Filming 'The Revenant' was an epic challenge

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

"The Revenant," which comes to Sisters Movie House on January 8, was inspired by the epic saga of mountain man Hugh Glass. Mauled by a she-grizzly in 1823, Glass was left for dead and forced to crawl more than 200 miles to a fur-trading outpost on the Missouri River.

Filming that story became an epic in its own right. And John T. Connor was an integral part of a crew that brought the story to glorious life on the screen. Connor, the son of Sisters resident Diane Goble, was the "focus puller," or assistant cameraman, on the arduous shoot. He visited Goble in Sisters this week and sat down with *The Nugget* at Sisters Coffee Co. to spin a tale of rugged wilderness, frayed tempers, and one of the toughest film shoots in the history of the medium.

"The Revenant" is a passion project of Oscar-winning director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Everyone involved in the picture knew the shoot was going to be exacting — both in terms of meeting the director's artistic vision and in coping with wilderness conditions. According to Connor, there was a deliberate mission to make the filming arduous, epic — and legendary.

"The whole idea of it was tough," Connor told *The Nugget*. "Everything around the movie was tough."

Too tough for many. Some got fired; others walked away, unable to cope with the conditions or after butting heads with the visionary director.

"It was very grueling, to say the least," Connor said.

Connor came on as focus-puller to replace someone who had left the picture.

It took a lot of persuading. After a career that included work on the first "Star Trek" movie and the "Mission: Impossible" franchise, he had taken the step up to director of photography and was not interested in returning to assistant status. But the production really needed him. And they were willing to meet his terms, because, as he put it, "no one in the world — *the world* — would do the movie."

The focus puller is responsible for making sure every shot in a movie is in perfect focus. It is precise, exacting work — and obviously a role that no production can get by without.

Connor's work started in Vancouver, British Columbia — in the rain. The unpleasant conditions took a toll on equipment and personnel. Then they moved to Calgary, Alberta — and winter hit.

"The winter came really hard, really fast," he said.

"The Revenant" was shot according to the chronology of the story, not in different pieces. That caused huge continuity problems when two feet of snow fell overnight between days of shooting one scene.

Then, after dumping snow on them and plunging temperatures down to as low as -29 degrees, winter abandoned the production.

"We came back in January, and it was the warmest January and February on record," Connor recalled.

The production had to shut down for three months, then head south — way south — to film the end of the movie in southern Argentina.

Connor's work was significantly complicated by the wilderness conditions. Extreme cold messed with the focus point of lenses, so he had to run tests at night after a grueling day of shooting in order to determine how to get the correct focus on the next day's shot.

And Iñárritu insisted on shooting the film entirely with natural light.

"That was a huge pressure," Connor said.

The film crew would drive for an hour-and-a-half to a spot near the filming location, hike in with their gear, set up, rehearse and go for a shot in the narrow window of opportunity Mother Nature provided. It didn't always work out. Sometimes they just couldn't make it happen — which felt like a stinging defeat.

"That happened a few times, when we didn't get the shot," Connor said.

Yet all the hardship and tumult has yielded a picture that is, by all accounts, a visually stunning masterpiece. Those who have seen advance screenings have been blown away by the shots Connor and the rest of the crew struggled so hard to get.

"I get a text every day from somebody just going, 'Wow!'" Connor said.

"The Revenant" is Connor's swan song as a focus puller. It may prove to be a legendary song, at that.

PHOTO PROVIDED

The Revenant is coming to Sisters.

The Belfry
Dec. 31 / Thurs. / 9 PM
A MARDI GRAS NEW YEARS
With Zydeco Virtuoso
Andre Thierry & Zydeco Magic
If you like to dance, Andre will have you moving your feet all night long!

Jan. 19 / Tues. / 6 PM
January Dinner Show
Save the date!
Jan. 22 / Fri. / 8 PM
Dennis McGregor and The Spoilers
PUB OPENS ONE HOUR PRIOR TO SHOWS
BelfryEvents.com
Call for Details
541-815-9122

