work reflects a straightforward depiction of the process of herding, knocking unconscious, sticking in the heart or main artery and skinning the seals. That process is shown twice, first in its entirety. It is followed by historical photos of the harvest as it was conducted 100 years ago. The entire process is shown again so that the viewer can watch it with less startled eyes, says Swibold.

The first showing of the harvest tends to impress people as being rather gory while the second time through people can see that it is a harvest and not a "blood-lust kill."

The process of preparing

the seal skins for transport to the fur seal treaty countries is also shown as is the celebration parade after the process and skin preparing is finished.

The narration was again straightforward and explains that which is shown on the film with nothing mentioned about the political controversy that surrounds the harvest in the U.S. Congress and environmental circles.

Michael Zacharof, an IRA officer on St. Paul narrates the film which includes an original song "Slaves of the Harvest" written for the film by Max Lestenkof.

The film is being paid for by grants from Chevron USA, the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association, the Tanadgusix Corp., the for-profit corporation of the St. Paul Island.

Swibold says she presents the slides silently so that viewers can look harder and decide what they are seeing instead of looking lazily and with a wandering mind.

Those slides, however, have brought some interesting comments from people who have seen them in Canada. Swibold says that people want to see the stereotype Alaska Native in a small sod hut living the way they did centuries ago instead of using three-wheeler all-terrain vehicles. They sometimes make negative comments when they do see that the modern world has crept into the Pribilofs.



The 'Flying Tomatoes' - Susanne Swibold and Helen Corbett.