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COMMUNITY FILM SERVICES IN CANADA

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Community film services in Canada began during the last war, when the documentary motion picture was enlisted to make some of the issues clear. Price control and rationing, wage control, the fixing of rents, and the freezing of labour all found explanation in films shown on small screens in factories, trade union halls, and the country school houses where farmers gathered.

From the beginning, the National Film Board of Canada offered an exciting new medium to Canadians. Their enthusiasm and the government's interest provided an ample and intelligent introduction to the documentary film. Thus it was that many a layman, exposed to the new medium in his factory, farm meeting or trade union hall, saw in the 16 m.m. information film a new tool to be applied to many tasks of the community.

The school board member asked, "Why should not films shorten the teaching period"? The agricultural representative wondered, "Could not films encourage soil conservation, higher standards of livestock breeding; health and welfare on the farm"? And the man or woman who was just a member of an average community group saw in the film "something to put life into our meetings".

Soon portable 16 m.m. projection equipment was seen on every hand. The people found it in their working places, in meeting halls, in churches, and in the schools.

Today, films bearing the familiar NFB crest are being seen in some 400 Canadian theatres. About 3,000,000 people each month see National Film Board productions. Of this figure 1,000,000 see the films on rural film circuits, at meetings of clubs, service organizations, and in schools, or adult education programs. There are now more than 200 Community Film Councils in urban centres and 157 rural non-theatrical film circuits -- some operated entirely by the Film Board, others jointly or independently run. National Film Board non-theatrical film distribution operates as far north as the Mackenzie River and the Arctic, as far west as Vancouver Island and the Pacific and east to the Magdalen Islands in the lonely reaches of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It is a system unique in the educational film world.

Community groups with too limited interest or funds to justify purchase of films or projectors individually have co-operated to set up local community film libraries and have purchased jointly the equipment for bringing films into their meeting places. Public libraries have found a place for films beside the books, paintings and music records which they now distribute. Summed up nationally, such experience amounts to this:

Over a million Canadians see 16 m.m. documentary films each month.

Thousands of Canadians have learned to operate 16 m.m. sound movie equipment as a service to their groups.

Canada has 168 community film libraries, established and operated by borrowers of educational films.

Documentary films are among the baggage of air transports flying to the far north. Arctic Aklavik, population 346, reported 15 screenings of informational films in one month.

Films and sound motion picture equipment may be borrowed by any group in most localities in Canada either without cost or on payment of a small service charge.

The fact that thousands of Canadians have learned to appreciate the documentary film at the "shirt-sleeves level" does not detract from the older influence of the Film Societies. Because people understand films in a work-a-day context they have come that much closer to aesthetic appreciation. It is familiarity, the easy access to films and projectors, that is so largely responsible for Canada's pre-eminence in "the bright new field of national information and civic interest".

Canada's land is wide: her people are few. Of land and water, there are 3,695,189 square miles; of people only 13,000,000. The people have congregated close to water; cities dot the coasts of the lakes. For thousands of miles there is little more than a sprinkling of settlement. Canada has two main population groups - French and English; and a third group composed of other nationalities. It was to be expected that the National Film Board of Canada when it was set up by the federal government in 1939 should turn its cameras and its creative energies to the task of promoting national unity.

One of the first films produced was about the people: an introduction of Canadians to themselves. PEOPLES OF CANADA, a 20 minute exposition of origins, ideals and accomplishments, was unpretentious and sincere. It restated history in terms of the people. For the first time Canadians saw themselves in film; and it was films such as this that aroused the interest of large numbers of ordinary people, identifying the documentary with them and themselves with the film.

When, at the end of the war, the National Film Board ceased to show films in urban centres, the people undertook the task. "If you can organize a method of distributing films in your communities, we will pass them over to you", said the Board's distribution officers. Thus the distribution of 16 m.m. documentary films gained in simplicity and permanency.

The community film council movement expanded quickly. Representatives of groups with an interest in films came together to plan local schemes of distribution. The planning group adopted the name Community Film Council and the local collection of films sponsored by it was called a Community Film Library. Equipment and operators for showing films were called the Community Projection Service.

Proceedings were organized somewhat as follows. One or two people - perhaps a clergyman and a YMCA secretary - would take the initiative. They would call a meeting of delegates from all local groups who then agreed to form a community film council to sponsor an educational film library, and projection service. The film Board representative for the area would be asked for a basic library of films; the public library board delegate might suggest that the public library was the most convenient place to house the films; and the YMCA secretary would agree to make his organization's sound projector available to qualified operators for other organizations. The YMCA secretary might accept the responsibility for training volunteers from all participating organizations.

This is, of course, a simplification. There were problems and incentives not mentioned above. Not all public libraries were able to distribute films; not every community had a projector. But where difficulties arose, the National Film Board devised expedients to overcome them. For example, NFB projectors were made available until a community obtained its own. An NFB guarantee of privately-loaned equipment induced individuals or organizations to permit public use of their machines. Today there are 200 community film councils in Canada. The fifteen film libraries of 1939 have now increased to 168. Fifty-five are in public libraries. The community film councils have extended their purpose from distribution to the demonstration of methods in using films. They now ask that the passive viewing of films evolve into a live, conscious, harnessing of films to the purposes of groups and the community.

Thus films introduce new ideas in the fields of education, health, diet, housing, medicine and child care. Through films the community expands its view of itself and thereby its interest in the world. Because of films the community has caught the significance of a richer, broader, experience and the film-maker in turn is responsible to a film-conscious people.

Today, film councils are better organized, since they profit by much that has gone before. District federations have been formed to exchange films and plan wider applications. Provincial federations have recently been set up and a movement is already afoot to establish a national federation of community film councils. Such bodies are doing much to systemize distribution of documentary films. But in addition to better circulation of existing films there is the promise of production of new films related more closely to the community and the needs it makes known through film councils.

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