



Take One Presents  
**Restoring Varick Frissell's The Viking**

AV Preservation Trust's  
Masterworks of Canadian Cinema

Let us begin *in absentia*. After all, the history of feature filmmaking in Canada starts here. As much as it sounds like the name of an outpost fishing village somewhere in Newfoundland, it is not an actual place but rather a state of being. Canadian cinema is an enterprise always fraught with peril. It is difficult to get films made and even harder to get them seen. As if production, distribution and exhibition were not problematic enough, there is the pressing, unsettling, even dizzying issue of preserving our cinematic heritage from oblivion. A dramatic reminder from the realm of *in absentia* is Canada's very first feature film, E.P. Sullivan's and William Cavanaugh's *Evangeline* (1913). This film no longer exists, except for a few stills taken from promotional material. *Evangeline* exists only as an absence. Its fate gives additional resonance to Peter Harcourt's famous description of Canadian film as "the invisible cinema."

Thankfully, the fate of celluloid oblivion has not been met by all early Canadian films. In fact, since the mid-1970s, David Hartman's *Back to God's Country* (1919) and Bruce Bairnsfather's *Carry On, Sergeant!* (1928), among others, have been restored by and preserved in Ottawa at the National Archives of Canada. Now, another important title has been rescued from *in absentia*. With funding from the AV Preservation Trust and Telefilm Canada, and bolstered by a recent NFB documentary (Victoria King's excellent *White Thunder*, 2002), the National Archives has recently completed the restoration of Varick Frissell's extraordinary 1931 feature, *The Viking*. An early sound-era hybridized melodrama-cum-documentary set against the backdrop of the icy oceanic dangers of the Newfoundland seal hunt, it is, technically and thematically, a remarkable example of maverick filmmaking in the northern reaches of North America.

In many senses, legal and otherwise, *The Viking* is not a Canadian film. It is an American production, funded by Paramount Pictures and stocked with Hollywood personnel, not to mention Frissell, its New York-born producer/writer. Moreover, it was shot on location in Newfoundland almost two decades before the island became a province of Canada. Yet, as Peter Morris and other Canadian film historians have pointed out, *The Viking's* astonishing location shooting, its literal and metaphorical use of harsh natural environments, and its combination of documentary, actuality footage and staged dramatic sequences connect it closely to the style and substance of films made in Canada both before (particularly *Back to God's Country*) and after it was made. In addition, its status as an early example of a

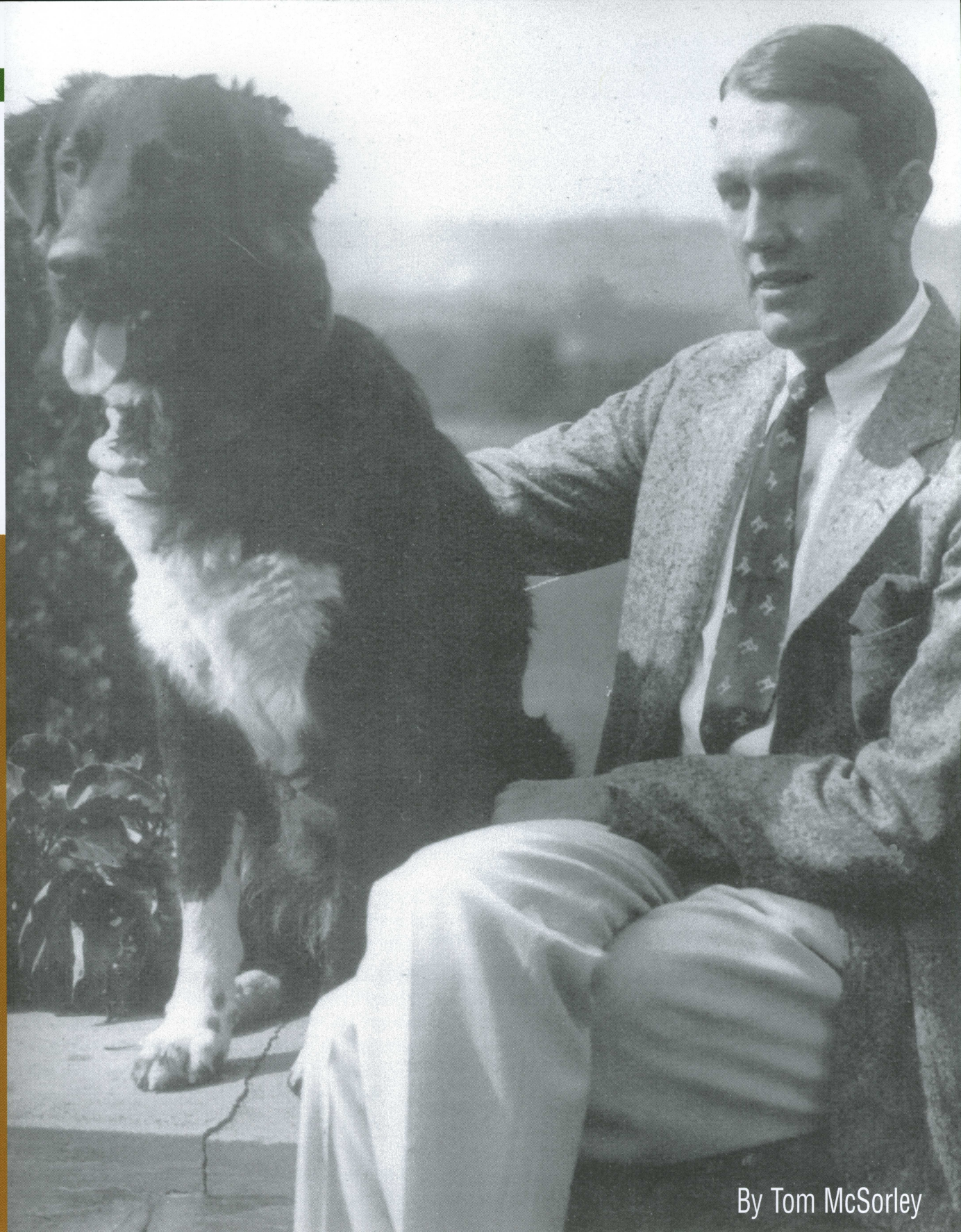
Canadian Northern makes it, in spirit at least, an honorary entry in Canada's early and tenuous feature-film catalogue.

