

## “We did it just for fun” Amateur Filmmaking at the Lakehead, 1929-1930

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Volume 99, numéro 2, fall 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065738ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065738ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Beaulieu, M. S. (2007). “We did it just for fun”: Amateur Filmmaking at the Lakehead, 1929-1930. *Ontario History*, 99(2), 168-189.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065738ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article retrace la courte existence de la *Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society*, et de ses tentatives pour produire trois longs métrages, y compris le premier long métrage réalisé par des amateurs au Canada, *A Race for Ties*, en 1929. Cet article montre que l'existence et le succès d'une telle société dans la ville alors isolée de Port Arthur, tiennent autant au dévouement de deux personnes – Dorothea Mitchell et Fred Cooper –, qu'à l'émergence et à la croissance de la culture de consommation, un trait caractéristique des débuts du XXe siècle.

# We did it just for fun

## Amateur Filmmaking at the Lakehead, 1929-1930<sup>1</sup>

by  
Michel S. Beaulieu



In the late 1920s, a historic and quintessentially Canadian series of events occurred in Port Arthur and Fort William, Ontario, collectively known as the Lakehead. In this hinterland region of Ontario, better known for its participation in the fur trade and lumber industry, one of the most significant periods of film production in the history of Ontario and Canada occurred. In less than two years, a group of unknown amateur enthusiasts attempted to make three feature-length films during a period when Canadian feature film production, for all intents and purposes, did not exist. According to noted film historian Peter

Morris, “the only other comparable efforts by non-professionals are a feature-length documentary, *Gold is Where you Find It*, produced in 1937 in Flin Flon, and *Talbot of Canada*, produced and directed in 1938 by Melburn Turner with members of the London Little Theatre.”<sup>2</sup>

The Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society arose out of the relative prosperity of Port Arthur and Fort William in the 1920s. This atmosphere was ideal for a group of friends and colleagues who possessed no experience, no desire for profit, and ultimately nothing but good intentions to produce a series of films. But Port Arthur and Fort William were hardly

<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was carried out with support from a Lakehead University Vast and Magnificent Land Research Grant. The preparation of this paper was made possible by a Social Sciences and Humanities Doctoral Fellowship. I am grateful for advice, assistance, and suggestions from Ronald Harpelle, Bruce Muirhead, Bill O’Farrell, Elinor Barr, Kelly Saxberg, and the staff of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society and the Library and Archives of Canada, Gatineau Site. I would also like to thank Jamie Paxton, Blaine Allan, and the editorial committee, who commented on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 187.

*Opposite page: On the set of A Race for Ties (1929). Pictured are Fred Cooper (camera), Unknown (behind camera), Harold Harcourt (sitting), Dorothea Mitchell, H.A. Saunders, Martha Lake, Eddie Cooke, and Laddie the dog. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.*

unique in their economic success prior to the Great Depression. Something else, then, must have contributed to the Lakehead – not Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver – being home to the country’s first and most successful amateur cinema club prior to the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> While the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society was the product of the growing culture of consumerism that was a hallmark of the early twentieth century and a natural outgrowth of the region’s prior exposure to a variety of attempts at film production, these two factors cannot entirely explain the society’s existence and success. More influential was the dedication of the society’s two principal members – Dorothea Mitchell and Fred Cooper. This article, essentially, is about the story of how the contributions of two people, although products of their environment, unwittingly contributed to Canadian film history because of their dedication and shared passion.

## Filmmaking at the Lakehead before 1929

While it remains unclear what exactly spurred the formation of the

### *Abstract*

*This article chronicles the brief existence of The Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society and its attempts to produce three feature-length films, including Canada’s first amateur feature-length film, A Race for Ties, in 1929. I argue that the existence and success of such a society in the then remote city of Port Arthur, Ontario, owes as much to the dedication of two people – Dorothea Mitchell and Fred Cooper – as it does to the growing culture of consumerism that was a hallmark of the early twentieth century.*

**Résumé:** *Cet article retrace la courte existence de la Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society, et de ses tentatives pour produire trois longs métrages, y compris le premier long métrage réalisé par des amateurs au Canada, A Race for Ties, en 1929. Cet article montre que l’existence et le succès d’une telle société dans la ville alors isolée de Port Arthur, tiennent autant au dévouement de deux personnes – Dorothea Mitchell et Fred Cooper –, qu’à l’émergence et à la croissance de la culture de consommation, un trait caractéristique des débuts du XXe siècle.*

Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society, some guesses can be made. Like many in Ontario, residents of the Lakehead had, by 1929, long become accustomed to “going to the movies.” By 1920, for example, the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William had over ten theatres showing motion pictures.<sup>4</sup> Unlike most other regions of the province, however, the twin cities had experienced a continual, if a bit

<sup>3</sup> While the exact date of the establishment of amateur cinema societies in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver remains unknown, such clubs did not exist there until after 1930. In the case of Toronto, although some sources such as *Movie Makers Magazine* indicate the existence of a club as early as 1932, it was not until 1935 that an active club can be definitely said to have existed. The Toronto Amateur Movie Club even published its own monthly bulletin entitled *Shots and Angles*. The author would like to thank Bill O’Farrell for introducing this material.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on early film exhibitions at the Lakehead, see Michel Beaulieu, “In Public’s

sporadic, romance with motion-picture production between 1911 and 1929.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the residents had watched and participated in successive attempts by private and government production companies to produce a wide variety of films. These companies familiarized the residents with the movie-making industry.

Between 1911 and 1929, two professional film companies operated in the Lakehead, and several films were produced about the region by the Ontario Government Motion Picture Bureau. The Lakehead's first company, the Commercial Motion Picture Company, was established in 1911 by one of the region's key industrial figures, James Whalen. The company did in fact make one film, *Port Arthur and Fort William: Keys to the Great Lakes* (1913), but, unfortunately, while the film was a region-wide event when it premiered at the Lyceum Theatre in Port Arthur in 1913, there is no indication that it had much success elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

The Lakehead's next brush with film-making was funded by the Ontario government and its motion picture bureau.

Established in 1917, the Ontario Government Motion Picture Bureau was created initially to complement the Ontario Censor Board in its attempt to regulate theatres and the films being shown in them, and to combat what the government perceived as a disproportionate amount of American content.<sup>7</sup> Soon after its creation, though, it began to function on its own and, essentially, "carry out the educational work for farmers, school children, factory workers, and other classes"<sup>8</sup> and "to advertise Ontario and to encourage the building of highways and other public works."<sup>9</sup> In all, the bureau made over twelve films dealing with the Lakehead region between 1918 and 1926.

