



## OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE FIRE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS

By Candy Moulton

I became a documentary film producer by accident and entirely because of WWA. Twenty years ago, a content developer for BPI, a multimedia production company in Boston, called WWA member Paul Andrew Hutton, who was nationally known for his many appearances in documentary



Paul Andrew Hutton

films being produced for a variety of cable television channels. The company was pursuing a project in Wyoming for the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center and sought a content researcher and a scriptwriter. Hutton gave them my name for research and suggested a scriptwriter as well.

The company got the job, and so did I. Production moved quickly. Less than a month after being hired, we were filming in Wyoming. I'd started as a researcher, but my role quickly changed.

The film called for footage of a wagon train. At the time, I was traveling with Ben Kern and his California Trail Wagon Train. When the LA-based producer asked if I could hire wagons and find people to appear in the shoot, it was easy for me to say yes. I hired Ben's wagon train and found other wagons, teams and people from throughout Wyoming to be involved. I found wardrobe and props. Along the way I was given the title of associate producer. Since I did not even know what an associate producer did, I called WWA member Miles Swarthout and asked him. He told me, "Anything the producer does not want to do."

My first exposure to production was in early June 1999. I managed to survive

the experience, learning some key lessons from that LA producer: 1) Eat whenever you see food because you won't get regular meals. 2) Stay behind the camera. 3) Get everybody to sign a release before you film them. 4) Don't worry about the current scene being filmed; instead get ready for the next one. 5) Watch what's going on in front of the camera, but more importantly watch for what is happening behind it!

I earned my paycheck the first day of filming when I saw an irate member of the wagon train making a beeline toward her husband, who was involved in a scene. I managed to intercept her before she could ruin the shot.

I knew nothing about film production, but what served me and the production was the fact that I did know the story.

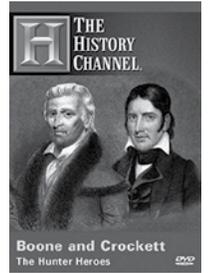
As we worked on script development and later shoots, I had a bigger role; the company recognized my understanding of westward migration. By the time we wrapped the shooting and had the film – a five-screen theatrical

presentation – completed, I had earned a co-writer credit. That film, *Footsteps to the West*, was recognized as a Spur Award finalist (the winner that year was *Boone and Crockett: The Hunter Heroes*, written by Hutton and Dan Gagliasso for Gary L. Foreman's Native Sun Productions).

Gagliasso, by the way, was the lead writer on the Trail Center project so he earned double recognition in the Spur Awards that year.

The first film project I wrote and produced myself came seven years later and was a short film for a stagecoach experience, also for the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center. Two years after that production, we were deep into planning of a major documentary film, *In Pursuit of a Dream*, developed for the Oregon-California Trails Association, which won the Spur Award for documentary film in 2010, my first major award for writing and producing a documentary film. The film won many other awards and ultimately went into distribution to the education market under an agreement OCTA negotiated with Landmark Media.

We had a talented group of content and film experts who had a hand in that production, including several who are WWA members: BPI director and cinematographer Bob Noll, line pro-

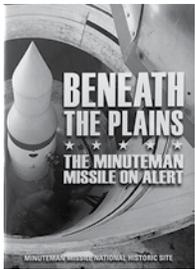


*Ice Age floods and geology expert Bruce Bjornstad provides commentary for films for the Hanford Reach Interpretive Center.* Candy Moulton



ducer Quackgrass Sally and film and content experts Hutton, Will Bagley and Terry Del Bene.

That film set me on a path I never sought and did not expect. In the years since, I have developed several dozen films and multimedia pieces with Noll and BPI for museums and visitor centers ranging from the Flint Hills Discovery Center and Hanford Reach Interpretive Center to the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site.



While filming in Texas, I earned the name Three Horse Woman from Dr. Jerry Bread, a Comanche, who told me the name fit me perfectly – “You know,” he said, “nag, nag, nag.” Yep! That’s what producers do. The

finished film, *Settling the Plains: The Story of Fort Griffin*, is an interpretive documentary that tells a story of a place from two unique perspectives – the American Indian view from Bread and an historian’s perspective provided by Henry Crawford.

