

IN MEMORIAM: DICK BIRD, 1892-1986





Dick Bird's passing at 94 years of age on 27 September 1986, after more than two years of illness, ended a life of adventure and closed a chapter in the history of cinematography. An unusually talented and interesting man, Dick was also for much of his life a potent force in conservation education, reaching people of all ages across the breadth of this continent. His timely intervention helped keep the fledgling Saskatchewan Natural History Society solvent, and he later launched the conservation fund of the Saskatoon Natural History Society.

Born 16 August 1892, the son of a leatherworker, Dick was raised in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, England. In 1903, he paid sixpence to see his first silent cinema film. When only 14 he emigrated to his uncle's farm near Lake Champlain in Vermont, sailing from Liverpool to Portland, Maine. In 1908 he purchased for \$2.98 from Sears Roebuck a Shamrock folding camera, which took four by five inch plate film. In 1909 he visited the Pathe Freres studio in Jersey City, New Jersey, where he received advice on the purchase of a second-hand 35 mm movie camera with a wooden tripod. Self-taught, he travelled widely for ten years, making documentary newsreels for the princely sum of \$25 per week. A bullet glanced off his head during a steelworkers' riot in Gary, Indiana, he was fired upon with poison darts by a South American Indian, he collapsed from famine in China, he was jailed in Japan, and in 1916 he was lined up before Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa's firing squad until he waved a Union Jack and said, "Don't shoot me, I'm British." He made films of the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force in 1918, and for a while thereafter made his home in eastern Canada. In all, he visited 68 countries.

Dick Bird moved to Saskatchewan in 1921 to make documentary and in-

dustrial films for the Saskatchewan government. He filmed the dedication of the Albert Street bridge, the opening of Saskatchewan's first radio station, CKCK, the first drilling for oil and gas, the visit of bandleader John Philip Sousa to the RCMP barracks, the arrival of the first trans-continental automobile traveller in Regina, and visits of dignitaries including Lord Baden-Powell and Lord Tweedsmuir. He recorded Ethel Catherwood training for the Olympic high-jumping event that won her a gold medal. Dick opened his Bird Films Ltd. photographic shop in 1928.

In the 1930s Dick became serious about nature photography. In 1937 he was elected President of the Regina Natural History Society. That year he began a weekly "Camera Trails" broadcast every Thursday evening on radio station CKCK, Regina, and also published *The Camera Trailer*, illustrated with his own photographs, for distribution to his radio audience. Seven issues were published in 1937. One school teacher, Miss Ferne Barker at Tyvan, enrolled all 27 pupils, including my first cousins Janet, Evie, Allan, and John Houston, in the Camera Trailers Club. They took a pledge "To be the protectors of all birds and animals . . . Never to shoot a wild bird, unless it is a game bird, with anything but a camera." This had the double purpose of encouraging children to become interested in nature conservation and to take photographs, obtaining their film from Bird Films. Dick took time to visit some of the schools. At Tyvan and at Sanderson school near Avonlea, where interest was particularly lively, he took the children on nature hikes. Membership reached 2000, mostly children, but included 80-year-old John Teece of Abernethy. The radio program and the club folded after the eighth issue of *The Camera Trailer* in 1938. (My set ends with #8 and is thought to be complete.) Air time on CKCK was costing

Dick \$10 weekly and postage and printing another \$35, more than business warranted in the depression.

I first met Dick Bird in February 1943, as the first speaker presented by the newly-formed Yorkton Natural History Society. (Publication of the *Blue Jay* had begun only a few months earlier.) Having made the arrangements for the rental of St. Andrew's United Church, Yorkton's largest meeting place at the time, I was unfortunately ill in bed with mumps but Dick came to visit me before showing his films to a standing-room-only audience in the church. Dick donated his time. The entire proceeds went to the wartime Milk for Britain Fund. Dick also spoke to some of the Yorkton schools, telling the children that "standing on guard for Canada" meant protecting everything that goes to make up this Canada of ours, right down to the little Yellow Warbler on its nest or the first silky crocus in springtime.