The only experience by residents of the Lakehead with feature-filmmaking prior to the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society was the establishment in 1927 of the region's first and only professional feature-film production company. Thunder Bay Films Limited was, like so many other companies operating in Canada during the late 1920s, nothing more than a Hollywood branch-plant operation, which used

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Demand: Entertainment in Fort William's First Town Hall, 1892-1903" Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society *Papers and Records* (2003): 3-18 and Mark Chochla, "The Golden Years of Theatre in Thunder Bay" Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society *Papers and Records* (1979), 32-39.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of early film production at the Lakehead, see my MA Thesis "Reel History: Film Production at the Lakehead, 1911-1931" (Lakehead University, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on James Whalen's Commercial Motion Picture Company, see Michel S. Beaulieu, "Wie es eigentlich gewesen? Early Film as a Historical Source" in *Bâtir de nouveaux ponts: sources, méthodes et interdisciplinarité/Building New Bridges: Sources, Methods, and Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Jeff Keshen, Sylvie Perrier, and Chad Gaffield (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005), 249-264.

<sup>7</sup> For the most complete discussion of the Ontario Government Motion Picture Bureau, see Wyndham Paul Wise's "Ontario's Film Industry: A History of Provincial Policy" (MA Thesis, York University, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 138 and Wise, "Ontario's Film Industry," 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Moving Picture World* 32 (1917), 819 quoted in Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 138.

Northwestern Ontario's scenery to produce the nature-adventure films that were popular throughout the world at the time. What makes Thunder Bay Films stand out, though, is that its real story is not unlike the plot of many films from the period. A supposed Hollywood producer comes to town accompanied by a host of actors, fairly well-known but nearing the end of their careers. The director, also once well-known, is himself in the twilight of his career. The company's executives convince local investors that the Lakehead would be the next "Hollywood North" and sell thousands of dollars worth of shares. In the end, Thunder Bay Films did produce a film in 1929 entitled *The Devil Bear*, but it had limited release. The hope of many that the region would become "Hollywood North" was dashed, along with their money, with the disappearance of Thunder Bay Films Limited in 1929.<sup>10</sup>

### The Amateur Film Movement in North America

By 1929, none of these early experiences with filmmaking had led to sustained production. Compounding the situation, while newer and bigger theatres continued to be built, such as the Orpheum and Colonial in Fort William and Port Arthur, they were now under the control

of American parent companies such as Famous Players.<sup>11</sup> The Lakehead, like the rest of Canada during this period, was at the mercy of Hollywood, the embodiment of the consolidation of professional filmmaking in North America, and, according to Patricia Zimmermann, Hollywood's "division of labour, formal paradigms of aesthetic standards and conventions, and market control and monopolization."<sup>12</sup> While Thunder Bay Films had been an attempt to get access to the Hollywood system of exhibition and distribution, not surprisingly, it failed.

However, not all in North America were content with this turn of events. The idea of the "amateur" filmmaker developed, Zimmermann contends, as "a cultural inversion to the development of economic professionalism."<sup>13</sup> At the same time Thomas Edison was beginning to experiment with moving pictures, the growing demand for consumer goods created ethical and commercial changes throughout North America. According to William Leach, "The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and the money value as the predominant measure of all value in society."<sup>14</sup> The resulting rampant

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive examination of Thunder Bay Films Limited, see Michel S. Beaulieu, "The Best Picture Ever Made in Canada? Thunder Bay Films Limited and *The Devil Bear*," *Revue Canadienne D'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 14:2 (Fall 2005), 18-37.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph M. Mauro, *Thunder Bay, The Golden Gateway of the Northwest: A History* (Thunder Bay: Lehto Publishing Ltd. 1981), 309.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Zimmermann, *Reel Families: The Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New

consumerism encouraged hobbies, and a more expansive definition of leisure was created to include pursuits of the arts.<sup>15</sup> For example, one of the earliest manifestations of this phenomenon was photography, a very popular hobby at the Lakehead in the early twentieth century. As in much of Canada and the United States, the growth of the middle-class in Port Arthur and Fort William resulted in the increased importance of cultural activities in the community.

Yet, the amateur film movement was not only a unique experience, but an alternative to professional production “on the fringe of the commercial mainstream.”<sup>16</sup> Zimmermann describes amateur film, considered part of the *avant-garde* movement, as “a constant reorganizing of aesthetic, economic, and political formations, not as linear history of particular amateur-film producers, film circles, or films.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jan-Christopher Horak writes that amateur film “has always been closely identified with specific filmmakers, audiences, and spaces for reception, even though the critical focus has been on artists.”<sup>18</sup> Essentially, the amateur film movement evolved

from the myth that “every man and every woman was a potential film artist.”<sup>19</sup> In practice, though, the cost of equipment (despite the drop in prices following the standardization of cheap 16mm film and equipment in 1923) was prohibitive for many, and those who could afford to pay the price were only able to because of the growing middle-class demand for consumer goods that defined the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

### Robert Flaherty and the Lakehead

It is within this context that the Lakehead’s first amateur, and later independent filmmaker, began his career. Considered to be a father of documentary film, Robert Flaherty was an early opponent of professionalism and the consumerism rampant in the film industry following the advent of the studio system. Best known for his films *Nanook of the North* (USA/France, 1922), *Moana* (USA, 1926), and *Tabu* (USA, 1931), he used the freedom granted by advancements in portable camera technology in the early 1920s to create a wholly new type of cinema.

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York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Leach, *Land of Desire*, 9 and Patricia Zimmermann, “Starting Angles: Amateur Film and the Early Avant-Garde” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 140-41. See also Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Zimmermann, “The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art,” *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1986). See also Zimmermann, *Reel Families*. Also encouraging is the establishment of the North East Historic Film Archives, an institution dedicated to the collection and preservation of amateur motion pictures. More information can be found at <<http://www/oldfilm.org>>

<sup>17</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, “Introduction: History in the Gaps” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, 5, 14, 57.