This point-counterpoint technique plays well across the three-screen presentation. It is in typical documentary style: subject matter experts or “talking heads” telling a story that is visualized with a blend of layered archival photographs and images, small-scale reenactments and original B-Roll (supplemental footage) that set the scenes.

Having the opportunity to bring stories to life on a screen – either big or small – is work and fun all rolled together. And the work of producing has made me a better writer because I now know the real importance of the small details – the “color,” as the great popular nonfiction writer and editor Dale L. Walker once taught me.

When Bill Kurtis and Hutton produced a film about the Mountain Meadows Massacre for *Investigating History*, I had a chance to assist with field production and carefully dissected Will Bagley’s book, *Blood of the Prophets*, to get the details correct, such as the fact that the 8-year-old girl who carried the surrender “flag” for the Fancher Train wore a white



dress. I gleaned many other details – that ever-important writing color – from Bagley’s book. During filming he was on hand to explain the background to the story and provide critical overview for filmmakers and actors. That film *Mountain Massacre* won Hutton, Kurtis and Jamie Schenk a Spur Award in 2006.



For any documentary film producer, the work of the writers is critical. Producers rely on not just the writer for the film under production, but also the writers who have chronicled any of the details of the story being told.

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Ken Burns is the most recognized documentary filmmaker working today, having produced dozens of films, including the exceptional *Country Music* that aired in September on PBS. Burns has focused on some of the epic stories of the American West, including *Lewis and Clark: the Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, *The Dust Bowl* and *The West* itself.

Dayton Duncan is one of the best-known documentary film writers. Most of his work has been in coordination with Burns. He wrote nine episodes of *The West*, including “Ghost Dance,” “One Sky Above You,” “The Geography of Hope,” “Fight No More Forever” and “The People.”

Duncan wrote *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, *The Dust Bowl* and *Country Music*, all TV miniseries documentaries. He also wrote multiple episodes for the TV movie documentaries *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, *Mark Twain and Horatio’s Drive: America’s First Road Trip*.

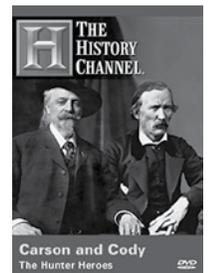
Duncan won Spur Awards from WWA and Western Heritage Wrangler

Awards from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum for Best Documentary Script in 1998 for *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* and in 2013 for *The Dust Bowl*. He won a prime-time Emmy for Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming and also Outstanding Nonfiction

Series in 2009 for *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea* and was a nominee for a Primetime Emmy for *The Dust Bowl* for the episode “The Great Plow-Up.”

Duncan has also written or consulted and advised on documentaries that are not centered on the American West, including miniseries documentaries *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, *Prohibition* and *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*.

Hutton, besides giving me a hand up, has appeared as a subject matter expert and has also been a writer for many documentary films. Among his writing credits are the TV movie *Eighty Acres of Hell*, the TV movie documentaries *Carson and Cody: The Hunter Heroes* and *Time Machine: Boone and Crockett – The Hunter Heroes*. He also wrote the short film, *The Wilderness Road: Spirit of A Nation*, and wrote several scripts for the documentary TV series *Investigating History*.



On camera, Hutton has been featured in a number of series including *The American West*, *America: Facts vs. Fiction*, *Gunslingers* and *American Experience* programs on Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Custer’s Last Stand, Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp. He has also been on *The Wild West*, *History’s Mysteries*, *The Untold West* and *The Real West*. His work on documentary films as writer and subject expert has spanned more than three decades. He has three Spur Awards and Wrangler Awards for both writing and on-camera work.

Former WWA president Kirk Ellis won a Spur Award in 2006 for *Hell on Wheels*, an episode of the *Into the West* TV miniseries, but he is best known for his work on the miniseries *John Adams*, for which he won two Emmy Awards (among the 13 garnered by the series). Additionally, he has written many other

documentary programs for film and television audiences, including the PBS production for the National Memorial Day Concert this year.