The story of *The Viking* is very much the story of its creator. Born in 1903 in New York to a wealthy, influential family, the peripatetic Frissell developed a great interest in and a genuine love for the landscape and people of Newfoundland. In the 1920s he made two short documentaries, *The Lure of Labrador* (1925) and *The Great Arctic Seal Hunt* (1928), the latter of which would serve as the foundation for *The Viking*. His actuality footage of the seal hunt stunned audiences throughout the United States, garnering critical praise from *Variety* and *The New York Times* for the compelling drama inherent in the daring, dangerous hunt.

Encouraged by this response, Frissell decided to expand his material into a feature-length drama. He formed a production company, the Newfoundland Labrador Film Company, and sold distribution rights to Paramount. Paramount insisted on adding a love story, however. Frissell reluctantly obliged. He hired veteran Hollywood director George Melford (*The Sea Wolf*, 1920, *The Sheik*, 1921) and went into production. The dramatic sequences were shot on location in Newfoundland and were woven into the often breathtaking footage of the seal hunt. In January 1931, a pre-release test screening in Hollywood confirmed Frissell's suspicions: audiences reacted positively to the naturally dramatic sequences of the sealers struggling out on the undulating Atlantic Ocean ice and negatively to the awkward narrative imposition of a melodrama involving two men vying for the love of one woman. Frissell resolved to return to Newfoundland to shoot additional scenes on the ice to bolster the film. In March, he set sail again on the *SS Viking*. On March 15, 1931, something or someone accidentally detonated the cache of dynamite on board used for emergencies. Frissell was never seen again and his body was never found. To capitalize on the tragedy, Paramount quickly released the screen-tested version of *The Viking*. Publicity for the film shamelessly exploited that fatal explosion, exhorting audiences to go and see, "the picture that cost the lives of the producer, Varick Frissell, and 25 members of the crew...." *In absentia*, indeed.