*Robert Flaherty's still images and documentary films, such as Nanook of the North, inspired many young photographers and cinephiles at the Lakehead. Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 972.255.175v*



“Bob,” as local Port Arthur newspapers referred to him, was the eldest child of a mining engineer who, in 1893,

brought his family to, what biographer Arthur Calder-Marshall referred to as, “the little known Canadian Northern frontier of Lake of the Woods.”<sup>21</sup> It was here, accompanying his father, that Flaherty was first exposed to what would be the inspiration of his life’s work.<sup>22</sup> In Rainy Lake and later Port Arthur, Flaherty came to love and understand the region and all of Northern Canada. As Calder-Marshall commented, “other people might regard Rainy Lake as an outpost of North American civilization, but to young Bob, as to his father and all the men in the camp with any vision, it was on the edge of a vast landmass, largely

unexplored and unexploited.”<sup>23</sup> Even after his departure in 1910, Flaherty was considered throughout his life a local boy who had made a name for himself, and for this reason local newspapers reported his every move. Flaherty himself, long before the mainstream media got wind of his accomplishments, often told the local media about his experiences in order to sate the appetite of an interested community clamouring for news about “Bob’s” latest exploits.<sup>24</sup> Flaherty also held previews of *Nanook* and *Moana* at the Prince Arthur Hotel in Port Arthur before they graced the screens of New York.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert J. Flaherty* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970), 17. For the latest and only academic examination to focus on some of Flaherty’s time in Port Arthur, see Robert J. Christopher, *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A Documentary Life, 1883-1922* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005). Many members of Flaherty’s family became influential within Port Arthur and Fort William. See “Robert Flaherty Pioneered Films,” *Thunder Bay Chronicle-Journal* (hereafter *TBCJ*), 31 July 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Information in Calder-Marshall, *Innocent Eye*, 18 was derived from radio interviews Flaherty gave to BBC in London on 14 June 1949 and 24 July 1949.

<sup>23</sup> Calder-Marshall, *Innocent Eye*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> For some of his earlier exploits, see, for example, Port Arthur *Morning-Herald*, 20 March 1911, Port Arthur *Daily News*, 27 March and 26 July 1915.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert J. Flaherty, “How I Filmed *Nanook of the North*,” *World’s Work* (October 1922), 632-40.

While Flaherty did not actually make any of his films while at the Lakehead, his family's well-known status in the region and the frequent local newspaper coverage of his exploits impacted many young photographers and cinephiles. For the residents of the Lakehead, Flaherty's connection to the region was an ever-present fact and point of pride throughout the 1920s and 1930s. His work, combined with local familiarity with moving pictures through exhibition and an exposure to photography trade magazines, made filmmaking for the interested individual a real possibility. Most amateur filmmakers in the 1920s, however, were located in the United States and belonged to amateur cinema societies. According to noted film scholar Lewis Jacobs, generally they were composed of painters, dancers, illustrators and others in distinguishable "artistic" pursuits.<sup>26</sup> Others were collectives made up of college students and like-minded individuals, one of whom happened to own a camera. It was the formation of the Amateur Cinema League (ACL) in 1926, however, that allowed these scattered groups throughout North America to have a voice and a concrete organizational structure. It was also with the birth of the ACL that a few residents

of the Lakehead finally had the means to learn how to produce films.<sup>27</sup>

### The Amateur Cinema League

Established in New York by inventor Hiram Percy Maxim, the Amateur Cinema League was one of the most prominent, non-commercial associations of moving-picture amateurs. According to its magazine, *Movie Makers*, the ACL believed that "instead of amateur cinematography being merely a means of individual amusement, we have in it a means of communicating a new form of knowledge to our fellow beings – be where they may upon the earth's surface."<sup>28</sup> Individual members were encouraged to seek out like-minded individuals and form autonomous cooperative groups, the impetus for which, it declared in promotional material, must come from amateurs:

local groups, unaided, have built up a majority of clubs. The Amateur Cinema League does not claim credit. Nor does the League wish to hamper this free pioneering spirit by attempting to create local Amateur Cinema League chapters or to set up formal relations with these different groups. Our aim is simply that of service.<sup>29</sup>

Each member of the ACL was entitled to consultation services, access to process-

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For information on *Moana* and *Louisiana Story* and the previews of *Nanook* and *Moana* held in the Prince Arthur Hotel in Port Arthur, see Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society "Flaherty File." Although Flaherty had moved away by 1922, his sister, with whom he was very close, and his parents continued to live in Port Arthur. Flaherty spent vacation time in the city and often did post-production work as evident in the collection of stills possessed by the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society that do not exist elsewhere.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur L. Gale, "Amateur Clubs," *Movie Makers* 3:2 (February 1928), 100.

<sup>27</sup> Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945," 19.

<sup>28</sup> "Amateur Cinema League: A Close-up," *Movie Makers* 2:2 (January 1927), 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Movie Makers* 2:10 (October 1927), 35.



ing laboratories and the advice of experts in the field. The magazine acted as a means through which member societies could keep up with each other, and learn of the latest advancements in the field, providing the latest news, events, and technical advice on a monthly basis. Articles encouraged amateur filmmakers not just to mimic Hollywood or commercial moving pictures, but, through examples, to demonstrate that they too could create something that often rivalled and challenged traditional cinematic thoughts and ideas.<sup>30</sup> Flaherty, himself one of the over 30,000 members by 1927, in one interview “lifted an old copy of *Amateur Movie Maker* and remarked solemnly that it was the only movie magazine he cared to look at.”<sup>31</sup>

The Amateur Cinema League was important to the development of amateur film in Ontario and throughout Canada in the late 1920s and 1930s. Blocked by the vertical integration of the film industry, many in Canada turned to the ACL as an outlet through which their work could be exhibited. From its creation, the ACL organized a lending library “to provide an adequate distribution of amateur photoplays, secure a dependable event for club programs and, as well, encourage new groups to undertake amateur pro-

ductions.”<sup>32</sup> Officially, the Amateur Cinema League brought the amateur film movement to Canada in June 1929 with the organization of the Regina Amateur Cinema Club.<sup>33</sup> Established with twenty members, the Regina group had a laboratory and studio facility at its disposal. W.H. Bird was elected president, Archie Murray Vice-President, and P.M.F. Bird Secretary-Treasurer. Frank Holmes and Leslie Baines were mentioned as being the group’s cameramen. Their first production was in the works in June 1929, but, in conjunction with the local newspaper, they had only arranged by that time for a series of weekly articles on amateur films.<sup>34</sup>

### The Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society

When the Regina club formed in June 1929 it became the first Canadian affiliate of the Amateur Cinema League to be discussed in *Movie Makers*. However, a few months earlier, Port Arthur residents Dorothea Mitchell and Fred Cooper met to discuss the possibility of making their own film and launched an amateur film club in Port Arthur, Ontario. Why Port Arthur? The Lakehead had not been spared from the increasing North American demand for consumer

<sup>30</sup> Horak, “The First American Film Avant-Garde,” 19.

<sup>31</sup> Flaherty quoted in Mina Brownstein, “Filming With Flaherty,” *Movie Makers* 2:5 (May 1927), 7-8. The title of the ACL’s magazine changed its name from *Amateur Movie Makers* to *Movie Makers* shortly after its inaugural issue.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Gale to Marion Gleason, 10 December 1927 (Gleason File, George Eastman House) quoted in Horak “The First American Film Avant-Garde,” 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Movie Makers* 3:6 (June 1929), 373.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.



goods, and Fred Cooper, owner of Port Arthur's and Fort William's largest bakery, and a city councillor, along with Dorothea Mitchell, a prosperous middle-class woman of British education, were essentially the target audience of those marketing amateur film equipment.

