

North Idaho Nuggets
Episode #3: Roll 'Em: North Idaho Goes to the Movies

Show Notes:

[About Nell Shipman:](#)

[The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart: An Autobiography](#)

[The Girl from God's Country](#) by Kay Armatage

[Letters from God's Country: Nell Shipman's Selected Correspondence and Writings, 1912-1970](#)

If you're in the area, you can visit [Shipman Point](#) in Lionhead State Park near Coolin, ID.

Other links:

[Dante's Peak](#)

Mel was released on DVD in 2011 as [Everyone Loves Mel](#).

Sandpoint At the North End of the Long Bridge is available at the Bonner County History Museum. Learn more about filmmaker Erik Daarstad through his autobiography, [Through the Lens of History: The Life Journey of a Cinematographer](#).

[Banff Mountain Film Festival Facebook page](#)

[Sandpoint Radius Film Festival](#)

The historic [Panida Theater](#)

[Movies in the Park](#)

Portions of the text of this episode appeared in the article "Nell Shipman at Lionhead Lodge" by Jennifer Lamont Leo, published in *Sandpoint Magazine* in Winter 2015.

Transcript of Episode 3: Roll 'Em! North Idaho Goes to the Movies

Most of the time, North Idaho's pristine lakes, majestic mountains, and dense forests make the glitz and glamour of Hollywood seem like a galaxy far, far away. We've got loads of stars, but they're the kind that twinkle in the dark sky, not the kind that make sure the camera captures their good side.

But did you know there was a time during the 1920s when a slice of Hollywood came to us? That there was an actual movie studio right here in North Idaho? We'll be talking about that today, as well as the handful of other movies that have found in North Idaho a breathtaking backdrop. And if you stick with me to the end, I'll tell you about a very fun way that you can spend a summer evening with the stars--both the twinkling kind and the other kind.

Are you familiar with the name Nell Shipman? Back in the 1920s, you would have been. In the early days of Hollywood, Nell Shipman was a force to be reckoned with. She'd launched her career as a silent-screen actress in her native Canada. By the early 1920s her star had risen in Hollywood, where in addition to acting she'd also started producing, directing, and writing screenplays. Drawn to the peaceful Northwest, she founded a studio, Nell Shipman Productions, in Spokane Valley's Minnehaha Park.

A nature-lover at heart, Shipman preferred to shoot outdoors on location instead of within the studio. She found in northern Idaho the rugged scenery that suited her melodramatic adventure stories, in which plucky heroines triumphed over adversity in treacherous wilderness settings. In 1922 Shipman and her personal and professional partner, Bert Van Tuyle, packed up the company and headed to Priest Lake.

A local resident, Lloyd Peters, who at age nineteen had worked for Shipman as an actor/carpenter/jack-of-all-trades, remembered the group's arrival at Priest Lake. "In a little while a full moon came up," he wrote in his memoir, "and I could see the lake was as smooth as glass. The little steamboat chugged along, passing beautiful islands and dreamy bays. We saw the mountains on either side of the lake, and could pick out the jagged peaks in the moonlight. . . . Now I knew why Nell picked this land for her movie camp."

Shipman wrote in her autobiography, "Did you ever come to a place and instantly recognize it as . . . the one spot in all God's world where you belonged, where your roots could go deep into soil which would forever nourish you, where inspiration and spiritual blessing welled up from the earth to top the tallest Tamarack, spread to the encasing bowl of sky, return on every waterway to feed you everlastingly? Such a spot, so it seemed to me, was Priest Lake, in Idaho." Nell named her piece of paradise Lionhead Lodge.

The isolated population around Priest Lake must have wondered what hit them, not having encountered the likes of Nell Shipman before. Beautiful and brash, she flouted convention at every turn, but was also reputed to be friendly and kindhearted to animals and people alike. Her company included not only Shipman and Van Tuyle, Nell's young son Barry, the crew and cameramen and cook, but also a vast menagerie of animals common and exotic, from bears and mountain lions to raccoons, beavers, and sled dogs. The first priority upon arrival at Lionhead Lodge was to build appropriate pens for the animals. Eventually the property also held a main lodge and several smaller log cabins, outbuildings, and docks.

On occasion local residents were cast in films. Dorothy Winslow, the 19-year-old daughter of steamboat captain Bert Winslow, landed a role in "The Light on Lookout" after winning a Shipman-sponsored beauty contest. While Winslow did not go on to pursue a movie career, she did wind up marrying assistant cameraman Aubrey Overmyer, with Shipman and Van Tuyle as witnesses.

Several movies were made at Lionhead, including outdoor scenes in "The Grub Stake," "Trail of the Northwind," "The Light on Lookout," and "White Water." Filming on location involved hiking over rough terrain with heavy camera equipment, costumes, props, and animal cages. Over time, some crew members quit, fed up with the rough and isolated conditions. Financial problems forced the closure of Lionhead Lodge in late 1924, and the remaining animals were donated to the San Diego Zoo. Shipman and Van Tuyle went their separate ways. Nell continued writing, but she never again returned to Priest Lake or starred a movie. Still, her memory lives on.

