

The History of Documenting BC's History for Over Fifty Years

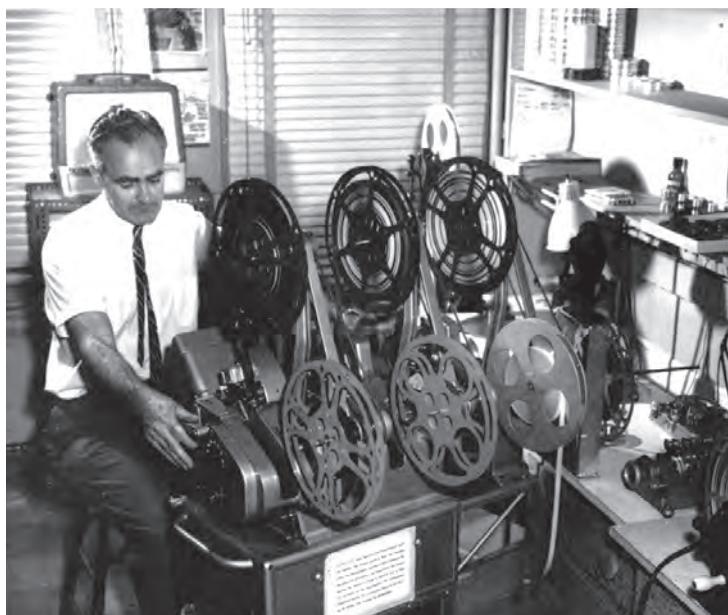
THE EXPLOSIVE CAREER OF WIM ROOZEBOOM

BY DREW TAPLEY

“I’ve made over a hundred films,” veteran documentary filmmaker Wim Roozeboom told me a few weeks after his 95th birthday.

For almost fifty years, Henrik Willem Bakhaus Roozeboom, or Bill Roozeboom as he is known in his film credits, made documentary films in some of the most extreme climates and locations on Earth. His first big contract was in the wilderness of Canada’s Yukon Territory.

“That first film was *Take Four Giant Steps*, made to document the oil exploration efforts in the Yukon. It won best picture of the year in its category at the Canadian Film Awards in 1961,” he said. “I was the crew—me, period – and when the temperatures dropped to minus 35 degrees Celsius I could only work for ten minutes before having to put the camera under my clothes to keep it warm. I spent four months up there to shoot it. That was an experience. I had never worked at minus 56 before,” said Roozeboom. “Using a camera at minus 50 gives you about two minutes before it is frozen solid... When it’s frozen,



WIM ROOZEBOOM in the editing room.

film shatters and leaves a bunch of chips at the bottom of your camera. I stripped my camera and cleaned off the oil with solvent so that it was running metal to metal. But even then, it would still seize up.”

The success of *Take Four Giant Steps* helped jumpstart his career and opened up a stack of work op-

portunities.

He went from the arctic cold to the tropical heat of the Australian desert on a subsequent film assignment to Coober Pedy, where the above-ground temperature can reach 50°C.

“I contributed a lot of film footage for two half-hour movies made

in the southern hemisphere, on a series called *The Challenging Seas*, which covered the shrimp industry in the strait between New Guinea and Australia. The other film I did exposed the unconscionable human destruction of the Great Barrier Reef.”

Roozeboom chose to focus his attention on environmental subject matter, which often meant putting his health and even his life at risk.

The Ripple Rock explosion in the Seymour Narrows channel in British Columbia on April 5, 1958, was the largest non-nuclear peacetime explosion up to that time. It was the biggest project Canada’s Department of Public Works had ever undertaken and it hired engineering geologist Victor Dolmage to run it. A documentary was subsequently commissioned on the preparation, testing, and the big bang itself. Roozeboom was hired as a cameraman.

Roozeboom says he was the closest person to the blast, in a small bunker cut into the rock face of Quadra Island. He failed to get the shot he wanted from there, but managed to capture it via a remote



"BILL" ROOZEBOOM, shooting in the Arctic.

camera he had set up a mile down the channel.

He notes how it was his most challenging film, for several reasons.

"We were in a five-and-a-half-foot diameter tunnel and I was six foot one at that time. Our lights had 500-watt bulbs, and if one drop of water hit them they would burst. It was miserable down there. But it was an adventure. There was little sound with the explosion because the water muffled the boom to a rumble."

The explosion was televised live on CBC as more than 635,000 tonnes of rock and water was thrown 300 metres skyward.