An avid fan of both photography and moving pictures, Cooper frequently exhibited free movies every Tuesday and Wednesday nights in the windows of his bake shops which were decorated, ac-

*Left: Young Fred Cooper, date unknown. Courtesy of Andy and Laura Carlson. Opposite page: Dorothea Mitchell in 1967 as "Lady Lumberjack," courtesy of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 975.150.1*

ording to Brent Scollie, "to resemble an English cottage lawn."<sup>35</sup> Cooper was inspired by Flaherty. When he decided to take his family on a trip to England in the spring of 1928, Cooper purchased a 16mm camera to preserve the trip. In addition to belonging to a middle-class which could afford such frivolities, photography magazines such as *American Photography* had been bombarding readers at the Lakehead with motion picture camera advertisements since 1923. Typical articles, for example, suggested that "the vacationist who does nothing but loaf and sleep and dance and play bridge has only a week or two of vacation, but the one who records all of these phases of the two weeks with his cine-camera takes home a generous slice of vacation to spread over the dull-crust of routine throughout the year."<sup>36</sup>

Although Fred Cooper filmed his family's 1928 European vacation, he did not originally think of making films to be shown in public. When he and his family returned, however, the pictures he had taken aroused a great deal of interest. A variety of local clubs and charities requested the use of the films for fundraising purposes

<sup>35</sup> An advertisement for the free movies can be found in the *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWDJ*), 13 December 1927, and the reference to the building's exterior is available in Frederick Brent Scollie, *Thunder Bay Mayor & Councillors, 1873-1945* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2002), 70.

<sup>36</sup> See Herbert C. McKay, "The Cine Amateur," *American Photography* (June 1932), 348 quoted in *Reel Families*, 73.

but, because of their personal and private nature, Cooper was not inclined to show them. He did, however, begin to wonder if plays could be adapted, filmed, and used to help those charities he had not wanted to disappoint.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, although Cooper had the financial means to become involved in amateur filmmaking, he lacked the creative and artistic talent necessary for producing films. For this he turned to his friend and accountant, Dorothea Mitchell, for help. Like Cooper, Mitchell was an avid photographer who had also been exposed to trade magazines and journals for photography, and, as the century progressed, filmmaking.<sup>38</sup> She was also a natural choice to help Cooper as, he later recalled, she possessed “unusual ability and wide talents.”<sup>39</sup>

Dorothea Mitchell’s wide talents and unusual ability were largely a product of her unique upbringing.<sup>40</sup> Although born in England in 1877, she grew up in India

as the daughter of a member of the minor colonial elite. Encouraged by her mother from an early age to participate in activities that were not considered practical or consistent with the life of a proper young woman of the nineteenth century,

Mitchell became proficient, through instruction by British military officers, in riding, carpentry, and marksmanship. In the early 1890s, Mitchell’s family moved back to England only to see their father die unexpectedly while away on business and their upper middle-class existence come to an end.

Mitchell, now in her early twenties, was forced to become the sole supporter of her mother and sister. After numerous jobs ranging from domestic help to a nursery governess, in 1904 Mitchell, realising her limited options in England and lured by the Canadian government’s promises of free land and a better life, em-



<sup>37</sup> *Victoria Daily-Colonist* (hereafter *VDC*), 27 January 1963 and *FWDJ*, 1 March 1963.

<sup>38</sup> When exactly film magazines were first sold at the Lakehead is unknown. It was discovered, however, in a house under renovation in the spring of 2003 that the moulding for a few tons of cement blocks were made of *Photoplay*, *Moving Picture World*, and *Moving Picture Magazine* articles from 1917 to 1929.

<sup>39</sup> *VDC*, 27 January 1963.

<sup>40</sup> For more on Dorothea Mitchell, see Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle, eds. *The Lady Lumberjack: An Annotated Collection of Dorothea Mitchell’s Writings* (Thunder Bay: Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 2005) and the documentary film *Dorothea Mitchell: A Reel Pioneer* (Shebandowan Films, 2006).

igrated to Ontario. Settling first in Hamilton and then Toronto, Mitchell found her expectations unmet. She took a position as companion to a mine-manager's wife in Silver Mountain, Ontario, located approximately seventy kilometres west of present day Thunder Bay. This position, though, was short lived as a few months later the mine closed. Not wishing to leave, Mitchell became the manager of the local general store, the local railway station manager, and the local postmaster. In 1910, not content with renting any longer, Mitchell drew upon her education and upbringing in India and petitioned the Government of Ontario for land under the Homestead Act. A year later she became the first single woman granted a homestead in the history of the province. With her land, she hired some men and established a sawmill, quickly becoming known as the Lady Lumberjack. She worked the mill successfully for nearly ten years until, owing to her mother's health (Dorothea's mother and sister had joined her in Canada in 1911), Mitchell moved into Port Arthur, where she went back to school and became an accountant. One of her first clients was Fred Cooper.

In addition to knowing her past, Fred Cooper also thought of Mitchell as a potential filmmaker because, throughout the 1920s, she had also distinguished

herself in the local theatre movement and, like Robert Flaherty before her, with her photography skills. Active in all aspects of social life at the Lakehead, Mitchell was also well acquainted with the activities of Robert Flaherty and his family. In addition to being kept abreast of Flaherty's activities by the frequent newspapers articles that appeared about him, she was living in Port Arthur when *Nanook* was previewed for the first time, and she had observed the activities of Thunder Bay Films Limited.<sup>41</sup> In Cooper's eyes, Mitchell had all the makings of a first-class production manager.

Dorothea Mitchell's first decision was to approach Major Harold Harcourt, another reasonably well-off resident of Port Arthur, to help with any projects the amateur club would undertake. Reputed to have been a technical adviser for army films while living in California, Harcourt was the only individual Mitchell knew who had actual filmmaking experience.<sup>42</sup> Initially using Mitchell's business office as the society's meeting place, Mitchell, Cooper, and Harcourt began to organize the Amateur Film Society of Thunder Bay, later renamed the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society.<sup>43</sup>

By the middle of February 1929, Mitchell proposed a plan of action that Cooper and Harcourt quickly endorsed.

<sup>41</sup> Although there is no evidence that the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society was directly influenced by Thunder Bay Films, Peter Morris suggests that it would not be surprising. Peter Morris to Elinor Barr, 21 October 1981 (personal collection of Elinor Barr).