Sisters MOVIE HOUSE
STARTS FRIDAY
FRI., JAN. 1 – THURS., JAN. 7
Joy *(PG-13)*
Fri 1:45, 4:30, 7:30
Sat 1:45, 4:30, 7:30
Sun 12:45, 3:30
Mon-Thurs 4:00, 6:45
The Big Short *(R)*
Fri 1:15, 4:15, 7:00
Sat 1:15, 4:15, 7:00
Sun 12:30, 3:15
Mon-Thurs 3:45, 6:30
Star Wars *(PG-13)*
Fri 1:00, 4:00, 7:15
Sat 1:00, 4:00, 7:15
Sun 12:00, 3:00
Mon-Thurs 3:30, 6:30
Sisters *(R)*
Fri 2:00, 4:45, 7:30
Sat 2:00, 4:45, 7:30
Sun 12:45, 3:15
Mon-Thurs 4:15, 6:45
Movie times and titles are subject to change. Visit website or call for latest information.
WWW.SISTERSMOVIEHOUSE.COM
541-549-8800

SISTERS
ENTERTAINMENT·ARTS·SPECIAL·EVENTS

Wed.~Dec. 30

Black Butte Ranch Snowshoe & Campfire Adventure Tour 4 to 6:30 p.m. Free! Snowshoe to a secret forest location for a bonfire, cocoa & s'mores! Snowshoe rental available at the Glaze Meadow Rental Shop. Sign-up at 541-595-5879. *Limited to 20 people.*

Thursday~Dec. 31

Hardtails Bar & Grill 5th Annual New Year's Eve Bash featuring Live Music with Tommy Hogan 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. Don't miss Hogan's electric blues. Never a cover! Free champagne toast & balloon drop at midnight. For additional information call 541-549-6114 or go to hardtailsoregon.com.

The Belfry Mardi Gras New Year's Eve with Andre Thierry & Zydeco Magic 9 p.m. An unparalleled musical experience that will captivate your soul! Doors open at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are $25 online at belfryevents.com or $30 at the door. For more info call 541-815-9122.

Hoodoo Annual New Year's Eve Celebration 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Followed by fireworks and live music until midnight! For additional information go online to skihoodoo.com or call 541-822-3799. Ski report number is 541-822-3337.

Faith Hope & Charity Vineyards New Year's Eve Celebration with Live Music by CinderBlue 7 p.m. to midnight. Five-course wine-paired dinner. $125 per person. 21 and older, reservations required. 541-526-5075 and faithhopeandcharityevents.com.

Black Butte Ranch Horse-drawn Carriage Rides 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. $9 per seat (kids under 5 on laps free) includes cocoa, coffee or hot cider at the Lakeside Bistro. Call to reserve at 541-595-1252.

Friday~Jan. 1
HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Black Butte Ranch Horse-drawn Carriage Rides 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. $9 per seat (kids under 5 on laps free) includes cocoa, coffee or hot cider at the Lakeside Bistro. Call to reserve at 541-595-1252.

Saturday~Jan. 2

Black Butte Ranch Horse-drawn Carriage Rides 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. $9 per seat (kids under 5 on laps free) includes cocoa, coffee or hot cider at the Lakeside Bistro. Call to reserve at 541-595-1252.

Sunday~Jan. 3

Aspen Lounge at the Lodge at Black Butte Ranch Live Music with Brendan Booher & Elisha Voetberg 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. For additional information please call the Lodge at 541-595-1260.

Saturday~Jan. 9

Stitchin' Post Preview Party! 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Come to the celebration and check out all the class offerings for 2016! For additional information call 541-549-6061 or check out the website at stitchinpost.com.

Deadline to submit items for the Events Calendar is 5 p.m. Fridays. Email teresa@nuggetnews.com

Monday~Jan. 11

Sisters High School BINGO & Community Dinner! 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., dinner just $2 a plate! BINGO at 6:30 p.m., 11 games for $15. Fundraiser for SHS athletics. Great prizes! Info: Tim Roth, 541-549-4050 or tim.roth@sisters.k12.or.us.

Saturday~Jan. 16

HarmonyHouse Live Music with David Jacobs-Strain & Bob Beach 8 p.m. (doors open at 7 p.m.) at 17505 Kent Rd. Suggested donation $20. A special evening with David UNPLUGGED! BYOB and a favorite snack to share if desired. For additional information call 541-548-2209.

Sisters Schools Sisters Shootout Basketball Tournament 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. The annual tourney is for boys & girls grades 5-8 from all across Oregon. Presented by Sisters Park & Recreation District. For additional information call 541-549-2091 or go to sistersshootout.com.

Sunday~Jan. 17

Sisters Schools Sisters Shootout Basketball Tournament 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. The annual tourney is for boys & girls grades 5-8 from all across Oregon. Presented by Sisters Park & Recreation District. For additional information call 541-549-2091 or go to sistersshootout.com.