Throughout the West, producers are developing short and long documentaries for local PBS stations, museums, interpretive centers, local television programming and for entry in film festivals, among other outlets. One of these producers/writers is Geoff O’Gara, whose Spur Award-winning film *The Drift: An American Cattle Drive* for Wyoming PBS highlights the ranch tradition of moving cattle through the Green River valley following pasture from near Big Piney and Pinedale to the high country.

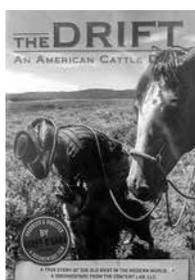
*“Eventually, I don’t know what happens, but the land kind of gets a hold of you.”*

— *The Drift*

*“The Drift is a way of life. It is an almost tribal movement of cattle. These families have been doing this over 100 years. – It’s clannish.”*

— Albert Sommers in *The Drift*

The story of the Green River Drift is not only one of cowboy tradition, but a contemporary view of land use. As one of the range riders says in the film, “The Upper Green is the bull’s eye for livestock-predator conflict in Wyoming.” O’Gara’s film clearly shows that the politics of public land grazing has gotten more and more intense due to competing interests from grazing to wildlife to oil and gas development and even highway traffic.



What is unique about the Drift is its cultural importance, recognized when it was designated a cultural property on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ben Masters and a group of friends broke and rode wild mustangs along the Continental Divide from Mexico to Canada, recording their journey in documentary style to win the Spur finalist certificate and a Wrangler Award for

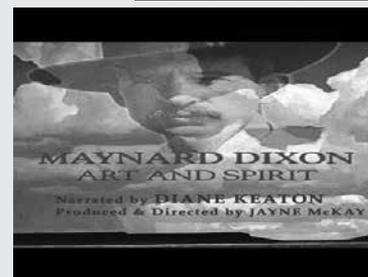
*Unbranded* in 2016. The Spur that year went to Cameron Trejo and Dodge Billingsley for *Power’s War*. Masters has just

*Buck Brannaman* is interviewed for the Spur-winning documentary *Buck*. Cedar Creek Productions



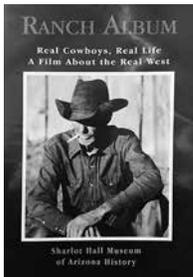
## Spur-winning documentary scripts

- 1992:** (tie, presented in 1993) *Buffalo Bill and His Wild West* by Robert Kirk and *Last Stand at Little Bighorn* by Paul Stekler and James Welch
- 1993:** (presented in 1994) *The Hunt for Pancho Villa* by Paul Espinosa
- 1994:** (presented in 1995) *One Hundred Years of Hollywood Westerns* by Jack Haley Jr., Phil Savenik and Aubrey Solomon
- 1995:** (presented in 1996) *Ruby to Paradise and the Legends in Between* by Vicki Evans
- 1998:** (tie) *George Armstrong Custer* by Arthur Drooker and *Lewis & Clark* by Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns
- 1999:** *Frontier Legends: of the Old Northwest* by Gary L. Foreman
- 2000:** *Annie Oakley: Crackshot in Petticoats* by Arthur Drooker
- 2002:** *Boone and Crockett: The Hunter Heroes* by Paul Andrew Hutton with Dan Gagliasso
- 2003:** *Custer’s Last Stand* by Daniel Leavitt
- 2004:** *Carson and Cody: The Hunter Heroes* by Paul Andrew Hutton
- 2005:** *Wild West Tech: Deadwood Tech* by Laura Verklan
- 2006:** *Mountain Massacre* by Paul Andrew Hutton, Bill Kurtis and Jamie Schenk
- 2007:** *Gold Rush* by Michelle Ferrari
- 2008:** *Maynard Dixon: Art and Spirit* by Jayne McKay and Daniel Dixon
- 2009:** *Kit Carson* by Michelle Ferrari
- 2010:** *In Pursuit of a Dream* by Candy Moulton
- 2011:** *American Experience: Wyatt Earp* by Bob Rapley
- 2012:** *Buck* directed by Cindy Meehi
- 2013:** *The Dust Bowl* by Dayton Duncan
- 2014:** *Indian Relay* by M. Smoker
- 2015:** *State of Jefferson* by Kami Horton
- 2016:** *Power’s War* by Dodge Billingsley and Cameron Trejo
- 2017:** *The Drift: An American Cattle Drive* by Geoff O’Gara
- 2018:** *Down the Fence* by MJ Isakson and Eric Frith