<sup>42</sup> See Dorothea Mitchell's notes for "A Race for Ties (Its Inception)," recorded for the Canadian Film Institute, November 1963, 1 (personal papers of Dorothea Mitchell, collection of Elinor Barr). This can also be viewed online at <[http://www.ladylumberjack.ca/a\\_race\\_for\\_ties.html](http://www.ladylumberjack.ca/a_race_for_ties.html)>.

<sup>43</sup> The first film made by the group credits the Amateur Film Society of Thunder Bay as producer in the opening credits. The ACL's magazine *Movie Makers*, however, calls them the Port Arthur Amateur

She decided that a script would be selected first, and then other individuals would be invited to join the society based on their suitability for the roles. Right away a problem arose, because not one of them had ever written a film script before. Mitchell, who of the three was the only experienced writer, took the initiative and proceeded to search for a suitable scenario in film magazines, such as *Movie Makers*. Eventually ordering a book of photoplays from California, Mitchell discovered to her dismay that “any [published] movie scripts intended for amateur production were altogether too brief for fundraising purposes.”<sup>44</sup> Cooper suggested that Mitchell, being something of a local legend, write a story based on her life as a female lumberjack, believing that people would be very interested.

### A Race for Ties

In one week, Dorothea Mitchell penned a script based on a timber deal that had gone bad while she was running her sawmill at Silver Mountain. Instead of sprucing up the plot with clichés and narrative devices, Mitchell, taking very little literary license, drew upon the many individuals she had met and events in her life to fill out the story.<sup>45</sup> The script was woven around a deal in which a small independent business owner is hoodwinked by big

business, a situation she herself had experienced. In the story Mitchell portrayed big business, as well as its attempts to absorb smaller companies, in an unfavourable light. As one would-be critic noted, the film “illustrated the octopus-like tendency of big business to engulf and destroy [the] small operator.”<sup>46</sup>

With the script finished, Dorothea Mitchell was next prevailed upon to pick the cast. As she would later reminisce, “I had written the story, and knew the theatrical talent available.”<sup>47</sup> She did not have to look far, casting the production with local citizens, many of whom were employees or clients of Cooper’s Bakery. All also possessed some experience either as part of annual Kiwanis shows or, like Mitchell, through their involvement in local theatre groups. Because Cooper owned the camera, she selected him as the cinematographer and Harold Harcourt as the director. Mitchell, although a consummate actor in local productions, was hesitant to take a part. It soon became clear that no one fit the part of “Aunt Sarah” and she, somewhat reluctantly, assumed the role.

In preparation for the first general meeting of the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society on 1 March 1929, all members were required to pay a membership fee of \$1 a month to cover expenses.<sup>48</sup>

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Cinema Society, a name reflected on the Society’s remaining letterhead and in all interviews with Mitchell and Cooper.

<sup>44</sup> See Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 1.

<sup>45</sup> *FWDJ*, 1 March 1963.

<sup>46</sup> *VDC*, 27 January 1965.

<sup>47</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

William Gibson was elected to be the society's first president, and Mitchell was to act officially as secretary and treasurer. Unofficially, she played a central role in all aspects of production and post-production when filming commenced on 3 March 1929. Clearly, Dorothea Mitch-

ing much of the initial membership, the key positions and control remained with the original duo of Cooper and Mitchell, with other prosperous Port Arthur friends such as Gibson holding the remaining positions.



*On the set of A Race for Ties (1929). Pictured are H.A. Saunders, Dorothea Mitchell, Martha Lake, Eddie Cooke, and Laddie the dog. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.*

ell's role in the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society's first production took on an importance unrivalled in today's films. As Mitchell remarked, due to "the unavoidable lapse of time between taking of in- and outdoor sequences, it was necessary [for me] keep written tab of costume detail – particularly men's hats and ties!"<sup>49</sup> Yet equally apparent is that, despite Cooper's employees compris-

The shooting of the film, though, was not without its problems. The short time in which the filming had to be completed, complicated by the encroaching spring and late production start, allowed for no retakes of scenes. It was the weather, however, that proved to be the biggest problem. Because shooting did not commence until March, there was concern about how long the snow would last. Rushing to shoot the exteriors, Mitchell recalled that they were "completed on the 3rd Sunday (17 March) – and none too soon, as snow had to be shovelled onto the bare spots."<sup>50</sup> In addition, as all involved were business

people with many community responsibilities, the "filming had to be done either on Sundays or at night."<sup>51</sup> Frequently, Mitchell just told the actors what to do as the camera was rolling. Despite the conditions, everyone involved felt that they "had great fun doing it even though the schedule was hard at times."<sup>52</sup>

Located as far as fifty kilometres away from Port Arthur, many of the

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *TBCJ*, nd. (Dorothea Mitchell File, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society).

<sup>51</sup> Mitchell quoted in *Port Arthur News-Chronicle* (hereafter *PANC*), 2 November 1970.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

*On the set of A Race for Ties (1929). Pictured here is Martha Lake as Marion Atwood. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.*



“sets” were chosen by Dorothea Mitchell because of her familiarity with the region’s rural areas. She was also an ideal choice to approach individuals to ask permission to use their property, because her frequent business trips to Port Arthur while still at Silver Mountain and her involvement in the community since retiring to Port Arthur in 1919 had made her well known and liked. In many instances, using an exterior was a matter of simply going up to the house, knocking, and asking permission, actually a necessity because few rural houses had phones at the time.<sup>53</sup> Mitchell also convinced the Port Arthur *News-Chronicle* to run a special front page headlining, “500,000 TIES REQUIRED FOR RAILWAY WORK,” to be used in the film.

While many in the society had had

theatrical experience, not all did. Mitchell’s script called for the leading man to be someone who could “portray a very rugged outdoor type of individual.”<sup>54</sup> William Gibson was chosen because he looked the part, but unfortunately it was not until an important scene calling for him “to jump into a car and drive madly out in to the country for 20 miles” that it was discovered he did

not know how to drive.<sup>55</sup> This situation, like many, was overcome through determination and ingenuity. In this case, Gibson sat in the driver’s seat and pretended to drive, while the actual driver crouched on the floor and operated the pedals.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these and many more obstacles that needed to be overcome, Mitchell, acting as the society’s press secretary, reported to the Amateur Cinema League that

the exteriors, or course, were the most fun. We were greatly rushed but nobody complained of standing in the wet snow for hours or skipping a mid-day meal, because

<sup>53</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 3. See also “The Mitchell story continued,” *TBCJ*, nd. (Dorothea Mitchell File, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *VDC*, 3 March 1968.

