

[In the spring of 2004, as production of *Brokeback Mountain* began to ramp up, the filmmakers searched for convincing extras for the critical “Fireworks Scene.” Alberta native Tom Caldwell jumped at the opportunity to witness Ang Lee and Heath Ledger practice their craft and, in doing so, create one of the film’s most resounding scenes. Tom has graciously allowed us to share his *Brokeback* memories here. A PDF version of this interview is available in **Downloads**.]

## **Interview with Tom Caldwell, *Brokeback Mountain* Fireworks Scene Extra**

March 9, 2021



Tom Caldwell

In May of 2004 there was an article in the Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) Herald announcing a casting call for the film *Brokeback Mountain*. We lived in Picture Butte, a nearby town, and I was working at CTV Lethbridge as a commercial writer / producer. I decided that I really wanted to get hired as an extra on this film. My wife Jeannette and I were big Heath Ledger fans, and I had a hobby of using my writing and PR skills to talk my way into cool experiences. I once got tickets to the Late Show with David Letterman in NYC, after submitting my dog and his stupid pet trick.

I have a BA in English, and at the time I was a member of the Lethbridge Film Society board. I am an avid movie fan. I was well aware of the nature of the love story in *Brokeback Mountain*. I had read the Annie Proulx short story. I had no personal qualms with being involved with a gay-themed film, indeed I

was somewhat amazed at how many people were against the film project due to the story.

I attended the mass cattle call casting event at F.P. Walshe High School in Fort McLeod. The lineups were huge. I was impressed with how many of the people attending naturally fit the look of small town Wyoming in the 1970s. These were country folk, men with ZZ Top beards and cowboy hats and manure on their boots. There were women who just looked the part: plain features, long hair, mostly wearing jeans or simple dresses. After a long wait, we each had our photo taken and filled out an information page which included questions about any special skills we had, such as playing guitar or rodeo work.

The information collected regarding special skills would have come into play if they decided to have an extra strumming a guitar, or perhaps juggling, the types of things folks might do at a big party in a park. In my experience producing TV commercials, it was always valuable to know any skills or hobbies your talent may have. The casting director for this film may have wanted this information for their permanent records, to draw on down the line.

Once more information came out in the press about the gay theme of the movie, a lot of people backed out of the production. I heard at the time that hundreds of the extras who had signed up refused to participate when they were called back to be hired.

Intent on being selected, I found the email address of the woman who was in charge of the local casting, and sent her emails as a means of getting my name to stand out in the pile of applications. I offered to ask my dad to come from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, as he was a trombone player and the film needed a brass marching band. This offer was declined.

I was called by a casting staff person and told to come to Fort McLeod on June 4, 2004, the filming day of the “Fourth of July” scene, which was to be filmed at the baseball diamonds. She advised me to wear worn, dull denim and to bring a blanket to sit on. I wore work boots, a red bandana, Wrangler blue jeans, and bought a new dark blue dome-button long sleeve shirt. I brought an alternate shirt as she asked. My best wardrobe item was the Levi’s jean jacket, one I had worn for at least 15 years — all ratty and tattered and torn.



Tom's Levi's Jacket

I drove to Fort McLeod late afternoon and went to the curling rink, which was wardrobe central. Lining up, we were each checked over by the wardrobe crew and told what to change about our look. I was offered a cowboy hat and had to decline, as I have a huge head, and have never been able to get a hat to fit. I went through the racks of clothing and found some size 13 cowboy boots. I squeezed into them and pretty much stumbled about in them all night long. I passed inspection. One of the other extras commented on my “great jacket.” As a clean-shaven, crew-cut city boy, I felt out of place for sure.

At this same location, two ladies about 20 years old were having their dark black hair done into what I call beehives. More on them later. We all did the paperwork required to get paid, \$9 an hour for 11 hours work. As I recall there were about 300 extras brought in that night. I estimated that half of them never appeared on camera.

We were fed a generous buffet supper and taken by bus to the ballpark location. I had run into a pal of mine and we decided to pair up for the shoot. He was older than me and we joked that he would be my dad, as our character stories go. We lined up to enter the ball diamonds, and were stopped one at a time and assigned where to go. I showed the crew person the blanket I had with me. There was some talk about the synthetic blanket, was it too modern, and they decided it was OK as it was solid navy blue. We were ushered into the diamonds.

