



Copyright: Leonard Frank

Episode Description

Director's Notes - Eli Gorn on "Copyright: Leonard Frank"

Director Profile

Subject Profile

General History

The greatest challenge for the director in the series A Scattering of Seeds was to bring history to life, to recapture the energy and passion the new Canadians brought to this country. Many of the people profiled in the series passed away years ago and were unknown to the general public or long forgotten. Another major problem was that precious few films or photos existed. The creative puzzle was to find a way to make their stories visually interesting. The producers of the series encouraged all directors to reenact scenes to heighten the interest and experience for the viewer.

For Teachers

Fortunately for me, my subject, Leonard Frank, was a prolific commercial photographer whose images defined the growth and the magnificence of British Columbia's West Coast in the half century before his death in 1944. Through these images, a life and a strong personality emerges. In every one of the 50,000 photos he took, I could imagine Frank being there, making decisions about the locations and the subjects. Each photo, a moment of his life. Never a shy man, Frank also appeared in his own photos enough to leave a real sense of his character -- charming, playful, determined. He exhibited a touch of hubris and haughtiness.

An important part of what was missing then, was the context. What was it like being a professional photographer at the turn of the last century? No disposable cameras. No quick photo developing stores.

We decided to try to find out exactly what it was like to literally walk in his footsteps and see the same scenery through his eyes. We set out to reenact how Frank took his photos -- lugging heavy awkward equipment into the bush -- setting up a huge box camera on a tripod. Each negative was loaded one shot at a time. These reenactments would place the viewer with Frank in the exact location of many of his most famous photos, demonstrating how much more demanding and difficult the craft of photo taking was at that time.

I needed to research the equipment and make sure that it was authentic. I started at the Vancouver Museum where some of Frank's equipment had ended up. I found a couple of his old embossing stamps. One read, "Copyright Leonard Frank". It became the title of the film. They also had one of his old studio cameras on a huge stand. But I was looking for one of his field cameras. That's where Frank excelled and established his reputation.

Since Frank had died over 50 years ago, I didn't expect to find any of his actual cameras but I did need to come up with something similar. I had only one example to go by. A photo was taken in Frank's studio of Albert Urquhart, the darkroom technician who he had worked with for many years. Carefully positioned next to Urquhart was Frank's old wooden 8x10 view camera. The picture was large and showed a lot of detail on the camera. The model, I was told, dated back before the turn of the last century. This was undoubtedly the camera with which Frank took most of his memorable photos. I called camera stores dealing in used cameras. I started going to camera swap meets and clubs. I followed up with collectors. I showed everyone the Urquhart photo. No one had a camera that resembled it.

I had almost given up hope when 2 days before my final shoot, one of the subjects of the film suggested that I talk to Angie, the owner of a popular photo finishing shop in Vancouver. I called up Angie and was surprised and excited to learn that he bought a lot of equipment from Otto Landauer, who had taken over Frank's business after his death. Angie still had a couple of old cameras hanging around and was sure at least one of them belonged to Frank.

The next day, I went to Angie's store to examine the cameras. I brought along the Urquhart photo of Frank's camera. We carefully compared one of the real cameras to the photograph. It seemed quite similar. At least now, I had finally found a camera that would work for the reenactment. The only thing that would be more thrilling is if we could somehow verify that it was Frank's camera. We looked at the photo time and time again.

In the Urquhart photograph, the magnifying glass showed a butterfly key with a broken tip and an odd pattern of scratches on the frame immediately beneath it. We checked the camera in front of us and everything matched up perfectly. The broken key. The scratches. They were identical.

Finally, we found what we needed, a positive identification. This small detail was unmistakable and irrefutable proof that this was the camera that Frank had lugged throughout the backwoods of British Columbia to take many of his most famous photos.

The feeling was euphoric. Here it was; the instrument that had given life to his creativity. Imagine holding Van Gough's brushes or hitting the keys on Hemingway's typewriter. To a slightly lesser degree, that's how I felt. It gives you some small sense of how exciting it was for me to carry Frank's original camera over the rugged terrain and look through exactly the same lens.

You could never completely hope to recapture the magic of an artist but for a few brief moments, you could enter his world and see through his lens, if not through his eyes.