

# Filmpool celebrates 40 years of Sask. filmmaker support

Wheat Soup is the film. It's also the beer, brewed by Bushwakker to celebrate 40 years of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative.



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The film *Wheat Soup* is projected behind Gerald Saul, who holds a prop anvil that figures into the film. *MICHAEL BELL / REGINA LEADER-POST*

Thirty years after its release, Saskatchewan's first feature-length film is being celebrated with more fanfare than surrounded its making.

Wheat Soup is the film. It's also the beer, brewed by Bushwakker for the Saturday party celebrating 40 years of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative.

"What do you do with a beer bottle?" asked Gerald Saul, who co-directed and co-wrote Wheat Soup with Brian Stockton.

"I don't really have a house where I keep beer bottles sitting around, but I will now."

"The fact that they're brewing a beer named after the film, I'm sort of treating it like a lifetime achievement award," said Stockton. "It's a super cool thing."

Saul and Stockton were University of Regina film students and Filmpool members when they made their movie, a futuristic Mad Max-inspired story of a farmer guarding his valuable wheat against poachers.

Its genesis was after the Filmpool declined to fund their earlier short film proposal.

"People gave us earnest advice, saying, 'Oh start small, work your way up.' We didn't want to start small," said Saul. "We tried once to start small and we got shot down, so let's just start big. How much worse could it be?"

They began filming in 1985. They'd drive around rural Saskatchewan to scout sets — then immediately shoot with their borrowed Filmpool equipment.

At the outset, they didn't know wheat from barley.

"By the end of that film, we knew a lot more about farming," said Saul.

## Wheat Soup excerpt

The film took two years to make, with Stockton's family providing funds to purchase and develop film.

"You really needed a Filmpool at that time because everything was film and everything was super-expensive," said Stockton.

"Film cameras were a lot more than digital cameras are today in cost, so the Filmpool was just super-important back then to anybody who wanted to stay in Saskatchewan and make a film."

There might not have been a Filmpool at all without U of R film professor Jean Oser.

"He was a huge part of why we have any of this," said Stockton.

According to Filmpool founding member Brock Stevens, Oser pulled the strings to have 30 local people hired as crew on *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a national production filmed in Arcola in fall 1976.

Stevens was among them. So were his fellow founders Don List, Ian Preston, Charles Konowal, Bill Mills and Gerry Horne.

When the shoot was over, the Canada Council offered \$20,000 in funding to organize and equip a film co-operative in the province.

Setting up in the Northern Crown Building, across Scarth Street from the Filmpool's current address, Stevens and his colleagues started out with a camera, an editing machine and recorders.

They also worked out of a house on Rae Street in Cathedral, which Stevens remembers for a late-night knock on the door in the midst of making a gangster movie, Jimmy's Game.

"We've had some reports of gunshots around here," a police officer told him. "I said, 'No, it's all OK, it's just me. I'm editing a film in the middle of the night.'"

The Filmpool was, and remains, a source of knowledge.

"Out of the university, the kids would come ... and say, 'Well now we want to make a film, how do we do that?'" said Stevens.

As a second-year film student in 1984, Saul heard about it from some other students.

"They were saying, 'Oh, there's this great organization, there's equipment, there's money, there's all these things,' and it just seemed magical," said Saul. "It wasn't quite as utopic as they made it sound, but it was close."

The Filmpool's incorporation on March 16, 1977, was the beginning of a Saskatchewan film community.

"Aside from a couple of pioneers that we had, like Dick Bird and Evelyn Cherry who made films in the early and mid-20th century, the real film community in Saskatchewan didn't really start up until the '70s," said Stockton.

"It was the Filmpool and the University of Regina film program that really got things rolling. Film culture in the province in many ways started with the Filmpool."

In a digital age, filmmaking has changed, to the point that the "film" part of the name is redundant.

"You've got your iPhone and that's all you need to shoot it," said Stevens. "I used to spend hours and hours taping pieces of film together so that the sequence was perfect. That aspect is gone."

