

Known and loved by *Brokeback* fans worldwide, Fort Macleod, Alberta, “became” Riverton, Wyoming, during the summer of 2004, when the Laundry Apartment, Cassie’s Bar, Fourth of July Fireworks, Bus Station Café, and del Mar Divorce scenes were filmed there.

Gordon MacIvor, economic development officer for the Town of Fort Macleod, worked hard to bring the filmmakers to his vintage town, and was a key player in obtaining the consent and cooperation of municipal authorities, business owners, and citizens. A tireless and enthusiastic promoter, and something of an expert on western history, MacIvor kindly agreed to sit down with Lauren Gurney and Jim Bond to describe his involvement in the making of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Interview With Gordon MacIvor, Fort Macleod Economic Development Officer

July 20, 2007



Gordon MacIvor

You are in the business of bringing businesses here.

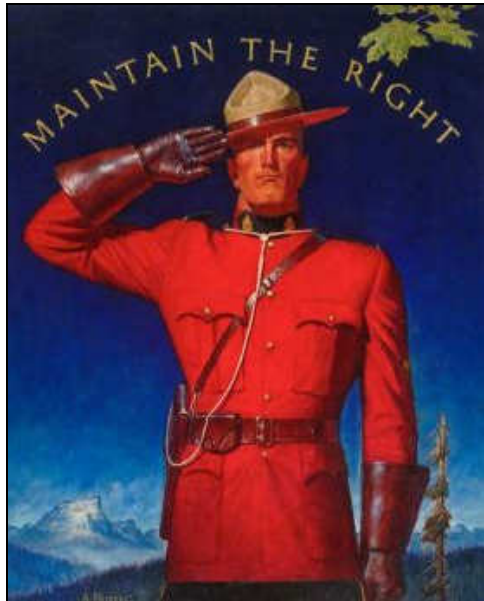
Yes, I moved here four years ago as the economic development officer, escaping the metropolis of Calgary after living there for 20 years. I was previously with the Calgary Economic Development Authority, so I have been doing development, including film and tourism, for quite a while. All of it is fun.

Tell us something about Fort Macleod.

Fort Macleod is a diamond on the Canadian prairie. The history of this area is closely tied to that of the American West. The Missouri River is navigable as far west as Fort Benton, Montana. After the Civil War, many young men went west by boarding a steamboat at New Orleans or St. Louis and traveling to Fort Benton, before heading west over land into the Oregon Territory. Fort Benton was a hotbed of frontier activity.

Up here in Alberta, there was nothing but Indians and millions of buffalo. American traders came up into this area from Fort Benton and traded with the Indians for buffalo skins. Everything then was aligned north/south. There were oxen teams with big wagons bringing flour, sugar, coffee, and tea from Fort Benton, and returning full of buffalo skins. If you were a soldier stationed out here and you wrote a letter home, it went to Fort Benton, then down the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, then on to Washington, D.C., and back north to Toronto, or by ship to London. In the 1880s they built the Canadian Pacific Railway across Canada, and that trading pattern disappeared.

Fort Macleod is also the ancestral home of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The RCMP is our national police force, much like the FBI. It was established in 1873 to bring law and order to western Canada. They were originally the North-West Mounted Police, then in 1920, when they became a national police force, they became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.



Royal Canadian Mounted Police Poster

The Mounties started a mounted patrol musical ride in the 1870s, commingling the band and the horses. We carry on their traditions here during the summertime. Of course, today we have our own detachment of real Mounties here. They drive around in cars [laughter].

Fort Macleod is well-known in the film industry?

Fort Macleod has longstanding ties to the motion picture business. *Brokeback* was one of many movies that have been filmed here.

The very first motion picture made in Fort Macleod was *Cameron of the Royal Mounted*, filmed in 1920. It was a silent “cowboys and Indians” feature, made long before the days of John Wayne.