produced a new documentary film, *The River and The Wall*, which chronicles the story of five friends who travel from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico by horse, mountain bike, and canoe to document the borderlands and how a wall may affect it.

*Ranch Album: Real Cowboys, Real Life, A Film About the Real West*, produced for the Sharlot Hall Museum of Arizona History in 1987, is one of those docu-



mentaries that stands up to the test of time. The film is written and produced by Gail Steiger and his brother Lew Steiger. Certainly film qualities have changed in the intervening years, but the technique where people tell their own story, punctuated

with excellent visual scenes, is routine documentary work, and this film is a classic.

*“Calf hunter has a job to do. Some days he’ll have good days. Some days he’ll have bad days.”*

— *Ranch Album*

*“There’s things you do and don’t do.... You don’t run in front of somebody else’s horse .... You do a little bit of the work yourself – at least to my way of thinking.”*

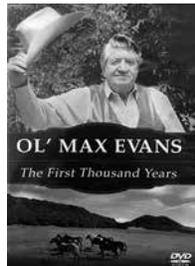
— *Ranch Album*

One cowboy, talking about the cattle he cares for, shows a bit of sentiment toward one cow he’s watched for years: “She’s old enough now I’m just waiting to see how [expletive] long it will take her to die.”

The dialogue you hear in these interviews with ranchers, with cowboys, with people of the land, have one thing in common: authenticity. Any novelist wanting to grasp cowboy language should get a copy of this film.

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As writers, we appreciate work about one of our own, and *Ol’ Max Evans:*



*The First Thousand Years* is a moving and detailed documentary tribute to a revered writer. This PBS film is produced and written by Lorene Mills and

Paul Barnes, edited by David Leach and filmed by Barry Kirk. It saw a round of airings in film festivals and special venues before airing on New Mexico PBS earlier this year.

This film is a tribute to Ol’ Max, a Lifetime Member of WWA who just celebrated his 95th birthday. It highlights his contributions to literature, filmmaking and art. It is a film that shares his connection to the land – whether for ranching or for mining – and his incredible legacy as a member of the Greatest Generation, one of the men who landed on the beaches at Normandy during D-Day.

*“Max Evans did not, as he likes to boast, experience a life of adventure. He was the adventure, and he’s outlived most of those who weathered the storms he likely created over the years ...”*

— Santa Fe New Mexican

A synopsis of the film, written five years ago when the project was still in its infancy, begins with this from Max: “By the time I was 17, life was really whippin’ up and the son of a gun never stopped. It has been a dead run for 90 damn years and my ears laid back all the time.”

*Ol’ Max: The First Thousand Years* blends the books and stories Max has written, from *The Rounders* and *The Hi-Lo Country* to *Bluefeather Fellini*, with remarks by fellow writers, editors, friends and archivists. Peter Coyote provided narration. This film shares many of Max’s stories including his time in Hollywood working with Sam Peckinpah and it highlights his acting debut scene in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*.

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Making any documentary is always a challenge as there is the necessity of travel and filming in a variety of locations, the need to put multiple people on camera, and the need to find a sponsor, benefactor, or other source of funding.

One key to any documentary is story, and content is always king. Many WWA members have established themselves as subject matter experts and earn a bit of extra income (and public exposure) from on-camera work for documentary films. Other opportunities exist for those same experts to work behind the camera, providing their expertise to producers who need people to consult and advise on a variety of topics – from the history to the clothing, guns or other weapons, to transportation and more. Another obvious role for writers is how I got my break into the world of documentary filmmaking – by working as a content researcher.

