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# IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO FILM A TOWN

Using the largest staff it's ever employed, Vancouver's Paperny Films tackles the mammoth feat of segregating a town for a new CBC series

BY ALICIA ANDROICH



What sounds like a sociologist's pipedream — remove a town's women for seven days to see how its men will behave — became reality when Vancouver prodcos Paperny Films recently descended on an Alberta oil town to shoot *The Week the Women Went*, a 10-part CBC series airing at the beginning of next year. Finding the right town to film, securing accommodations for the 70-plus crew, and sending off over 100 women were all huge challenges.

When 500 residents of Hardisty, Alberta (roughly two thirds of the town's population) showed up to a BBC Paperny threw the day before production began, executive producer Cal Shumiatcher was convinced the staff had chosen the right place to film. "That's when we realized, 'Okay, we've got people that want to be part of this,'" he says.

Even though the show came with a bible — BBC 3 previously commissioned its own version of the program — Shumiatcher says the only real similarity between the British and Canadian series is the title and concept, which he summarizes succinctly: "Take the town, remove the women, what happens?" Performing this seemingly simple experiment took more than simple efforts — there were logistical issues galore in getting the project off the ground.

## MAPPING IT OUT

Starting in October 2006, series director Sally Aitken and a couple of researchers sat down with a map of Canada to find the perfect town in which to set the show. She wanted a place that would reflect Canada as a whole, with the town being used to explore how women impact all facets of a community, from the home to the workplace. (These women would be sent to a resort for a week, and their experiences there would be shot as their male counterparts were filmed in Hardisty.)

First the team gathered statistics on towns with populations from 150 to 2,000 in Alberta

and budget. "We wanted the happy medium of a town that's tight knit," says Aitken, "but also large enough that the experience might bring together groups of people that may not otherwise associate."

The original list of over 20 locations was chopped down to seven that Paperny staff checked out in person. The town hall meetings Paperny held in the short-listed cities were an open forum where citizens gave their thoughts on what would be interesting, challenging or exciting. "It wasn't until we got on the road and started visiting the towns that any of our ideas for the show either bore fruit or

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and British Columbia, but quickly realized that places with less than 500 people lacked the essential services and businesses that would be affected by the town's women leaving. On the other hand, places with 2,000 people were teetering at the upper end of what Paperny could manage in terms of logistics

completely fell to the dust," says Aitken.

After the visits, the list of contenders was cut down to three towns. Hardisty was chosen partly because of its history; it was traditionally a rail and ranching town, says Aitken, but in the last 20 years, oil has become its mainstay. "There's a blend of iconic Canadian ▶ 036

A director on the CBC series *The Week the Women Went* — produced by Paperny Films — out on a river rafting trip while filming over 100 of Hardisty, Alberta's women



036 Women exec producer Cal Shumiatcher

## There were moments when people slept on the floor in the production office

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industries there," she says. Another selling point was that Hardisty's roughly 760 residents had embraced Paperny's staff right from their first visit to the town, which Aitken remembers fondly. After she introduced herself and the show to the roughly 100 people at that meeting, a man in big oil worker overalls stood up and proclaimed "I think this is going to be the best, fantastic opportunity and I can't wait" and was met with applause.

### LEANING ON THE STAFF

Paperny got the green light on the show from CBC at the end of March, and with shooting set to start June 1 there were only eight weeks in which to simultaneously (take a long inhale here): hire staff; return to Hardisty for two research trips and more town hall meetings; field questions from Hardisty residents about

the upcoming upheaval to their lives; and find places for Paperny's soon-to-be-massive crew to stay, as well as a resort for Hardisty's women.

The series producer and line producer were the first to be brought on to help Aitken and the researchers. Less than 10 of Paperny's own full-time staffers worked on the series, which meant more than 60 contract employees had to be hired. This took at least three weeks, says Shumiatcher.