More recently, during the late 1970s, parts of *Amber Waves*, with Dennis Weaver and Kurt Russell, were shot here. Then, in 1988 we did a movie called *Betrayed*, with Debra Winger and Tom Berenger. Also, parts of the 1996 television remake of *In Cold Blood* were shot in Fort Macleod. A couple of years ago the film *Badland* was shot here. Its writer, producer, and director is Francesco Lucente. It is the story of an American soldier who returns from Iraq and struggles with his family relationships.

At about the same time, the Robin Williams comedy *RV* was made, in part, just west of here. Although portions of it were filmed in Vancouver, the prairie scenes of *RV* were shot east of Fort Macleod.

We actually have a new movie coming to Fort Macleod, called *Passchendaele*. The star, director, and writer is Paul Gross, a strong Canadian actor. He was in *Due South*, a television series in which a Canadian Mountie was seconded [sent] to Chicago to work with the police there. *Passchendaele* is a World War I movie about the Battle of Passchendaele, that was fought in 1917 in Flanders, Belgium. There were over 100,000 young men from the Canadian Expeditionary Forces directly involved, and more than 16,000 casualties.

Paul's grandfather fought there as a young man and when Paul was growing up he heard stories of that battle. He decided that in remembrance of his grandfather he would do the movie. The west end of Fort Macleod's Main Street, and parts of Second Avenue, will soon be transformed into a 1917 Calgary streetscape, and military recruiting office, for that film.

Do pay a visit to our Empress Theatre which was built in 1912, making it Alberta's oldest continuously operating theatre. There you will see some extraordinary murals of local figures: Colonel Macleod, Dan Boyle, Chief Red Crow, and Chief Crowfoot. Among them is Broncho Billy Anderson, who was the first motion picture cowboy. He starred in *The Great Train Robbery*, made by Thomas Edison in 1903, and later released in long form in 1910. You'll also see Faye Ray, of *King Kong* fame. She was born 20 minutes away at Cardston, Alberta. Then there is W.C. Fields. His portrait pays homage to the evolution of the theatre and the art, from vaudeville, to silent films, to the talkies.



Broncho Billy Anderson and W.C. Fields' Portraits
at the Historic Empress Theatre

We are very pleased to have all of this filmmaking activity here for many reasons. The citizens of Fort Macleod get involved in the movies as extras. The making of a film here is always a great news story. The production crews use the subtrades [carpentry, electrical, landscaping, etc.] and in doing so, inject money into the economy. So in many ways our involvement in making movies is an important economic development tool. Above all, by hosting filmmakers, we are able to showcase Fort Macleod to the world.

You market the town to filmmakers in search of locations?

We are part of the Alberta Film Commission. The Film Commission asks filmmakers to define their requirements. Based upon the information they provide, we put together a collage of pictures and ask “Do you like this?” Then they respond and often request additional information. In the third step of the process, they actually visit and take a look at the location. There is a vast motion picture industry and we are just a small piece of it.

For instance, a production company may need a church. There are artistic people in the movie business that have in mind a certain “look” that they are seeking. Through the exchange of photos, conversations, and visits, we might bring them here to film one of our churches.

In addition to Fort Macleod’s vintage buildings, remember that we offer some of the most impressive western range scenery imaginable. We have real open range, not some rent-a-horse-for-an-hour thing. In nearby Longview, the classic western *Unforgiven* was made. Kevin Costner’s *Open Range* was shot just south of there. This is real cowboy country!



Alberta landscape from *Unforgiven* (1992)

Of course, you don’t win them all. A year ago, Brad Pitt did *The Assassination of Jesse James*. The film’s locations manager came and he liked our Main Street. He photographed the town. These people have a different perspective than you and me. They are looking at the background, and the foreground, and things like that. I spent a day with him here, but I knew I was in trouble because he mentioned that the next day he was headed for Winnipeg. Sure enough, they filmed their street scenes in Winnipeg.

When did you first hear of *Brokeback Mountain*?

