

## “Eye On the Plains: Montana Filmmakers Explore Human and Landscape Interface”

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by Steve Hawley

The On any given night, a portion of the nation's 3 million full-time recreational vehiculars can be found taking in an increasingly vast view of American splendor: the Wal-Mart parking lot. For two filmmakers, this simple fact presented an opportunity: What do these “affluent homeless,” as the IRS has labeled them, have to say about themselves?

High Plains Films co-founders Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr made this roaming motor home empire the subject of their 2002 documentary, *This is Nowhere*. Filmed mostly in the Wal-Mart parking lot in the duo's hometown of Missoula, Montana, the film depicts the role the big-box giant plays in keeping gas-guzzling RV travelers well-supplied with cheap propane, groceries, and plastic nicknacks manufactured in China. A vignette of the ecology between motor homes and Wal-Mart emerges. More importantly, the question of what motor homers are seeking is answered from voices among them. Perhaps inadvertently, they offer a variety of introspection not possible from critique outside their quirky community.

*This is Nowhere* well represents the commitment of Hawes-Davis and Carr to let the subject speak for itself. It's a twist for the genre in which their films are commonly categorized. Audiences are used to nature documentaries narrated by famous voices, often including some appeal to save a species or a place. By contrast, High Plains' films are focused primarily on people. “If you think about all this gear,” says Hawes-Davis, gesturing around an office full of computers and camera equipment, “it was invented and made by people. So I think maybe it ought to be used to say something, or to learn something about us as a people.”

“The landscape is there in our films, but hopefully people recognize it may be not just be nature, but unavoidably as the location where all these human events happen,” adds Carr.

Both Hawes-Davis and Carr began making movies 15 years ago with the health of the natural world in mind. Each had made a no-budget documentary that garnered some modest critical attention, though, amazingly, neither had any training, formal or informal, in making movies. Upon swapping war stories and comparing misadventures, the duo decided they might work together, and founded High Plains Films in 1995.

The absence of any formal training may have been a blessing in disguise. Their unique style of making documentaries developed unfettered. In much of their work, sharply contrasting images, diametrically opposed opinions and a strict avoidance of any voice-over narrative or commentary seem to work toward fostering a rare kind of agency on behalf of the viewer. The onus is on the audience to make their own meaning, an effect created by High Plains' sotto voce approach to filming.

In *Killing Coyote*, for example, Carr and Hawes-Davis let coyote hunters themselves illuminate two prevalent themes: the fundamental paradox a hunter faces in the destruction of an animal he purports to admire, and the long war of cattlemen to maintain ham-fisted control over varmints and predators on America's rangelands. Hearing and seeing hunters wax nostalgic about the sheer cunning of coyotes even as they celebrate haystacks of coyote carcasses places the audience in the midst of this quandary.

Along the same lines, *Libby, Montana*, the long, sordid tale of W.R. Grace's vermiculite mine in a small northwestern Montana town, and the litany of cancers and lung disease the

townspeople have subsequently developed, is distilled into a cinematic self-portrait: Citizens speak for themselves, even as some of them must breathe through oxygen tubes to do so.

Hawes-Davis credits an approach that separates the journalistic background research from the filming process. "We never want a subject to feel like we are trying to go after them or nail them in any sense," he explains. "But at the same time, it's impossible to do a film like *Libby, Montana* without some fairly serious in-depth investigation. I guess there's an artistic side as well as a journalistic side. But what we are supposed to be documenting is perspectives. As much as I admire him, I don't want to be doing what Michael Moore is doing."

Hawes-Davis and Carr cite the influence of veteran documentarians like Errol Morris (director, most recently, of *The Fog of War*). "One of my favorites is Fred Wiseman, who has been making documentaries for over 40 years," says Carr. "He's sort of the guru of the pure observational films. There's no apparent interaction between the filmmaker and the subject, and whatever is happening in the scene, rather than cutting and shaping a scene through editing. Wiseman is a great study, because the more you can allow yourself as a filmmaker to remove yourself from the scene, the better, in my opinion."

Presenting a variety of viewpoints with a hands-off-the-subject approach has its drawbacks. Multiple voice risk a wildly meandering narrative thread. The audience is left to tie together loose ends that can quickly become the source of befuddlement for viewers looking to have a single story told. Some might want the cameras to follow just one RV out of the parking lot in *This is Nowhere* to see if the subject actually winds up anywhere; others may wish for the tragedy of a single victim of asbestos, as in *Libby, Montana*, to tell her tale. Carr for one, doesn't see this viewpoint as taking full advantage of the potential of film, though he recognizes its limitations: "One of the advantages of film is that you can show multiple perspectives that are a reflection of the real world. But we do have limited time in a film. There's always a lot more footage that winds up being cut from a film than what makes it in." Costs be damned, this ethos has worked well for *High Plains* so far. Critical acclaim and numerous awards have followed. But success brings with it another set of complications.

What started out as a serendipitous foray into making documentaries has evolved into an internationally recognized film festival, an office in the historic Wilma Theater building in Missoula, emails and phone calls to respond to on a daily basis, and a dizzying variety of tasks to manage, many of which seem only peripherally related to making movies. To support its efforts, *High Plains* now operates as part of a nonprofit venture called the Big Sky Film Institute, which also supports the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, a growing documentary film festival that takes place each February in Missoula.

A fellowship at the University of Montana that puts cameras in the hands of students has been put on the back burner for a while, ostensibly so that Hawes-Davis and Carr can devote more time to putting the camera back in their own hands.

The lesson to be learned in sticking to one's passions might well be gleaned in the subject of *High Plains'* upcoming release. *Brave New West* will portray Moab, Utah resident Jim Stiles. Stiles illustrated Edward Abbey's books and almost 20 years ago began publishing his own newspaper, the *Canyon Country Zephyr*, which provides an Abbey-esque critique of the ongoing industrial transformation of the American Southwest.

Stiles, both Carr and Hawes-Davis observe, belongs to an era when activism was completely unprofessional, almost always unpaid, and unencumbered with the burdens of a full-time career. "Abbey was always using art to convey a strong message," observes Carr, a path he notes that Stiles has continued to travel.

“What happened to environmentalism when it turned professional was that a lot of the fun that went with it disappeared,” adds Hawes-Davis. Suddenly both men catch on to a self-conscious irony in their remarks. What each of them has said could be true of making movies. Both Carr and Hawes-Davis are silent for a moment, furtively glancing around their office as if they’ve landed there in a time warp.

Brave New West will undoubtedly be a film about Stiles and his hopes for Utah wildlands. Yet even the subject of the film is always, in some sense, the filmmaker. The singular path that Abbey and Stiles have traveled through their art seems to be one High Plains hopes to follow. Without a word of their own on the subject.