

EMPLOYMENT IN ASTORIA

FILMMAKING — DOES IT WORK?



B. SMALLER

BY JOE ALTIERI

Looking around here in Astoria, Oregon, there are not a lot of jobs. In fact, most employers who do offer jobs here make sure to keep them at 30 hours or less to avoid paying any benefits. So how does the Film Industry rate here? Let's take a serious look at Hollywood North.

'Into the Wild' just finished shooting here, mostly isolated shots intended to represent other places, like California. Mostly filmed in and around Astoria, some of the scenes were filmed in nearby Seaview (Washington). The largest employment here from this film was seven extras, of whom only five were actually used at the Olney General Store for a day.

By comparison, the Dream Works production of 'The Ring Two' used 207 extras for at least three days each, and it was possible to earn more in a few days than one might earn here in a couple of weeks!

Usually, film companies pay minimum wage, if they pay anything at all. One can be assured of at least one catered meal a day, and screen credits for some of the lesser-budgeted films made here. Days run in excess of 10 hours and can have overtime pay, and in the case of the TV show, "Hometeam: Astoria", they also paid out-of-pocket expenses for materials, and mile reimbursement too.

It is not uncommon for more than 1500 locals and others from further away to line up for a day just to have a chance at a job as an extra, or 'Production Assistant'.

People here are generally excited about being in the movies, and many have said they would take time off from work and volunteer just to be a part of it. One friend I've made has a goal of 10 films so that he can gain free membership into the Screen Actors' Guild. All of the local work here is non-union, and 'temp', usually for three days or less, and there are, of course, no benefits. Still we come, like the Gold Rush days, to await our 15 minutes of fame. Meanwhile many of my friends I've met here over the past 15 years have moved somewhere else — their advice is to only move to Astoria if you already have a job here.

Temporary work and agencies abound here, probably a left-over industry from the cannery days. I did manage to work a day in a packing cannery through a 'temp' agency, as a fill-in for someone who was sick. That very business survives to this day, and the many stories I have about being a 'temp' in Astoria could easily fill a book.

Grocery stores here have been frequently hiring for every position, but observe the "less than 30 hours a week" rule, no one is full-time or gets benefits. One store has been adding more employees, even though there aren't any positions for them now. The other store has a manager in charge of interviews, hiring and firing; and he was a bit distressed since he knew the recent hires would only get maybe two weeks work, followed by a layoff of perhaps months for reasons we could only guess — like a federal grant for hiring new workers — and he was so disturbed by it all, telling people to their faces that there was work knowing full well it was only temporary, that he took a lower level job at the store of night-stocking clerk for frozen foods so he wouldn't have to deal with it anymore. Word passed he was seeking employment elsewhere.

A local hospital fared no better for 'temps' filling in for so-called regular jobs. One person was a 'temp' at the hospital for over two years, and was paid around \$3 an hour more than she would have received as a direct employee. She left for a job managing a dental office, and her replacement was a 'temp' at the hospital for nearly a year. It was only when her position was advertised as a full-time job with benefits that she decided to leave, mainly because she had not been notified the job was being made full-time nor was she asked to apply. I ended up there for what was promised to be two weeks and worked two months, doing a similar job. Like the cannery, the film work and other 'temp' work, I was well enough liked, and I've heard the hospital wants me back — as a 'temp'.

An Astoria radio station is an odd story: I was there more than a week to train for a job as a replacement for a live morning show, and I knew everyone there. After some time passed the person I was to replace left the job and was promptly replaced by studio automation, with added "live announcement" on recorded disc — yet another job lost to a machine.

A newspaper was another experience that turned out to be for a short time. I was doing photography and captions, and e-mailing in the work, receiving my paycheck by mail. Things seemed to change when management decided it was not okay for me to mention that I was an employee but merely a freelance "helper." I was told to remove the mention from both my website and current résumé. Furthermore, I was instructed to destroy any newspaper cards and 'press passes' I might have designed with my name on them. None of this had anything to do with the quality of my work but rather mere mention of my working at the

THE TRUTH CAN MAKE US FREE

BY TOM DUNCAN

The gratuitous, obsessive, and essentially dramatic secrecy about the Bradwood LNG project bears all the earmarks of an investor scam, not a real project.

After all, there is nothing secret about the geology or hydrology of the Columbia River, and the properties of Liquid Natural Gas have been understood since the 1950s and before. So what's to be secret about?

Keep the secrets from the "terrorists"? Well, maybe — But the company itself keeps telling us that ours is not a high value terrorist target, and those of us who oppose the project are just being silly and hysterical to bring it up. What secrets, anyway? Tide tables? Width and depth of the channel? Great places along the bank to hide secret defense outposts?

Special hideouts where the "terrorists" might shoot RPGs from? Doesn't this sound just so pre-adolescent?

No, I believe the real secret is the secret intention of the Northern Star Natural Gas Company itself. Their job is not to build and maintain LNG facilities — if they were ever to get approval to build a project they would sell it to Halliburton or Sempra. No, their job is to develop investor interest in LNG in general by proposing idealized scenarios to generate venture capital, and then guiding that interest and money to projects that have real potential. Along the way, many projects will be proposed and rejected — but each of the proposals has to seem real at least long enough to get an investor buzz. The industry itself has said only six to eight LNG plants will be built — out of a lineup of some 50 to 70 proposals.