Darryl Solly, a great guy, was the locations manager for *Brokeback Mountain*. He knows Alberta like the back of his hand. Darryl called me early in 2004 and said, “I need to talk with you.” He came down and brought his camera and we walked the land. At that stage it was all very confidential. I did not know precisely what he wanted, or the film he was working on.

We are a film-friendly community; we greet them with open arms. Anything we can do to help and support filmmakers, it’s “Yep, done!” and on from there. So we try to

accommodate them whether they need traffic control for a street closing, or, for instance, for *Brokeback Mountain's* Fourth of July Fireworks Scene, our fire department was on standby just in case they were needed. We do what we can to provide service to the industry. In this case it meant taking them into the Queen's Hotel [Cassie's Bar] and seeing how filming there might work; introducing them to the people who own buildings, such as Harley Brown [owner of the Laundry Apartment], and helping them come to an accommodation; securing the ballpark for the Fourth of July scene, things like that.

The pictures Darryl made during his initial visit were packaged up and sent to Ang Lee, Michael Hausman, and a friend of mine, Murray Ord. They obviously liked what we sent them!



Ang Lee and Judy Becker survey a prospective Fort Macleod filming location
Spring 2004

One story: There was a lady living in the [laundry] apartment. Unfortunately, she has since passed away. Darryl walked up there and knocked on the door out of the blue. She was doing her thing and there is this big guy saying, "Hi, my name is Darryl Solly. I am a film locations manager and we are making a movie. Is it OK if we look at your apartment?" "Well, okay," she said.

Of course, they wanted a scene with outside stairs. That was the marching order—to find a place with outside stairs and a window overlooking them. Because there was a scene... right?

So Darryl talked to the lady and explained everything and said they would like to use her place for the movie, that they would compensate her and move her to a motel while they filmed, pay her expenses, a moving van would come to the apartment and move and return her possessions, and they would give her an honorarium. Then Darryl left, and I remember my phone rang and it was this lovely lady, and she said, "I just had this guy here and he wants to use my apartment for a movie. Is this for real?" And I politely reassured her that it was true, and with that she was all excited.

Towns sometimes get burned by filmmakers who do not pay their bills.

It is symptomatic of the film industry in general. And it is no different from, say, doctors. Just as there are, say, two percent bad doctors out there, most of the guys in the film business are very professional, but once in a great while you will run across a bad one.

Over the years we've had some really low-budget films and documentaries. A few years ago, a German documentary company did something in the mines near the Crowsnest Pass. They ran up some bills. A colleague of mine there received a phone call saying the production crew had disappeared, and they owed money for food and rooms and such. So they tracked them and picked them up in Montreal.

That is just one of the things that is out there that you have to be aware of, but when you are dealing with professional people there is a high standard, and there is no issue at all. I think the only thing you have to be careful of is that production companies do a great deal of subcontracting [carpenters, electricians, etc.], so where you have subcontractors there is a potential problem if a subcontractor fails to pay his employees. But that is something about the industry at large, and it has nothing to do with Fort Macleod in particular.

You market to two constituencies—the filmmakers and the people of Fort Macleod?

Yes, there is some local anxiety, a bit of the unknown. Some retail merchants are concerned, quite legitimately, that if, say, their street is closed, it could diminish sales. That is where we come to a business accommodation. We might say, "Tell us what your sales were on this day last year and we will compensate you for the difference between what you made this year and what you did make then." Where a merchant told us, "Last year I made \$1,000 and this year I made \$800," Darryl wrote him a check for \$200.

The filmmakers also pay for the use of the locations. That is one of the direct economic development benefits of something like this. Approximately \$200,000 was invested, donated, or spent by the *Brokeback Mountain* production crew in Fort Macleod during May and June 2004. They booked all of the motels in town for three weeks to a month. The motel owners benefited from that. They would order \$750 worth of donuts every morning [laughter]. They tied off Main Street, so they donated \$3,000 to the Chamber of Commerce. For the Fire Department's assistance with the Fourth of July Scene, they made a donation of \$6,000. I received summaries of the checks issued here in Fort Macleod: the Java Shop, the Queen's Hotel, Harley Brown, the lady in the [laundry] apartment, and so on.