In 1977 the site of Lionhead Lodge was renamed Shipman Point. Nell's son Barry was present at the dedication.

Lionhead Lodge was perhaps North Idaho's most serious engagement with Hollywood, but it certainly wasn't the only one. Several movies have been filmed here, in whole or in part. Let's see if any of these titles ring a bell.

Of course there was 1996's *Dante's Peak*, the volcano disaster flick starring Pierce Brosnan and Linda Hamilton. It was partially filmed at Mirror Lake and in Wallace.

In 1998 a movie called *Mel* told the timeless story of a pet giant turtle inhabiting a rural lake. It was filmed in and around Sandpoint, particularly the sheriff's office and the jail, although the story is set in Washington. The cast included Ernest Borgnine and Jack Scalia, and Joey Travolta of the Travolta family--yes, *that* Travolta family--produced and directed the film.

An acclaimed documentary film, *Sandpoint at the Northern End of the Long Bridge*, premiered in the early 2000s. Renowned filmmaker Erik Daarstad won a prestigious national honor from the American Association of State and Local History for his role in preserving and interpreting a slice of North Idaho history.

And finally, while it wasn't a movie, a TV commercial for Swiss Miss hot cocoa mix was filmed at Mirror Lake in 1976 and involved several local young people in the filming. Apparently our mountains lent a good-enough approximation of the Swiss Alps, at least in the eyes of the producers.

North Idaho has reportedly been a favorite destination of a number of Hollywood types over the years. While stars on retreat from the spotlight tend to cluster further south, down near Sun Valley, Hailey, and Ketchum, a few have been known to swing through the Panhandle now and then.

Speaking of swinging on a star, in the 1940s, Bing Crosby came up for a fishing vacation on Lake Pend Oreille. Also in that era, Rita Hayworth swept through Farragut Naval Training Station on a war-bond tour, thoroughly charming the sailors. Midcentury film star Lana Turner was born and raised in Wallace. More recently Ben Stein and Viggo Mortensen have kept residences in the Sandpoint area. The late actress Patty Duke made her home in Coeur d'Alene.

In 2018 a writer named Katy Moeller wrote an article for the *Idaho Statesman* titled "Has Idaho Become the New North Hollywood?" In it she mentions that Kim Kardashian was spotted wake-surfing on Lake Coeur d'Alene. Not that Kim's exactly a movie star, but still. Also, apparently Henry Winkler enjoys going fishing on Idaho's Snake River. Hey, he should try Pend Oreille, if he hasn't already. If it was good enough for Bing, it's good enough for The Fonz.

Even some animals have gotten in on the act--in addition to Nell Shipman's. In 2007, Stanley, a Sandpoint-born rat terrier who'd done time at a local pet store, was re-homed to a shelter in Spokane. From there Stanley was rescued by dog trainer Carol Byrnes. Ms. Byrnes found out that a movie production company was looking for a dog just like Stanley for a "feel-good" Christmas movie on cable television. Stanley played a street dog who befriended children and was trained to steal things. I found out that the production company was called North by Northwest Productions, but I wasn't able to discover the name of the movie. If any of you listeners knows what movie is, please leave a comment on the Bonner County History Museum Facebook page. We would love to see Stanley in action.

If you're a movie buff, there are lots of places around the Panhandle to see movies. There's Sandpoint's historic Panida Theater which shows movies as well as live performances. And of course, the Bonner Mall Cinema in Ponderay, the Hayden Discount Cinema, and Coeur d'Alene's Regal Riverstone. Sandpoint is also home to some world-class film festivals, like the Banff Mountain Film Festival and the Sandpoint Radius Film Festival.

Years ago Sandpoint even had an outdoor theater. It was built during the poodle-skirt era, in 1951, by L. H. Weskil, son of F. C. Weskil, who had built the Panida Theater back in 1927. Originally called the Motor Movie, the drive-in's grand opening featured Jimmy Stewart in *Broken Arrow*.

Alas, the drive-in theater is long gone. But if you enjoy watching movies under the stars, and you find yourself in the Sandpoint area during the summer of 2019, you're in for a treat. The popular Movies in the Park series, cosponsored by the Museum, Pine Street Dental, and Sandpoint Parks and Recreation, will kick off on July 19 with *Pirates of the Caribbean*, followed by *Sing* on July 26, *How to Train Your Dragon* on August 16, and *Night at the Museum* on August 30, 2019. Movies will be shown outdoors at Lakeview Park in Sandpoint, so bring your blankets and lawn chairs. For more info, visit bonnercountyhistory.org/mip or call 208-263-2344.

And there you have it--North Idaho's modest and not-so-modest brushes with Hollywood. If you have any more stories like these to share, we'd love to hear them. Leave a comment on the Bonner County History Museum Facebook page, or send an email to bchs@frontier.com. If you're in the area, do stop in for a visit. We're located in Lakeview Park in Sandpoint. Visit bonnercountyhistory.org or call 208-263-2344 for more info.