Even so, said Stockton, “To get around other likeminded filmmakers and be part of that community, that’s always been important and maybe even more so now.”

Plus, the Filmpool offers specialized equipment.

“Cameras are cheap, but really good professional movie lenses still cost several thousand dollars each,” said Stockton.

Filmpool executive director Gord Pepper says the organization has “played a major role in keeping film alive here.”

The non-profit currently has about 150 members, but has had thousands over the years. Some stay for a year or two. Others, like Stockton and Saul, maintain their membership for much longer for an annual fee ranging from \$60 to \$75.

Pepper says the Filmpool has helped launch the careers of many, including its most prolific former member Stephen Surjik.

Others are just starting out, like Candy Fox, who is “becoming a real superstar” in Pepper’s estimation. Her documentary Backroads screened two years ago at the Toronto International Film Festival’s Canada’s Top 10 Film Festival.

Last year, Lucas Frison’s film about breaking a floor hockey record actually broke the real-life record at 62 hours.

Also in 2016, the third annual Saskatchewan Independent Film Awards (SIFA) saw six feature-length films nominated — all made in Saskatchewan.

“I think it’s important that we keep this entity alive and that we always have this opportunity to support our own creativity and our own culture,” said Pepper.

In his eight years helming the Filmpool, he has seen growth in its Indigenous membership, a primary reason for which is Mispon.

That organization, which counts the Filmpool as a partner, helps to develop Indigenous filmmaking thanks to people like Janine Windolph (president) and Trudy Stewart (festival director).

“This doesn’t happen overnight. You have to build a community and build momentum,” said Pepper.

“There’s lots of ideas out there from everyone, so we think if we can support them, then who knows what sort of success they might have?”

The same can be said for the Filmpool’s annual summer camp, which seeks to get teenagers involved in filmmaking.

The Filmpool celebration is Saturday at 2:30 p.m. at Bushwakker. Beer will be poured, Wheat Soup will be screened and stories will be told.

The fourth annual film awards are Nov. 17 at the Artesian.

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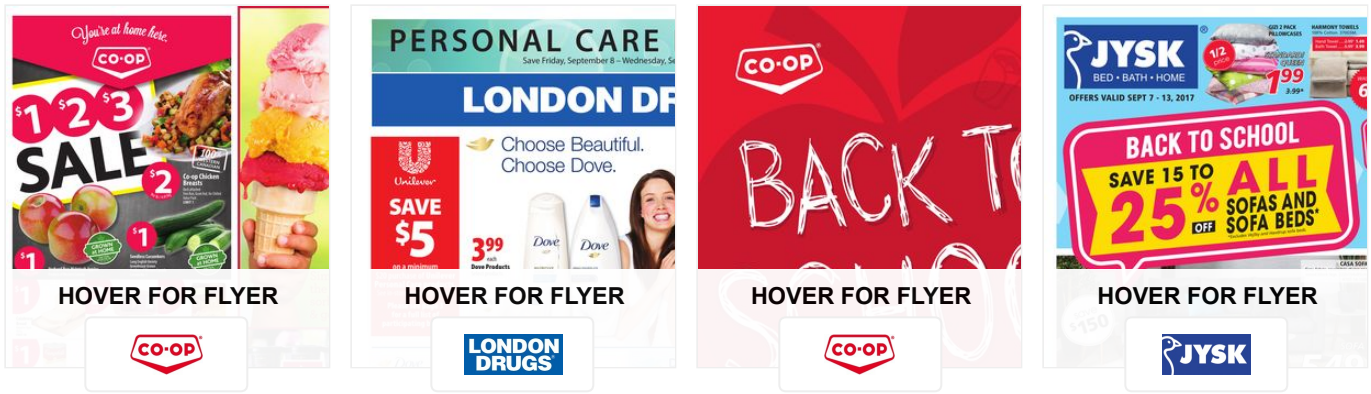
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