Dick was an important early supporter of the Saskatchewan and the Saskatoon Natural History Societies. When the newly-formed Saskatchewan Natural History Society took over publication of the *Blue Jay* from the Yorkton society in 1950, Dick read of the society's financial dilemma in the third of the new issues edited by L.T. Carmichael. Treasurer George Ledingham reported that each quarterly issue cost \$120, and with only 500 members at \$1 each, some in arrears, the society lacked the funds needed to produce that year's fourth issue. Dick Bird promptly volunteered to give a fund-raising film night, "Camera Trails along Nature Trails," in Regina on 11 October. Proceeds of \$187 thereby rescued the fledgling society from early bankruptcy. Similarly, in November 1965 the Saskatoon Natural History Society put on a fund-raising Dick Bird Night with a film program titled "Nature at its Best." A nice profit of \$229 established the society's conservation fund, and a second Dick

Bird show titled "Alphabet of the Outdoors" added to the fund a year later.

Dick's first wife, Pansy Myrtle Fern Nix, died in 1937. Dick met Ada Bovee when she invited him to show films to her CGIT group in Avonlea. They were married in 1947 and became a successful team. Besides making movies for their own showings, Dick and Ada took film footage for Walt Disney movies for four years, 1952-1955.

Dick by this time was probably better known outside Saskatchewan than within it. His superb nature movies (including unforgettable sequences of the courtship displays of the Western Grebe and Sharp-tailed Grouse, the pre-flight wing flapping of young Ferruginous Hawks on their nest near Avonlea and the broken-wing distraction display of the Killdeer), together with his showmanship, caused him to be in great demand across the continent. His silent colour movies were augmented by his own narrative given into the microphone, much more personal than using a sound track. He never tired of presenting his material. Many summer days were spent in the field, and months each winter were spent on the lecture circuit, leaving his son-in-law in charge of his store. In 1946 he made a two-month tour of Canada sponsored by the Associated Canadian Clubs. He attracted large crowds almost everywhere; for example at a Federation of Ontario Naturalists showing in Convocation Hall, Toronto, in 1948, he had an audience of 1700 and another 1000 were turned away. Frequently he gave lecture tours throughout the United States — once speaking in 148 cities in 156 days. Prestigious and appreciative audiences included those at Harvard University, the National Geographic Society, and the Smithsonian. For some years his tours were sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Virtually every society brought him back again the next year to show a different film.



Dick received many honours. Lacking formal education, he earned letters after his name the hard way, through achievement, and became A.R.P.S., F.Z.S., F.P.S.A. and LL.D. In 1919 he became the first president of the Canadian Press Photographers Association. Later he became an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society and a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London, England (one of four Canadians then allowed to use "F.Z.S." after their names). In 1950 he was the second Canadian, after Yousuf Karsh, to become a Fellow of the Photographic Society of America and in that year he also became the first Life Member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. He received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of Regina in May 1976. At age 87, in 1979, he was honoured as Saskatchewan's Pioneer Cinematographer at the International Film Festival in Yorkton, and his movie, "The Ukrainians," made 58 years earlier, was shown. (Bird had recorded on film a gathering of 2000 Ukrainians

and 2000 of their children from 50 schools near Hafford in June 1921.)

When Robert Collins did a feature story in *Maclean's Magazine* on 2 April 1955 he quoted Harris B. Tuttle, an enthusiastic Eastman-Kodak executive who gave his opinion that Dick and Ada were "probably the outstanding photographers of birds and wildlife in North America." Perhaps Dr. Norman Church summed up Dick Bird best when he presented him for his honorary degree in 1976:

"His long career in cinematography and his outstanding professional contribution to the film industry are but one part of his exciting life; another part . . . is his love of nature and how he projected that love to generations of children, with lectures and pictures depicting the need for conservation of all wild life. In this he has added much to the sum of human happiness." — C. Stuart Houston, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7N 0J8



*Dick, Bird, 1973.*