The positions read like those on many other productions, but it's the volume that sets this staff apart. Roles included series producer, line producer, a coordinator for the women's side of filming, two additional coordinators working on Hardisty tasks, a production assistant working on logistics, three researchers, 14 directors helming an equal number of crews (each of which had a cameraman and sound person), a crane operator, three story

producers, two additional associate producers, a production accountant, on-site catering... the list is long enough to fill a note pad.

With more than 70 crew descending on Hardisty in five or six weeks' time, Aitken says researchers attempted to rent out motels for the staff, but the efforts proved futile since they were competing for rooms with oil workers. Instead, local bed and breakfasts, cabins rented from Hardisty residents, campgrounds and nearby towns were used for accommodations. "There were moments when people slept on the floor in the production office," says Aitken.

As logistical planning for the crew took place, the hunt was also on for reasonably priced, reasonably close resorts that could accommodate Hardisty's women. In the end, two companies put in bids to Paperny, and a deal with Bellstar Resorts was closed just two or three weeks before the trip happened.

Although Paperny's staff hoped all of Hardisty's adult women would go on the trip, it simply wasn't possible. For instance, seven out of the eight registered nurses in the local hospital are women, and it was impossible to



In the only staged shot of the shoot, Paperny's crews film the women as they leave town for a week-long stay at a resort

find male replacements for them. Other cases involved single mothers, those with aging parents, or those who couldn't afford the lost wages, although Paperny's staff was able to help find solutions in many instances.

### THE WAR ROOM

About two weeks before shooting, a schedule was posted on a wall in what Shumiatcher calls "the War Room." This plan was used to graphically give a sense of the stories to be

told during filming. "Color-coded 3x5 cards covered a wall eight feet high and about 18 feet long," he says. "And you look at that even before you shoot a frame and think, 'Oh boy, we got trouble. How are we going to do all of this?'" Compared to a standard shooting call sheet that lists a crew and where it's going to be, Paperny's sheets had 14 crews, with each covering three or four locations.

As much as the call sheets laid the groundwork for shots, Shumiatcher

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says there was room for the crews, who were filming on Panasonic HDX900s, to use their instincts. "Every day we'd wake up and say 'Okay, how do you think we should tackle this next phase?' because no one's done this before. We'd sit down and logically work out 'Well, if we're trying to follow 30 stories and we have 13 cameras, that's 2.6 stories each.' It was so funny," he says.

The teams didn't have the luxury of planting cameras at certain locations – they were busy following Hardisty's citizens. Filming was mainly done vérité-style, with some sit-down and on-the-fly interviews shot as well.

Some of the ideas hatched in pre-production didn't happen as planned once shooting started. "In pre-production, it's easy to fool yourself into thinking you can do 14- or 15- or 18-hour days for 10 days," says Shumiatcher. "The main thing that hit us was the reality of the volume of work." With 115 women at the resort, and roughly 75 men in Hardisty revitalizing Main Street (a challenge chosen by the community as part of the show), the crews had to pick their moments. "You just can't do it all," he says.

There was a lot of faith placed in the field directors "because there was just no way you could sit down at the end of the night and screen the dailies of 14 crews," says Shumiatcher. Aitken got a quick debriefing or notes from directors or story producers each night, but with the crew so exhausted it was more like "ships in the night," she says.

With 11 crews following Hardisty's men and three filming the women, at least 500 hours of footage was captured over 10 days. About 40 hours of this footage is video diaries shot by some of Hardisty's residents themselves using 50 Sony Handycams that Paperny distributed.

The only staged shot during production was the crane shot that captured the women leaving town. Aitken had two hours of sleep the night before it was filmed because she wanted to ensure the 14 crews got the scene from varied angles – without capturing each other.

**ON TO POST**

Paperny staff tested a software system called PilotWare that allowed them to load and log material into a database where they can easily call up a tape number (there were 1,000 tapes) or search by time of day or a resident's name. In July, the 20 people still on staff on the show were in the heat of editing using Final Cut Pro.

In October, there'll be another visit to Hardisty so residents can comment on their week-long experience and its impacts. Shumiatcher is already talking about pitching another version of the show – this time on Canada's East coast – if the first one draws an audience. ■