

1950: The First International Film Festival

Like the pioneers of the area, the members of the Yorkton Film Council had determination, courage, and audacity. No one was going to tell them that Yorkton, population 8,000, was a most unlikely site for a festival of any kind, let alone North America's first international film festival.

And so the work began. The festival was scheduled for 1950, giving the council two years for the complex organization involved. The members devised rules and regulations, set categories for film entries, established the dates of the festival (October 11 and 12), organized a two-day workshop on the use of film in the community, booked venues for screenings,



contacted the United Church Women at St. Andrew's to cater the lunch, and booked City Council Chambers for the workshop and York Theatre and the City Hall Auditorium for the screenings. They contacted the Yorkton Enterprise and CJGX Radio and arranged for advertising. They sold programs at 25 cents each to cover costs. In order to avoid duty on the films, the festival didn't charge admission.

And there was more. It fell to Nettie Kryski to write the embassies in Ottawa. Her first task was to explain what a film festival was because, of course, the venture was almost unknown at the time. The second part was to invite the submission of films. Just think about the receipt of that letter. Quite likely, the third undersecretary of the Netherlands or the clerk from the New Zealand High Commission would shake his head and then go off to consult an atlas of Canada to determine the location of the place called Yorkton.

Following receipt of the letters, there were phone calls. There were more letters. It helped that the National Film Board in Ottawa contacted film makers from around the world and lobbied with the embassies.

Finally, the entries came in – some of course from the National Film Board and Canada's Crawley Films and even one each in the amateur category from Yorkton's own filmmakers: Stan Stakiw, H. Ferman, R. Adamson and Rev. P. O. Olson. Foreign entries arrived from the Netherlands, India, Sweden, New Zealand, the United Kingdom,

Norway, France and the United States. In all, the newly minted festival received entries from nine different countries, 40 films in all. Quite a coup for a fledgling organization with no particular expertise in film making!

The screenings scheduled for October 11 and 12 were packed to capacity. Audience members judged the films by indicating their preferences and comments on a ballot provided for the purpose. Certificates of Merit were awarded to the winner in each category. The audience participation guaranteed buy-in from the community.

On the completion of the two-day event, the Canadian Film News reported that "Canada's first International Film Festival happened in Yorkton, Sask. In Ottawa, film producers and distributors marveled at the enterprise, if not audacity of the prairie city that dared to organize a traditionally European event. Until the entry of Yorkton, all International Film Festivals had been held in London, Edinburgh, Brussels, Paris, Locarno or Venice."

But more important than the opinion of the Canadian film industry was the judgment of the people of Yorkton and that judgment was very positive. The Yorkton Film Council made the unanimous decision to carry on. The International Film Festival would be held every two years to give the volunteers a chance to rest, a time to find that spirit of determination, courage, and audacity, for if it was audacity that started the festival, it was surely determination and courage that kept it going.

