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BOOM TOWN

B.C.'s Bordertown western set comes back from the dead to host *Gunfighter's Moon*.

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FEATURE

"A Life Of Its Own"

by Heather Conn

Once upon a time in the west stood a town.

PHOTO: CAROLE SEGAL

Danny Virtue, above (l) with Rex Rossi on the set of **Gunfighter's Moon**, *was a key player in the re-building of Bordertown, the B.C. set that rose from the ashes of an arsonist's fire.*

A town where cowboys cussed in the saloon and horses whinnied in the street. They called it Bordertown. In December of '94 an arsonist's fire struck but the town refused to die. Film crews came and left. Still, the town remained. Two pardners from down south came by in March of '95. They loved the town. They had a vision and a passion to bring alive a dream. And so, they came back to Bordertown and called it Red Pine, Wyoming.

This is a tale of the loss and subsequent revival of the old Bordertown set north of Maple Ridge, B.C. Most recently, the town's street facades have come back to vibrant life for the two hour movie *Gunfighter's Moon.* One of the town's strongest selling points as a location for an "archetypal western" is Mother Nature herself, according to writer/director and executive producer Larry Ferguson (who wrote *The Hunt for Red October*, *Presidio*, *Highlander*, *Aliens 3* and *Beverly Hills Cop II.*) He loved the surrounding mountains, rolling green fields, and the town's curved, hilly main street. He and executive producer Peter Rosten (*True Believer*) didn't want the look of flat, dusty plains of predictable westerns where "somebody in a moustache is shooting from behind a white railing" says Ferguson. Instead, the Hollywood duo wanted a lush look of "exciting, rich visuals" with a twist of natural difference. Western Canada's Bordertown gave it to 'em.

"It just sang" says Rosten with passionate zeal as he sits for a brief chat on some main street front steps on location. "It said, 'Shoot me. Shoot me.' We didn't know a place like this existed. It revitalized and transformed Larry's vision and gave the picture an internal life it hadn't had before the town. It has a life of its own."

Ferguson's praise for the location holds equal enthusiasm. "I'm ecstatic," he says, slumping into a front porch after emerging from a shoot inside a saloon. "I liked this the minute I saw it. The beauty of the location is that it isn't the expected."

Both men scouted locations in Calgary and nearby regions, and considered New Mexico, but nothing fit their vision or budget. With less than $5 million (Cdn.) to spend, they couldn't afford to build a town and needed an existing site. Bordertown and the price-is-right value of Canadian dollars and labour fit the bill. As Ferguson says "The union situation here is very helpful for American companies." But he and Rosten both agreed that creative, not financial considerations were top priority in choosing a prime site.

Once they found their dream location, the task of transformation began. How do you make a period town look authentic and believable? How do you create a unique look for a western town so it's colorful and memorable but not quite the mud, dirt and half-constructed houses of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*? How do you make a small physical location with a handful of side-by-side buildings evoke the sense of a sprawling home to at least 200 people? That's where the magic of the art department comes in.

And classic movie westerns come in mighty handy too. Art director Andy Deskin, a self-professed fanatic of westerns,

knows all the classics almost scene by scene. (He won a Gemini as production designer for *Lost in the Barrens* in 1992, the same year that *Bordertown* was nominated.) He and production designer Dan Lomino (nominated for an Academy Award for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) holed up to watch a video marathon of shoot-'em-dead flicks including Ted Post's *Hang 'Em High* and Martin Ritt's *Hombre*. They looked at colors, textures and lighting with Deskin fast-forwarding to many of his favorite sequences. (His all-time favorite westerns are Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*.)

"It's fun to look at other people's movies" says Deskin, sorting through a handful of location photographs and before and after shots. "I'd love to get the same feeling of those old westerns happening here (at Bordertown.)"

Lomino had a head start on the set. He scouted Bordertown and took location photographs two years ago, before the fire, when more original buildings remained. "I was eager to come back and work with that street," says the interview-shy production designer after some coaxing to leave his trailer. "I was excited about it because I knew I had a lot to start with. I knew it was going to be fun to be here and work on that. I really wanted to do this show because it was a western." (Lomino has worked on Clint Eastwood features and for the old series *The Virginian* and *Rawhide*. But *Gunfighter's Moon* marks his first stint as production designer on a western.)