Beyond the success of the film commercially, William O'Farrell, chief, Moving Image and Audio Preservation at the National Archives of Canada, a key figure in *The Viking's* restoration, says that the importance of the film in the evolution of filmmaking in Canada is undeniable. "Between

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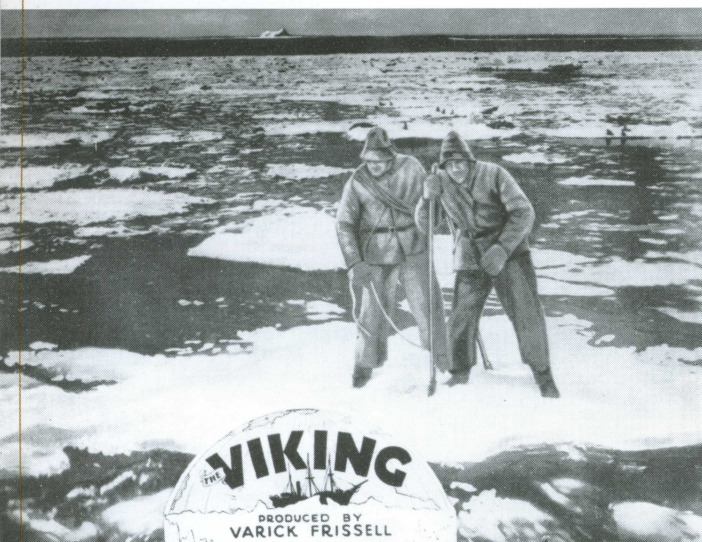
By Tom McSorley

# Search and Rescue:

## Restoring Varick Frissell's The Viking

SPECIAL FEATURE

1910 and 1960, about 100 features were made in Canada, so feature films in many ways prior to 1960 are always notable." As for its Canadian status, he notes that, "*The Viking* was a very unusual attempt to tell a story where space and location were the prime aspects of the narrative. It has a regional appeal that speaks to Newfoundlanders but also to a heroic struggle with the harsh Canadian environment, much in the way that *Nanook of the North* did a decade earlier. But the effort to shoot a sound film on the ice floes themselves, winching the very heavy primitive gear directly onto the ice, is definitely what makes this film unique. It's a bit of a potboiler. The melodrama is a bit over the top, but the images of the sealers are really the most compelling shots in the film. To my eye, *The Viking* is one of the most important Canadian films ever made."



Unlike the fugitive *Evangeline*, however, there were extant prints of *The Viking* in circulation and elements were collected, not without difficulty, at the National Archives of Canada. Says O'Farrell, "The film was in distribution by the Canadian Film Institute throughout the 1960s up through the 1980s on 16 mm, as it was a fairly important icon in the then nascent film-studies programs. Around 1989, I asked Dale Gervais on my staff to do a comparison of a few reels of the existing nitrate and prints we had to determine what the earlier copying to 16 mm was like. The initial test showed we could make very definite picture quality improvements. With the Archives' move to its new preservation facility in Gatineau in 1996, we now had in-house processing capacity for black-and-white duplicate stocks,

and so our team set to work. This restored version was literally years in the making."

While image restoration was challenging enough, an even more daunting task was cleaning up the original soundtrack. Itself an incredible technical accomplishment for the period, most of the sound on *The Viking* was actually recorded on location, in accordance with Frissell's wishes for authenticity. O'Farrell describes the painstaking process of rescuing the often muddy, obscure, deteriorated sound on the remaining original elements. "The sound restoration was undertaken by Chace Productions in Burbank, California, because it has custom-designed equipment for shrinkage and sprocket-pitch adjustments and can read vintage density-track signals far better than most labs. In fact, during the sound work, Chace was able to locate some trace evidence of a musical score that no one could see by eye. The Chace gear was able to do a full and complete recovery, and that musical outro, which occurs after the 'The End' titles, has now been restored. It was a fortuitous addition to the project."

The restored version of *The Viking* (soon available on DVD) is something to celebrate. Its presence is also a reminder of a considerable absence, O'Farrell emphasizes. "I recall being appalled that so many early films had disappeared through neglect or wilful destruction, particularly the films from the silent era. Most of Canada's silent-era films are gone, or exist only in fragments, stills or in textual sources only. Even in this era there are still many unpreserved films. It's hard not to be concerned." Fittingly, the most potent imagery in Varick Frissell's film amplifies these ideas in both literal and metaphorical terms. The incredible images of Newfoundland's brave sealers, many of whom could not swim, dancing across broken ice floes in search of a livelihood are a powerful portrait of the precariousness of things. Metaphorically speaking, they represent what we face as we struggle to preserve our constantly fading audiovisual heritage, which is not unlike the ice that cracks, disperses and dissolves into the ocean. We must, as it were, step carefully atop the ruptured ice floes, escaping the dark cold maw of oblivion below.

Canadian cinema may have begun *in absentia*, but, as the riches of the rescued *The Viking* reveal, we should not allow it to end in that same permanent exile of erasure.

This article is dedicated to Peter Morris.