<sup>56</sup> It was also discovered that the driver, a man named Toivo, had never ridden a horse. When trying to mount a borrowed steed, the animal “turned and re-entered the barn – literally wiping everything off his back! Incidentally, I was unaware until we started shooting, that this man had never ridden a horse in his life.” Dorothea Mitchell quoted in “The Mitchell story continues” *TBCJ*, nd. (Dorothea Mitchell File, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society).

we were afraid that the light would fail before the day's work was done. Sometimes it was necessary to shovel snow to bare spots on the road and sometimes cars had to be pushed out of snow drifts. We often melted snow to make coffee for the hungry bunch a mile from home.<sup>57</sup>

The exteriors were all the more remarkable because Fred Cooper filmed them without the use of a tripod. Mitchell herself credited Cooper for his skill and steadiness by acknowledging that “a great measure of its [the film’s] success was undoubtedly due to our cameraman.” However, Mitchell, ever the perfectionist, also added that “he sometimes lost part of a particularly humorous scene, because he himself was laughing.”<sup>58</sup>

With the completion of the exteriors, Dorothea Mitchell, assisted by Cooper and Harcourt, began the task of clipping and organizing the shots into egg-boxes, in order to plan for the interior scenes. For the interiors, it was decided that a “large box-type camera, with tripod” was needed because Cooper’s portable would be inadequate. Most of the interiors were scripted to take place in a rustic northern cabin, so Chris Dunbar, the same man Mitchell had approached to design and make the title cards, created a faux rustic log cabin painted on canvas. The set

was constructed in the studio of the same local photographer from whom the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society purchased their supplies.<sup>59</sup>

The interiors, it appears, were filmed without incident. Once they were completed, Mitchell, this time accompanied by well-known professional photographer and business owner Fred Lovelady, went back to the egg boxes, cut the interior scenes, and began the arduous task of “splicing them [together] to form a complete narrative.”<sup>60</sup> The editing was tricky because the type of projector being used tended to set the film stock on fire if a shot were frozen in one spot too long.<sup>61</sup> For the title cards, a sub-committee was established, which Mitchell again headed, this time assisted by Chris Dunbar. The artwork and text were sent away to Toronto for processing by the Eastman Kodak Company.<sup>62</sup>

While the title cards were being processed, the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society held a preview of the footage for the cast. At this meeting the last unresolved issue was discussed – what to name the film. Mitchell had tentatively entitled her script, *The Girl and the Timber Lost*, but after consulting all the members of the Society, it was decided to drop this

<sup>57</sup> “A Race with Thaw,” *Movie Makers* 3:9 (September 1929): 607-608.

<sup>58</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Program insert for “A Night to Remember,” 3 November 1970 (personal papers of Dorothea Mitchell, collection of Elinor Barr).

<sup>62</sup> A typed manuscript generated as a brief biography of Fred Cooper (Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society 973.150.1) indicates that it was Kodak and not the ACL who did the laboratory work. 400 feet of footage was ruined by Kodak. Like Cooper’s interviews it is at odds with Mitchell’s account. It describes Cooper taking a loss on the film, and exaggerated his role.



name and use instead *A Race For Ties*.<sup>63</sup> After the processed title cards had been spliced in, the final product, 1,600 feet in length and running just over 45 minutes, was sent to Toronto to be passed by the Ontario Board of Censors.<sup>64</sup>

On 28 May 1929, *A Race for Ties* was previewed in the drawing room of the Prince Arthur Hotel. A gala affair, the middle- and upper-class elite of both Fort William and Port Arthur attended and were enthusiastic in their reaction to the film. The Port Arthur *News-Chronicle* reported that George McComber, having been enlisted by Mitchell as business manager because of his prior experience managing theatres, “called on several in the audience to express their opinions with a view to helping the society.” One ambitious local journalist and would-be film critic described the film as involving the “society in a race with the weather,” referring back to the society’s tight shooting schedule. The mayor of Port Arthur, on behalf of the city, expressed his appreciation, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce commented, in the spirit of boosterism, “I think your organisation has done wonderfully well and should be of value advertising the city.” Dorothea Mitchell and the rest of the society were even successful in getting approval from both the Rev. D.R. Patterson and the Rev. P.C. Reed. Both

men, “not in the habit of going to motion picture shows,” expressed their enjoyment of the film and wished the society “success in future endeavours.”<sup>65</sup>

Some of those involved locally in the motion-picture industry also thought highly of the film. A.K. Graburn, manager of the Colonial Theatre commented that “the continuity and photography of the picture was exceedingly good and I want to congratulate everyone connected with it. I must say it will provide pretty tough opposition for the Colonial.”<sup>66</sup> Mitchell especially appreciated the opinion of the manager of the Paramount Theatre, who suggested the Society’s “effort was definitely ahead of many of the early professional productions, and that it was, at times,

## HUGE CROWDS GATHER TO SEE THE NEW FILM

Hundreds Turned Away When  
A Race For Ties Shown  
Last Night

The Lyceum theatre was filled to capacity and many were turned away from the door last night, when members of the Amateur Cinema Society of Thunder Bay gave the initial public showing of their first picture, *A Race for Ties*. The picture was well received and comments of the patrons were to the effect that, for an amateur undertaking and especially considering the lack of highly expensive facilities such as are at the disposal of the big film concerns, it was exceptionally good. Realizing that the picture was completed within a comparatively short time by entirely local talent, from the writing of the story, to the making of art titles, with which the film was decorated, those in attendance last night were surprised by the success attained by the society and the members have been encouraged to continue their efforts and start soon on the production of another picture. In addition to the main picture and the news reels given on the same program, a program of vaudeville was given by local talent. A skit was given by Miss Martha Lake, Wallie McComber and Herb Elliott, and other items were dances by Miss Mona Stewart, violin selections by Cardo Smalley and an impersonation by Wallie McComber. The dog featured in the picture was also presented on the stage. The program was given before a large crowd again this afternoon and will be repeated this evening. The crowds began to gather last evening an hour before the program was advertised for opening, 8.15. At one time the line was two and three deep extending from the theatre doors to Van Norman Street. The doors were ordered closed with every seat occupied at 7.53. It is believed the number turned away would have filled the place at least once, perhaps twice again. It was announced that because of this an additional showing would be arranged for some evening next week.

*Port Arthur News-Chronicle,*  
29 May 1929

<sup>63</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “*A Race for Ties* (Its Inception),” 5. The cast member in question was Eddie Cooke, who played the young boy on crutches. The *PANC* reported that, while “the title of the picture will not be decided upon till the end of the week... among the suggestions made, ‘*The Race for Ties*,’ has been most favourably viewed.” *PANC*, 1 May 1929.

<sup>64</sup> Archives of Ontario, RG 56-1-1, Ontario Board of Censors, Chairman’s correspondence.