Armed with a stack of research books, historical photographs, newspaper clippings, movie flicks and use of a research library in Los Angeles - Lomino and Deskin were ready to take on Bordertown. First, they rustled out its weak spots like the saloon doors, which faced directly onto a narrow main street and allowed limited camera positions. To enhance visual dramatics, especially for the movie's final gunfight scene, they moved the flapping front doors from the side of the building to the corner. That way, the audience sees both sides of main street and kitty corner to the saloon instead of just one section of street. A bigger picture emerges.

And take that crude but cozy looking log cabin with the hanging fur pelts and the rustic porch deck. A plain and simple little place, right? Wrong. It's a "very complicated set" says Deskin and it demanded intensive preparation for interior shoots done the first day. All four walls are "wild" which means they can be pulled away easily by simple removal of a few screws. In a tight 12' by 12' room, this gives more options for camera positions. The whole roof is comprised of pieces removable by pulleys. The ceiling is also removable.

A "new" shanty town of tents and blackened kettles transformed a portion of Bordertown's burned-out area. A gallows and jail, whose black wooden bars look like steel, were added. To provide the flavour of a growing town, the art department cleared off one fire-ruined building and replaced it with a new wooden framework. This gained additions throughout the movie to convey that it was under construction. "You never see the logistics of the town all at once," says Deskin. "You go to different buildings in the town so it looks and feels much bigger."

It took the construction crew four weeks to do prep for the whole set. A maximum of 20 people, including five painters, worked on set construction at any given time. Add the set decorating crew, drafts people, art director and two mascot dogs and the total hits about 35.

At the end of the main street stands the movie's schoolhouse which demanded conversions from its *Bordertown* days. Additions included tongue and groove siding, a flagpole, rooftop cupola with a bell, a front awning and one large front door replaced by double doors. (No viewer can see that inside the schoolhouse stand towering mounds of electrical units and cables used to juice the movie.)

If you look uphill beyond the schoolhouse, on the road out of town, you'll see a quaint, tiny wooden building. In the movie, it's the church. In reality, it's the production office. "I base my reality on the movies" says Deskin with no hint of irony. "I want the emotion from the movie, not 'Oh, that's what a western town looks like.' Given the choice between a more dramatic and exciting room where someone says, 'Wow! Do you remember that scene with all those great-looking things?" and the correct room, that's more important than sticking to authenticity. If you want authenticity, you watch a documentary. If you want drama, you go to a movie."

Yet *Gunfighter's Moon* explodes with authentic detail. Lance Henriksen (*The Quick and the Dead* and *Dead Man*), the movie's starring gunfighter, carries a genuine 1876 Winchester rifle. All guns used in the movie are originals or else the identical size and specification of originals. In the town, thousands of decorative touches breathe life into the bygone summer days of 1877. Rows of real cookies and candy surround bolts of fabric and knick-knacks in Yarnell's General Mercantile store. Lace curtains blow in the windows. Bullet holes spray across the bank's door. Fresh sod covers rooftops. "Dan (Lomino) did a brilliant job" says a keen-spirited Rosten. "The heart of Bordertown was there and then Dan made that heart beat."

Director Ferguson wanted no gimmicks or fudging for the movie, adds Rosten. "Larry's true commitment was the movie's reality. The people all look real. Larry always says to the actors on set, 'Be real.'" The movie's historic look, with black-clad gamblers, horse carriages and a hillbilly string band, did not extend to Ferguson and Rosten's favorite on-set transportation. They tootled up and down main street in a gold cart.)

The movie's stunt coordinator Danny Virtue, who rented Bordertown to Los Angeles-based Rysher Productions for this shoot, supplied his own horses, wagons

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Nikki DeLoach (l) and Kay Lenz starred in* Gunfighter's Moon *which chose to shoot on the revitalized Bordertown set after looking around North America for a western town that fit their budget.

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and props for the film. He continually promotes Bordertown to California filmmakers and says he receives enquiries regularly about the location. "Bordertown is back in business and is going to maintain itself," he says. "It's a great asset to the film industry in British Columbia."

To add a country, woodsy effect to Bordertown, a "greens" crew moved trees from one place to another. The town facades gained new colors and paint. "I gave the town some color but still kept with the earth and greens of the tree backgrounds" says Lomino. The town's existing brick was repainted to look aged. Awnings were added to the main street facades along with new signs, which were then aged to look more old-fashioned. Thanks to Deskin's Corel Draw computer program, "Deskin's Mining Supplies" appears on one storefront as an inside joke. All stencils for the town's signboards originated with the computer-drafted images. As he puts it: "Using modern technology for a western is ironic."