Roozeboom worked with his wife Marguerite, a commercial artist and film animator on the majority of films he made and says they never had children because they were not at home often enough.

They did a lot of engineering films for the governments of Canada and British Columbia—particularly hydro projects.

"I think we probably did ten or fifteen films just on the BC hydro

projects," said Roozeboom. "I also did a lot of work for the CBC because they were desperate to fill the hours. I worked from one film to the next and seemed to be busy every day. In those days, the budget for a half-hour film was maybe \$25,000."

He produced a film for a group of lawyers who were suing a medical company in the thalidomide case. "I did the film for them to take into court and plead their case. And they won."

Despite a prolific and formidable career as a filmmaker, Roozeboom has no formal training. His entry into the world of documentary filmmaking came about simply because he wanted it to. But even before he started on this career path, his young life prior to this was a worthy subject for a documentary in its own right.

Born in Holland, Willem or 'Wim' as he now prefers to be called, immigrated to Alberta with his parents at the age of five. He moved to Vancouver during the Great Depression and joined the Air Force at the age of 21, serving as a fighter pilot during the Second World War. On



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August 1, 1945, two weeks before the end of the Pacific War, he was shot down off the northern coast of New Guinea.

"I had to ditch my plane in the ocean. As I hit the water, I was thrown forward and smashed my head on the gun sight. It scalped me to the bone. I climbed into my survival dingy with a large flap of skin hanging over my right eye."

He heard news of the atom bomb while recovering in a hospital in Sydney, Australia, and knew immediately that the war was over. Afterwards, he returned to Canada to help his dad run his struggling poultry and agriculture business.

"It was completely and utterly bankrupt. Forty thousand dollars in the hole in 1945 is like half a million dollars today," Roozeboom said. "It took me seven years to dig it out of debt and two weeks after I sold it I was hired as a staff photographer at Parry Films Ltd. That's where it all starts. I had never before been in the movie business. I got some books, started to read and shot some film."

Books weren't enough.

"You have to have an instinct to be a filmmaker and learn to tell the story," said Roozeboom. "I did a half-hour film on clouds because I had studied clouds in the Air Force. I developed stories and told stories. If a crane was moving something, I could anticipate where they were going to pick it up, where they were going to put it down, and how they were going to maneuver it. I could see it in my head, and always arrived at the spot where they would end the sequence."

An oil exploration consortium was drilling a test well a hundred miles south of the Arctic Ocean, and they contracted Roozeboom to make a documentary about it. The expedition was the first major investigation into oil and gas potential along the entire North American continental Arctic coast. For the next four months he travelled by plane, train, boat, helicopter, truck, snowmobile, tundra vehicle, dog sled, and snowshoes—in blinding snowstorms and whiteouts.

This sort of experience became his new normal and paved the way for dozens of films working as a construction cinematographer.

"When the Alberta government

telephone department was putting in a line across the province, site to site, I was on top of a derrick, filming another beam coming in, three hundred feet up in a strong wind, standing on the edge of a foot-wide beam."

Roozeboom imagines how much easier it would be to be a filmmaker now and work with digital equipment and drones, especially in the frigid conditions of the High Arctic. Today, at the age 95, he says he can't stop working because "an idle mind is a small mind, and I can't be a small mind. I've got too much in it."

At Pacifica Retirement Residence in Surrey, BC, Roozeboom continues his lifelong passion for storytelling through authoring books. His autobiography, *Through My Viewfinder*, was published in 2011 and recounts his fond memories of the indigenous peoples of the world. His second book, *The Camera and the Brush*, published the following year, details the many worldwide expeditions he embarked on with Marguerite.

"I've met some great people. I once sat next to Pierre Trudeau. I also did a couple of trans-Canada royal tours and that went straight to the TV stations. By the time her Majesty the Queen of England arrived in Newfoundland or Vancouver, my camera had been under her nose for two weeks. We got quite familiar with one another and often had a little chat if we got a moment of downtime."

Despite all his accomplishments, no one has yet written a book about him. This doesn't stop him from writing about other people though. He recently penned and published a book of memoirs on fellow residents at Pacifica Retirement Residence entitled *Welcome to Walkerville* and he has already started work on a sequel.

"The book I am writing now is called *The Sunset Years* and includes the story of a 90-year-old former fighter pilot in the German Luftwaffe who was also shot down. When two pilots meet, the conversation always progresses to aircraft, and we both claim our plane was the better one." ■

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