The most charitable thing one could believe about this is that it is sort of like pitching movie plots to potential investors — each proposal is taken seriously by its proponents, but everyone knows only a few will fly, and the expense of a failed proposal is just the cost of doing business.

The least charitable thing one could believe about this is that these are high-handed opportunists who are cynically using a period of economic disarray and national fear to channel money to themselves—and when their perpetual motion machine is exposed they will quietly leave town and set up somewhere else. Think "The Emperor's New Clothes."

The real secret is that there is no real plan here. LNG importation on the Columbia is completely nonsensical, and they know that — but they don't want us to know they know. The truly sad thing about it all is that now the U.S. Coast Guard has been drawn into the plot, and at least up to now, seems to be acting as a protector of corporate interests rather than following their historical mission of protecting the public.

Say no to secrecy. Money enslaves us, and only truth can make us free.

Tom Duncan is an Astoria medical doctor.

newspaper was taboo. I am still, at least in theory, on a 'call-up' list for more work, but I doubt I will ever hear from them again.

Yet, the oddest of all was the local community college, which had an opening for someone to repair and maintain all personal computers on campus. The process was to use hard-drive backup "clones," so there wasn't a real need for troubleshooting skills of 'Windows' knowledge, just "wipe 'em and reload 'em" as need be. It turns out the school district did a three-way swap of employees, and the exchange employee didn't have the skills to do that particular job. A friend on the job said he received phone calls from the new hire for the most basic beginner tech support, and said he couldn't believe it was on the level or that perhaps a joke was being played on him. That job is frequently open but its requirements have been so fine-tuned that most of us who applied previous times wouldn't qualify the current round.

There are many more instances of either 'temp' jobs being misrepresented, or questionable hiring practices that space here won't allow. I've tried to avoid specifics in the stories told here. The State Employment Office is aware of these things, including some local businesses advertising to attract new hires from hundreds of miles away, intentionally bypassing the local labor pool. I could say, in their defense, that they have already processed the local applicants more than once, and perhaps it's more efficient to advertise elsewhere. But after 15 years of living in Astoria, a clear pattern has emerged. Not only is Clatsop County the poorest in the entire state of Oregon, with the most people living at or below the poverty level, but the use of temporary labor is at an all-time high here, which means living wage jobs, or anything beyond state-mandated minimum wage, is the exception here. And as far as job, health or whatever other employment benefits are concerned, there aren't going to be any for a worker who puts in less than 30 hours a week. That includes working at a local swimming pool, which juggles many part-time people around, some of whom I know work two or more jobs and also attend school.

All of this brings me to what I was first talking about: the Film Industry making frequent movies, commercials and TV shows here. Despite minimum wage, and often no wages at all for independent productions, the attitude among Astorians who have not been directly involved, is that someone from 'somewhere else' is robbing the local job pool. Yet, it is simply not so, especially when you think about people taking three days off from their jobs to work on a film — certainly it represents a downturn in income.

And the seasonal fishing and fish-processing industries have been a part of the local scene for a very long time.

In general, I've found that temporary film employees, from positions of extra, driver and production assistant, are treated quite well. Meals included and pay that accumulates at an astonishing rate given the long hours, and with frequent waiting around for something to do for hours at a time, it's a local opportunity to socialize and talk with others both locally and from afar about films and other things. As mentioned before, many said they would do this for no pay, even perhaps pay themselves to be involved with a production for the experience. After a variety of jobs in Astoria, I can say that with the right attitude and some patience, it can be one of the easiest jobs to do here as well.


I've tried to give an overview of jobs in Astoria for the last few years, and the prospect of future jobs also. The advice to move here only if have already secured a job, plan to open a new business or are retired, is also sound. Like Lahina on Maui Island, it's frequently difficult to be able to live where you work, and Astoria seems to be heading into the major employer area of tourism, which pays very little and is generally seasonal. But is Astoria really just a back-lot for film studios, and not a functioning city? Not really. But as the downtown businesses turn over, one after another, and people move to other places in search of the American Dream, only time will tell if this is a great place to live and work — or if one must sacrifice everything just in order to stay here.

One thing is certain. Astoria is changing. And to all the friends I've known here the past 15 years who have moved on somewhere else, Astoria is no longer the 'End of the Trail', or the place that Californians or East Coast residents came to because they couldn't go any farther west. Like in the book of the same name, *Into the Wild* that was just partially filmed here, people have the need to move on to where life can be better — and whether it is better elsewhere is something each person who journeys through here has to decide for themselves.

Astoria, the new filmmaking destination? Perhaps, for now; then again 15 years from now I'd bet no one would recognize Astoria who is currently living here. Make that only five years into the future.

Stay tuned....
Happy Labor Day!

Joe Altieri obviously lives in Astoria. He says he has "logged years worth of stories and photos from 'The Ring Two' through today" at his website at www.astoriainovies.com, if anyone wishes to see "a daily blow-by-blow report of filmmaking here in Astoria." The same site carries tales of 'temp' jobs under the "Working in Astoria" section.



Astoria Real Estate

Thinking of moving to the coast?
Come in and check out the local market!

www.astoriarealestate.net

503-325-3304

Peter and Janet Weidman
2935 Marine Drive, Suite C
Astoria, OR 97103