<sup>65</sup> *PANC*, 29 May 1929.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

consistent and the continuity excellent.<sup>67</sup> With these rave reviews, it was not surprising that, two days later, hundreds gathered outside the Lyceum hours before the public premiere of *A Race for Ties*. On 31 May 1929, just three months after the initial meeting of the society, their first film played to a packed house. Between 400 and 500 patrons were turned away, requiring the film to be exhibited for two more days.<sup>68</sup> During the three days of public performances the film garnered local reviews similar to the preview's. *A Race for Ties* also received international recognition, first by the Amateur Cinema League's article on the film's release in September 1929 and later in the league's report in May 1930 recognizing the film as the first "Amateur photoplay in Canada."<sup>69</sup>

During the 1920s, newsreels highlighting recent national and international events preceded feature-length films in Ontario theatres. The premiere of *A Race for Ties* in May 1929 was no different, except that for the first time in the history of Northwestern Ontario a 400-foot, 16mm newsreel of local events also produced by the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society accompanied it. Alongside footage of a Zeppelin leaving Europe and arriving in New York, the newsreel shows the tugboat *James Whalen* breaking the ice in Port Arthur's harbor; the opening of the Municipal Golf Links course in Port Arthur on 18 May 1929; footage of load-

ing grain and lumber; a local road race; a recent visit by the Governor General to Port Arthur; and, receiving the most applause, footage of the champion hockey team, the Bear Cats. It also appears that this was not the only time that a member of the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society was involved in the production of newsreels. Owing to his involvement with the production of the society's three films, Fred Cooper in 1930 (now a Port Arthur alderman) was the regional liaison with the Fox Film Company for a series of Movietone newsreels and for the filming of a "special picture depicting a [big game] hunt, in which the reproduction of sounds of the bush and the call of the moose will be featured."<sup>70</sup>

Largely because of the efforts of Dorothea Mitchell, *A Race for Ties* and the newsreel were shown in the surrounding townships during the summer of 1929. Mitchell herself ventured into the surrounding countryside with the films with the hope of collecting money to help worthwhile causes in the rural districts of Northwestern Ontario. All proceeds from each of these exhibitions were donated to various charities in the region, with Mitchell often paying for any expenses incurred. For example, after its Port Arthur premiere, *A Race for Ties* was next shown in September 1929 at the Kakabeka Falls community town

<sup>67</sup> Dorothea Mitchell's notes for "A Race for Ties (Its Inception)," 6.

<sup>68</sup> *PANC*, 1 June 1929.

<sup>69</sup> "Race with Thaw," *Movie Makers* 3:9 (September 1929) and Arthur L. Gale. "Finishing Third Film," *Movie Makers* 4:5 (May 1930), 285. *A Race for Ties* is recognised by film historians as the first amateur feature-length film in Canadian history. See, for example, Morris, 186-87 and a letter to Elinor Barr from Peter Morris, 21 October 1981 (collection of Elinor Barr).

<sup>70</sup> *PANC*, 5 September 1930.

hall. All proceeds went to fund the Outpost Hospital.<sup>71</sup>

Mitchell was aware of the faults present in *A Race for Ties*. Later in life she was openly critical about the plot being “over-prolonged” and, conversely, sections of the film in which cuts were too quick or the introduction of characters necessary, the most notable being the sudden appearance of the “Goof.” Although in the scenario “Aunt Sarah, in planning to make this trip to Barlow’s had told the young people she hoped the Goof would show her the short cut,” in

desire to make more films. Buoyed by the success of *A Race for Ties* and determined to improve upon their first effort, the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society immediately decided to make another film. Half the length and less ambitious, the second film was adapted from a story by Mitchell entitled *Sleep-Inn Beauty*. It appears that in scripting the scenario, Mitchell kept in mind one critic’s suggestion about *A Race for Ties*, that “in future pictures you endeavour to get a little more summer into the picture and a little less of the snow and winter that is the im-

pression of this part of the country in the minds of many who have never seen our summers.”<sup>73</sup>



The opening title card to *Sleep-Inn Beauty* (1930). Image courtesy of <[www.shebafilms.com](http://www.shebafilms.com)>

### Sleep-Inn Beauty and The Fatal Flower

By comparison to *A Race for Ties*, relatively little is known about *Sleep-Inn Beauty*. Shot during the summer of

the film, Mitchell comments, “there is no sub-title stating this.”<sup>72</sup> Luckily, these omissions did not dampen the group’s

1929, *Sleep-Inn Beauty* is set at a fictional middle-class summer resort in North-western Ontario run by a man named

<sup>71</sup> This is indicated by a note at the bottom of the newsreel’s description on the society’s letterhead (personal papers of Dorothea Mitchell, collection of Elinor Barr). In fact, it is from these performances and Mitchell’s continued use of the film for charity until a few years before her death that most of the information on *A Race for Ties* and those individuals involved in the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society has been gleaned. Each of these performances was usually accompanied by a number of newspaper articles and interviews. Some of the richest of these are from the showings in Victoria after Mitchell retired there.

<sup>72</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 5.

<sup>73</sup> *PANC*, 29 May 1929.



Image courtesy of <[www.shebafilms.com](http://www.shebafilms.com)>

O.U. Nightmare. The story revolves around Clarence, the resort owner's son and an individual of dubious character, and his sweetheart Daisy. Both dream of a chance to escape from the monotony of the resort and, one could assume, Nightmare's tyranny. The only problem is that both Daisy and Clarence have no money. At the same time he and Daisy are bemoaning their plight, a wealthy angler approaches Nightmare with \$500 and suggests he organize a "Water Carnival" complete with beauty contest to relieve the boredom of his daughter (with the implied intention that she will win). As fate would have it, when Clarence searches for his father on the day of the contest, he finds him asleep. Taking the trophy and the cash prize, Clarence locks Nightmare into the room, and tells the contestants that he is filling in for his sick father. Not unexpectedly, he picks Daisy as the winner and together they make their escape and get married, but not until after a boat chase!

*Sleep-Inn Beauty* was shot over two days north of Port Arthur, near Mitchell's camp at Surprise Lake (a popular tourist location for swimming and fishing at the time). Wally McComber (the Goof from *A Race For Ties*) played the leading man and Maye Flatt the leading lady. Fred Cooper shared photography duties with Lloyd Small and took a minor acting role. In addition,

over sixty extras were bused in from Port Arthur.<sup>74</sup> No record of the film being exhibited publicly exists, but, considering Mitchell's efforts with *A Race for Ties*, it was almost certainly shown.