Johnny's Restaurant is a nice little restaurant with good Chinese food, run by a husband and wife. Of course, Johnny relies upon tourists who are staying in the motels to visit his restaurant and eat lunch or dinner. In May and June 2004, our motels were all full with the *Brokeback* production. Of course, the filmmakers have their "circus" and their own canteen. This is necessary because they are frequently working at unusual hours. So Johnny was not seeing the same volume that he would normally get. He talked to me and I approached Darryl and suggested that he see Johnny. And Darryl went in and said to Johnny in a positive way, "How can I help you?" and they were able to reach an accommodation.

Then there is the whole spin off of movie tourism. Last year we had all these tourists who came into the Queen's Hotel and had a beer, and went into the Java Shop and ordered apple pie and coffee, staying here, eating here, taking pictures, rediscovering these places. That is very special. *Budget Travel* magazine ran a great feature, "The Top 10 Movie Spots," [January 2006 issue] and we were mentioned prominently.

Is this tourism phenomenon true of other films that were made here?

This is unusual. There is a whole *Brokeback Mountain* subculture, like *Lord of the Rings*—everybody's going to New Zealand to see where it was made. To *Brokeback Mountain* fans we say, "Please come and enjoy!"

And the production itself?

For *Brokeback Mountain*, the production people were all top professionals. They wanted a certain look; they wanted the 1960s and 1970s. Their artistic people were incredibly thorough. I remember when they went into the Java Shop, they were looking at every light inside. And the walls! They were holding paint swatches on the walls and everything.

In situations where the art department came in and said, "We need to change this white paint to cream," they'd paint it cream. Then when they were finished filming, they'd say to the owner, "Do you like this? If not, we will paint it back to white." The owners got some free painting done that way!

It was an exciting time. I remember standing over at Harley's [Laundry Apartment] surrounded by a hundred-person production crew working everywhere. And I said to myself, "This is fun!" There were many gratifying moments like that.



Production Activity at the Laundry Apartment
May 2004

We all patiently waited for the film to be edited and go into distribution. I spent more than a year waiting, and then one day I read about *Brokeback Mountain*'s triumph at Cannes! It was deeply gratifying.

Did the Mayor or Town Council need to grant approval for a film of this scale to be made here?

Yes, but they are on side and fully cooperative. If a street needs to be closed or whatever, they are willing. If the filmmakers need Public Works to barricade an area, we'll do it. If, as in the case of *Passchendaele*, they want to use special street lights, our electrical department will put them up for them.

Did people say to you, "What is this movie about?"

Oh, very much so. We knew it was a western movie set in the 1960s to 1980s, in which Fort Macleod would become Riverton, Wyoming. A lot of towns in Montana and Wyoming and Alberta are quite similar, so that was cool.

When it was first brought up that *Brokeback* was a gay cowboy movie, nothing was said. No comments or whatever. The controversy was subsequent, it was after the movie came out, and that was when it was out on the street, a "gay cowboy movie," and there was all the press and everything like that. But at the time it was being shot, nothing.

Some citizens felt they had been deceived. Did you?

No, I don't think anybody paid any attention to it. After the movie was made and it caught the world's attention, some people in Fort Macleod complained. When we had a showing at the Empress Theatre, a small number of folks reacted negatively. There were a number of letters to the editor of *The Macleod Gazette*, and then it died down.



Poster for Empress Theatre Screening of *Brokeback Mountain*, January 2006

There were some people, some “real cowboys,” who weren’t going to go see it. I do not think that they have to this day.

***Brokeback Mountain* is quite possibly the most enduring film to be made in Fort Macleod.**

It is wonderful to have a classic movie that will be around for the next 100 years or whatever. That is just great.

Thank you! You have been very generous with your time and have made us feel very much welcome in this lovely town.