There were three setups that night. The first scene shot had the brass band marching through the crowd. My pal and I were seated on the ground and given some loose notes on actions to do. My little routine was to walk over to a senior couple and say a friendly hello, and then walk back and sit on my blanket. We did this about a dozen times for the camera and each time I would sit down and say to my pal, “Hey, that was Fred and Wilma” or “Ricky and Lucy” or some such fun names. It was a broad shot with lots of activity.

The second scene was where Heath and Michelle and babies are sitting on the grass and the crude bikers are being loud-mouthed jerks. We were seated a ways back from them at first. An assistant director approached two young couples who were sitting together closer than my pal and I were, and explained that Ang Lee wanted them to move back, as the two men looked like they would be likely to chip in on the fist fight that was going to happen. The girlfriends were the beehive ladies from earlier. They all moved back, and the two of us were placed closer to the action. Bringing that blanket had paid off; we had prime seats for this scene!

The look they were going for was “dull.” No bright colors, nothing shiny. A lot of the extras had been given small American flags to wave. Props crew people were going around spraying the flags with a diluted paint to make sure they were not too “bright.” We were all checked for watches and I had to remove my glasses when the cameras rolled.

When Heath walked onto set everybody noticed, it was a cool reception, the extras all just went quiet. I deliberately played it cool. Asking for an autograph or trying to say “hi” to a star on a set like this would be a great way to be fired. During the fight scene we were told to take notice once the argument started but not to move or stand up at all. It was very interesting to me to be able to watch this scene from up close, to watch the actors and the crew work together. Heath got stoked for the fight by doing a bunch of pushups.

There was a snack break which amounted to a big crowd of us extras walking over to a picnic table and trying to get a hot dog and get back to set. Porta potties were supplied but you were best to avoid going too often. You had to get the OK from an assistant director to leave the set area. It was a cool night out and a lot of the other extras were napping as they could. I was quite happy to stay awake and soak in the whole experience. Watching a film crew of almost 100 people working is very impressive. It takes a lot of lighting gear to make darkness look like night. [For more on this, see Pierre Tremblay interview, Part 2, pages 23 and 24.]

The last scene shot was as the fireworks went off. They were being launched by the Fort McLeod volunteer fire fighters. I did not get assigned a spot on camera during this scene which made me happy, as I was able to stand close behind Ang Lee at his monitor bank and watch him work. Lee sat at his monitors and talked back and forth with assistants and the cinematographer and directed the action. He was able to see the live camera shots on video screens. The joke was that I wanted to walk up to him and suggest some creative changes, which would have been another great way to be fired!

By dawn things had wrapped up. We went back to the curling rink to return our wardrobe pieces and I drove the 45 minutes back to my house in Picture Butte. I lost my blanket somewhere in the shuffle but I was not too upset; it had served me well that night.

In January of 2006 Jeannette and I attended the *Brokeback Mountain* screening at the Empress Theater in Fort McLeod. I was pretty excited to see that I “made the cut” even if I was seen on camera in a long shot, very briefly. I am proud to say that I appeared on camera with Heath Ledger. His body of work is amazing and his death truly was a tragic loss to the world of film.



Tom's Fireworks Scene, Westwinds Baseball Area, Fort Macleod, AB

We both loved the film. I admit to getting a bit emotional at the end. My wife and I agreed that it really is just that, a great love story. I have watched it a number of times since then. I am amazed at how much bias I have seen against the film. People get nervous when I mention having worked on the film. Always with the jokes. We now live in Regina, Saskatchewan. I was in a dollar store and bought five DVD copies of the movie. As I was paying for the DVDs at the register, a young lady behind me in line was giggling, telling her boyfriend, "That's that movie!"

I went to a casual meeting at a bar one night to talk to some film producers about a project they were working on. As a courtesy I brought one of the *Brokeback Mountain* DVDs as a fun "door prize" ice breaker at the meeting. The men at the table shunned the DVD and wouldn't talk about it.

Anyone who refuses to watch this movie due to their own narrowmindedness is depriving themselves of the experience of an amazing story told with true grace and skill. One measure of a film is the ability of the story to take the viewer into emotional spaces they may not be comfortable with. This film does just that, and some people lack the ability to relax and experience this journey as they are too concerned with what others may think of them. Those people are at a loss.

Bio:

Tom Caldwell lives in Regina, Saskatchewan. He has worked on a handful of small films, and as Jamie Foxx's driver on *Held Up* (1999). Tom has produced hundreds of medium market TV commercials, and is co-host of *Good Evening: An Alfred Hitchcock Podcast*.