In the spring of 1930, the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society underwent minor restructuring. Although Mitchell, Cooper, and Harcourt maintained their positions, H.C. Elliot replaced William Gibson as president. Deciding to expand, the society also rented office space in the prestigious Whalen Building and, on the urging of Fred Cooper and the society's wealthier members, invested in new equipment, such as arc lights and a bigger camera, in preparation to make a much more complex film. This new project, it was decided, would be a crime story, a genre popular in Hollywood at the time. Following the successful formula established with *A Race for Ties* and *Sleep-Inn Beauty*, Mitchell, penning the script this time with Harold Harcourt, once again elected to fill the cast with new members

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<sup>74</sup> *Movie Makers* 4:5 (May 1930), 285 and Dorothea Mitchell's notes for "A Race for Ties (Its Inception)," 6.

“enrolled to suit the characters.”<sup>75</sup> For this film, she selected Harold Gross, a member of the Allan Cup-winning Bear Cats. A well known beauty, Margaret Arthur, was approached to play the leading lady, while Wally McComber was once again prevailed upon, this time to play a homeless “snitch.”

*The Fatal Flower*, as this film was titled, is a story about a young woman and a young man whose budding romance occurs just as a rash of bank heists plagues Northwestern Ontario. The young woman’s father, who happens to be the chief of police, and a young detective are tipped off by an informant that the man the chief’s daughter has been seen with is up to no good. In comparison to *A Race for Ties* and *Sleep-Inn Beauty*, *The Fatal Flower* is a more conventional story, but its complexity is indicative of both Mitchell’s and the society’s growing skill and competence in making films. Dorothea Mitchell’s reputation, as with the two other films, paved the way for the group to have access to much needed locations. She convinced one of the local bank managers to allow the group to shoot the robbery scene at the Imperial Bank of Canada. Additional

scenes were shot at Boulevard Lake and the customs building, which was used as the police station in the film, and a local golf course.

In May of 1930, *Movie Makers* reported that *The Fatal Flower* was nearing completion and would run between 1,600 and 2,000 feet.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, according to Mitchell, “everything went well until photography was completed.”<sup>77</sup> With



Harold Gross and Margaret Arthur in a scene from *The Fatal Flower* (c. 1930). Image courtesy of <[www.shebafilms.com](http://www.shebafilms.com)>

only the title cards to be finished, the combined effects of the depression, the transfer of leading man Gross to a bank in Winnipeg, and the diminishing of interest on the part of the society’s members doomed the production.<sup>78</sup> This lack in interest was only heightened by the appear-

<sup>75</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 7.

<sup>76</sup> Arthur L. Gale, “Finishing Third Film,” *Movie Makers* 4:5 (May 1930), 285.

<sup>77</sup> Dorothea Mitchell’s notes for “A Race for Ties (Its Inception),” 6.

<sup>78</sup> “Fred G. Cooper” bio by unknown author (Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society 973.150.1). Inspired by the activities of the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society, in 2004 a group of Thunder Bay cinephiles completed *The Fatal Flower*. This film, along with the other two made by the society, and a documentary about Dorothea Mitchell are now available on DVD. For more information on the DVD and the society, see <http://www.ladylumberjack.ca>

ance of the first true talkie, *Close Harmony* at the Orpheum on 30 September 1929 and the equipping of most local theatres with sound equipment by 1930.<sup>79</sup> Financially, Fred Cooper's insistence on "more elaborate equipment, such as large box-camera, fade-outs, and Arc lights," also had left the society in financial trouble. Dorothea Mitchell paid the bank debt out of her own funds and purchased the remaining assets of the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society in 1931.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

Although the Port Arthur Amateur Cinema Society owes its existence to the economic and cultural climate that marked middle-class existence in the late 1920s, there is no doubt that the inspiration, driving force, and general success of the Society were the direct result of Fred Cooper's and, especially, Dorothea Mitchell's participation. It is a testament to their skills and dedication that forty years after its premiere, *A Race for Ties* had not lost its lustre or ability both to capture the attention and generate the enthusiasm of Lakehead residents. With guests arriv-

ing in vintage cars and dressed in period costume, the film was once again shown in 1970 to the public in honour of senior citizens. Appropriately, the honoured guests of the evening were screenwriter and star Dorothea Mitchell, then 94, and cinematographer Fred Cooper, himself 74. Tribute was also paid to the participants who had long since passed away. Acknowledging the standing ovations following the screening, Mitchell expressed to the crowd that "there is nowhere else I enjoy being more than in Thunder Bay," and, still disbelieving of the film's importance to the community and country, "I still really don't know why all the fuss is being made about this, but I love all the attention."<sup>81</sup> Perhaps most telling are Mitchell's comments in an interview she gave reflecting on her days of making films in Port Arthur, and long before realising she was possibly the first independent woman filmmaker in Canadian history: "Looking back, I realise what colossal nerve we – a small group of complete amateurs – showed in attempting such a task."<sup>82</sup>

While the group of individuals that came together in the Port Arthur Amateur

<sup>79</sup> *PANC* and *FWDTJ*, 1 October 1929. Surveys of *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* and *Moving Picture World* revealed the theatres of Port Arthur and Fort William were included on promotional advertisements for Victor sound equipment in 1930.

<sup>80</sup> Dorothea Mitchell's notes for "A Race for Ties (Its Inception)," 6-7. Throughout his life, Cooper repeatedly claimed to have paid off the group's debt, and most believed him. This was heatedly disputed by Mitchell, however, in a letter she wrote to Peter Morris dated 26 July 1965 (collection of Elinor Barr). In it she denies Cooper's claim that he personally paid for the production. As secretary and treasurer of the society throughout its existence, Mitchell still had the records. It appears that *A Race for Ties* made \$850 in its three showings locally (admission was \$0.50). After paying the Society's rent, the amusement tax, orchestra, stagehands, film, and screen. In fact, the group still had \$220 after expenses. The society went into debt, she contends, because of the desire by members led by Cooper for newer and more expensive equipment.

<sup>81</sup> *PANC*, 3 November 1970.

<sup>82</sup> Dorothea Mitchell's notes for "A Race for Ties (Its Inception)," 2.

Cinema Society and produced not one, but three of Canada's first feature-length amateur films, were devoted cineastes, their success resulted primarily from the participation of Dorothea Mitchell and Fred Cooper. While both had the financial means and fit the profile of the membership of the majority of amateur film societies operating throughout the world, what made them unique was their dedica-

tion and, in the case of Mitchell, personal charisma. It is a testament to their efforts that despite early commercial and government attempts to establish a filmmaking industry at the Lakehead, the region's success ultimately came not from filmmakers bemoaning the lack of government funding, quotas, or distribution, but by those who, in Mitchell's own words, "did it just for fun."<sup>83</sup>




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<sup>83</sup> Dorothea Mitchell made this comment in numerous interviews and in her personal papers. Fred Cooper also made such a statement to the *PANC* on 3 November 1970.