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Film catches rebirth of river, town

The story of Dunsmuir's 1991 toxic spill is captured by a capital couple.

By Christina Jewett -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published November 10, 2003*)

Pat Shepherd has been out of the television news business for more than a decade, but in July he hurtled through a forest toward the scene of a story, grasping his camera with one hand and gripping the passenger seat of a four-wheeler with the other.

He felt the thrill of a breaking story anew.

This time, Shepherd left the scene of a train derailment north of Dunsmuir with footage to complete 70 hours of tape that he and his wife had shot since July 1991, when a similar derailment's toxic tide sterilized 38 miles of the upper Sacramento River. This time, Shepherd had the whole story.

"That was our intent in doing a documentary," Linae Orr, Shepherd's wife and business partner, said Sunday. "To be there when the news crews left."

Shepherd and Orr completed the 56-minute environmental documentary, "The River that Never Was," and screened it for residents of Dunsmuir, the small Siskiyou County town that was shaken by the 1991 disaster. Since then, the film has aired on PBS stations from Rochester, N.Y., to Denver to Los Angeles. It will air this week on Sacramento's station, KVIE, at 8 p.m. Wednesday and 2 p.m. Thursday.

The film shows the July derailment and flashes back to detail of how the 1991 toxic spill stripped a section of the Sacramento River of life and Dunsmuir of its economic center -- tourism related to fly fishing. It records the return to routine in the town, and raises questions about health impacts of the toxic spill and unseen changes in rail safety.

"The town is about trains, fish, the best water on Earth," former Dunsmuir News reporter Jenny Coyle says in the film. "I think in a really profound way, this really stabbed the town in the heart, because the things that it loved the most were being affected."

Shepherd and Orr were searching for a documentary subject in 1991 when they read a news story about the toxic spill. They were, and still are, running their own video production company, AUA Productions in midtown Sacramento. But sharing a background in news, they wanted to tell a significant story.

The spill grabbed their attention: unprecedented and immense, 19,500 gallons of a toxic herbicide flushed life from the Sacramento River.

Two days after the disaster, Shepherd and Orr drove north to film hearings related to the spill and to look at the river. Light still danced from the rippling water, but a chemical smell hung in the air.

"Dead fish were floating in the river, in pools, quieter areas," Orr said. "It was this gorgeous Northern California stream, just dead."

Orr said residents were agitated about conflicting information about the spill and frightened about possible health hazards. That week, she and Shepherd committed to wedging midweek sprints to Dunsmuir between their regular work, and to spending summer vacations there, working when it was time to unwind.

Over the years, they tracked down environmentalists and town leaders to narrate the re-emergence of life in the river, ongoing lawsuits and evolving emotions.

"We did it to tell a story that wouldn't be told," Orr said.

Environmental stories, though, have been told more often since Earth Day first was observed in 1970, said Mark Jonathan Harris, a University of Southern California film professor. He said such films have the power to reinforce environmental activists and convert those who deny problems.

Harris speaks from experience. He worked on a film that Sierra Club leaders successfully used to lobby Congress to create Redwood National Forest.

"Images of dying fish, dying birds, all things we see in a film can be effective in mobilizing people," Harris said.

While difficult to finance and painstaking to create, the films can document a unique incident but raise discussion of other issues, said Flo Stone, founder of the Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C.

"People are introduced to so much through film," she said. "They go to the place, meet the people, hear voices of people they can't talk to That has an effect, definitely."

Shepherd and Orr estimate they spent about \$30,000 of their own money on "The River that Never Was," on top of time for periodic filming and nine months of editing, writing and finishing the film. They secured the support of KIXE, the Redding PBS station, before finishing the film, and used the station's backing, a seven-minute excerpt of film and a book-length proposal to secure a \$52,000 grant from the Cantara Trustee Council, a group that manages settlement money from the state's suit for damages from the spill.

"We would have continued completing the film even without the funding," Orr said.

The steepest challenge was cutting down 70 hours of film to 56 minutes, sacrificing sound bites from politicians who made promises that never came true.

One benefit of making the film was forming relationships, including one with a source who shuttled Shepherd to his private land alongside the site of the July 2003 derailment. Most other media had only aerial access to record the crash.

"We got shots no one else got," Shepherd said.

Orr said they didn't set out to right any particular wrong, just to document the emergence of life from death in the river and devastation to status quo in Dunsmuir. In doing so, the film strikes a cautionary note about deadly chemicals and uncertain rail-safety standards.

"I think the ending shows, if not up there, somewhere else, something's going to happen," Orr said.

About the Writer

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