"(Bordertown) said, 'Shoot me. Shoot me.' We didn't know a place like this existed. It revitalized and transformed Larry (Peterson)'s vision and gave the picture an internal life it hadn't had before the town. (Bordertown) has a life of its own" - Peter Rosten.

The filmmakers soon discovered the hard way what keeps Bordertown's desirable setting so green: rain. Days and days of rain. During early shoots, the town's sloped main street soon resembled a slippery mudpit. Plans for exterior shoots were scrapped, replaced by interiors. But the art department had little warning to prepare these cover sets. Suddenly, everything had to be ready and authentic and finished right away. "For the first two or three weeks we were in cover set hell" says Deskin. You could find him in the general store with his sleeves rolled up furiously stacking shelves to help out key set decorator Jane Manchee.

The moviemakers had planned to shoot some early sequences in Maple Ridge's Golden Ears Park. About a week before shooting began, they arranged with the local park service to fire a gun and set off small charges in the presence of a park ranger. "I was right there when they did the test," says Virtue. "The forest ranger said it was too loud. They didn't want to spook the tourists and the animals." So, permission for the shoot was denied. Ferguson grumbled that this created delays in filming but Virtue says: "That should have been dealt with weeks earlier."

In Ferguson's words: "We met big bureaucratic logjams finding a place to shoot, getting access to public land. It was not a pleasant experience. I think the (B.C.) film commission should interface more with the park service."

Shooting shifted to private land instead, across the street from Virtue's ranch in nearby Mission. These land-owners were very cooperative, says Ferguson. The local people in Maple Ridge have been "extraordinary," he adds. "I would tell anyone that overall it's been a great experience."

He praised the western Canadian film crew of *Gunfighter's Moon*. "They are great. They work hard. They know their stuff." The movie's early stages demanded night interiors with extremely tricky lighting. After one lunch break, 19 different set-ups were required.

Several large prickly cacti, fake but believable, lie flat and wrapped in plastic outside the art department trailer. They form part of the set decoration for the movie's Mexican-style cantina, under construction in Maple Ridge. The adobe-lookalike building will appear in a fabricated facades-only town in Ashcroft, B.C. (called "Sierra Mesa" in the movie). This hot desert town, which Deskin says is supposed to be "somewhere between Mexico and Colorado" provides visual contrast to star Henriksen's journey when he arrives in the mountain greenery of Bordertown (aka Red Pine.)

Virtue says that in the future he plans to add more buildings and new interiors to Bordertown. It has been a location for Richard Davis's *Brothers of the Future*, Disney's *White Fang*, *Highlander* and the recent ABC movie *Hole in the Sky* starring Sam Elliott. He acknowledges George Grieve's contribution in building the original town. "Everybody who shoots at Bordertown contributes a little bit" he says. "I've never had anybody wreck or taint the location. They always ask me at the end of the shoot: 'Do you want it taken down or left as is.'"

So, last year's arson fire has not killed the spirit of this little town that could. Virtue says that the police have a suspect but no arrest has been made. Meanwhile, the U.S. recently lost to arson one of its most popular film locations for John Wayne westerns: Old Tucson, Arizona.

The trend in westerns will continue, says Virtue. "Good scripts will always prevail and they'll need a town to shoot them in." Lomino agrees. "We always want to go back to yesteryear. The trend now is for people to go to the country and get away from big cities. We're never happy with the present."

Gunfighter's Moon, which Ferguson wrote ten years ago when westerns appeared to be dead, was his first screenplay. But the resurgence in westerns inspired him to resurrect the story. In this genre piece staring Kay Lenz, a small Wyoming town asks a gunfighter hero to save them from disaster. He uncovers a secret in the process and is forced to confront the most frightening opponent of all: himself. "The drama is a very contemporary kind of thing - someone coming to grips with who they are," says Ferguson, who eagerly shares his passion for writing. "This is one of the hardest lessons to learn.

"I'm thrilled with the calibre of people, from major stars to crew, who have come together on this project because of their love for the material. Lance (Henriksen) has brought aspects of Frank Morgan to the screen that I never knew were there."

Ferguson discovered the allure of westerns as a boy raised on a cattle ranch outside Klamath Falls, Oregon, near the California border. Today, as a Los Angeles resident, he still commutes to Oregon where his 83 year-old father built his own log home on 26 hectares.

Back here in B.C. Bordertown is shapin' up as a hot location. Keep yer eyes peeled 'cuz the folks behind the pilot for *Gunfighter's Moon* aim to shoot a regular TV series 'round these parts. They could knock 'em dead.

Congratulations

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