

Interview with
DR. STEPHEN B. ARMSTRONG

November 20, 2017

**MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION IN
WASHINGTON COUNTY, UTAH
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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INDEX

Armstrong, Stephen B. PhD.	4
Dixie State University	4, 5
Kane County, Arizona	4, 5
Southern Utah	4, 5, 6
Washington County, Utah	4, 5, 6, 7

Dr. Stephen B. Armstrong was interviewed on November 20, 2017 in St. George, Washington County, Utah by Wendy Stabler. He related his experiences with motion picture production in Washington County, Utah.

WS: What is your name and age?

SA: My name is Stephen B. Armstrong. I am forty-seven years old.

WS: Please provide an autobiographical background detailing your experiences, personal and professional, leading up to your experiences working with or interacting with production crews here in Southern Utah or Washington County.

SA: I am a native of Maryland who came to work in Utah in 2007. I had earned my PhD in Creative Writing at Florida State University [Tallahassee, Florida] graduating [in] 2004. Although I [studied] creative writing at the university, my scholarship was largely film related. I was posting articles in various magazines instead of short stories in journals. That is where my interest was.

Right before I started work here at Dixie State [College] in 2007, I had done a book on a Hollywood director named John Frankenheimer and an article on a western by Nicolas Ray. [It was] about a movie filmed in Arizona called *Run for Cover*. I had done quite a bit of film writing and had become quite interested in the history of Westerns. It was pointed out to me that Southern Utah, the southwest corner of Utah, was very, very rich in film history because of the diversity of the landscape and the short driving time to Los Angeles [California].

I learned very quickly that hundreds of movies and television programs had been shot in the three county area of Kane County, Iron County and Washington County. From there [I] began to seriously research the topic of motion picture production history in southwest Utah and wound up doing a movie about the history of film production in Kane County which is adjacent to Washington County. It is a funny squeeze. It may not, actually, because you have Iron County, you have Washington County south of it and then you have Washington County [which] goes out very far to Short Creek [Arizona] and then you are in Arizona. Then you go a couple of miles north and you are in Kane County around Fredonia [Arizona].

I did a documentary on the history of film production in Kane County. As a result, [I] learned quite a bit about film production in Washington County. Actually, [I] did some shooting out here and used footage from this part of the country as we prepared that film. We eventually made a film called *Return to Little Hollywood*, Little Hollywood being the name for Kanab and Kane County.

WS: Can you go into more detail about the movie industry? The people you worked with, on and in Southern Utah, Washington County, like titles, cast directors [and] producers?

SA: When I came here there was much talk about how right before 2007 one of the sequels to the high school musical series had been directed for television by someone named Kenny Ortega. I became intrigued. I had missed that. There haven't been a whole lot of new productions since then of such a large name. Although Nicholas Cage was doing something at Rowdy's [Range, St, George,] earlier this year.

I came here after one of the bigger productions had taken place. I was interested. I was piqued about what was going on. When I did this research for the movie on Kane County, which overlapped with Washington County, I realized that the bulk of the movies that had been made out here were made long before any of us were really here. People who remember the good times of film production into the 1970s are fairly old now and there are not that many of them [around], as you and I have found out. The oral history project has been quite a challenge because a lot of people have passed [away].

What I happened to get plugged into is the film program here at Dixie State University which is led by Phil Tuckett, one of the subjects for our interview and Ben Braten. These fellows have been running a documentary production company out of the school.

I should tell you that *Fly Boys* was something that was made out here too, around the time I arrived. That was the film about the little boys who are somehow flying airplanes and they used the airport hill. But it had nothing to do with that and trying to track down the people who made that [film] has been futile, as well.

My experience has been primarily through Dixie State University's film production unit. We made *Return to Little Hollywood*. We did filming here in Washington County and used our students as production assistants, camera assistants, directors of photography and even [inaudible] producers. Phil Tuckett held the boom as we interviewed Christina Schultz for our movie about Kane County because for awhile there was something called the Center for Education, Business and Arts which was a pro-business development government entity with Work Services in Kanab [Kane County, Utah]. It was there to help bring the movie business back to Southern Utah [and] was based in Kanab. The developers of it were here at Dixie State University. It was hoped that this Center for Education, Business and the Arts, CEBA, would bring students from Kane County to Dixie State [University]. I don't know about CEBA. I don't even know if [it] exists anymore.

But there was *John Carter*, the big Disney film that made use of the Kanab landscape, the Southern Utah federal lands and Northern Arizona federal lands out there that look Martian. It has that Martian landscape aspect to it. So perhaps CEBA led to this big investment and this big return [of] production companies contributed directly or indirectly to *John Carter* coming here. Unfortunately, *John Carter* was a big flop and there hasn't been as much interest in returning to the area as there was before, although this Nicholas Cage movie using Rowdy's Range was one of the more noticeable recent achievements.

When we did our TV [television] broadcast, our Dixie Forum, here in April, the ABC news affiliate that interviewed me, Tobijah [Tyler] and Patrick Curtis about film production history in Washington County made mention of the fact that the Nicholas Cage had been filming right here in St. George.

WS: You have kind of talked about this a little bit. I want to make sure we have covered this completely. Why was Washington County selected as the site for these productions?

SA: The landscape is diverse. It is geometrically dynamic. You have plains, you have craggy formations that have interesting colors and then you have the canyons. It is going up. It is going down. It is going flat. It is going east. It is going west. People associate that with the look of the West. So Westerns proliferated right here. Of course, where we have the notion that the cowboys were having these fights in these exotic landscapes is fake. It is more likely they were having wars on the ranch lands and flat areas of Wyoming and so forth — if they had anything at all. Instead, we have always had this idea that the West is this place where you have bizarre rock formations to fit into that myth, the dynamism of the conquest of the United States, Manifest Destiny. Again, the landscape has often been perceived as being appropriate for science fiction when you go on other planets because it does look so much different from everywhere else in the country.

It has also been used, notably in Snow Canyon, with *The Conqueror*. It looks like a place where maybe you could have fighting with Mongols or Mongolian warriors with Genghis Khan. It is a landscape because it is interesting. Film production companies, sort of say, we can put this kind of story on it and that kind of story on it. Even stories of affluent good looking high school people is another fantasy, another myth. The landscape allows for high levels of fantasy, I think. A Western is just as fantastic and strange as a science fiction movie is or a musical interpretation of our high school years.

WS: Specifically what sites do you recall were used for motion picture productions in this area? Like eating establishments, lodging [and] the canyons?

SA: Unfortunately, if you go to downtown St. George you will see fairly new buildings or low cost commercial and tear downs. They tore down all the old motels and [places] like Dick's [Café] and the Big Hand [Café] because they no

longer functioned. The property had exceeded its function. Like Kanab, Washington County sort of eroded its motion picture history. I guess it wasn't entirely comfortable with it or recognized that there were more dollars and more consistency in tourism. So those architectural structures are gone. Some of the sites that have been used for the films have been compromised because of development. For instance, [by] putting The Ledges on top of Snow Canyon you don't have a pristine view anymore. You are just seeing where millionaires live for parts of the year.

I don't know if I answered the question wholly, but the St. George Boulevard was used for filming TV shows, *Six Million Dollar Man*, [and] *The Car*. You can drive around and see glimpses of where this has occurred, but a lot of the filming was done in areas that were, at the time, remote or undeveloped. Grafton [Washington County, Utah is] a keen example over there where they did the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Closer to Springdale [Washington County, Utah]) you had *Jeremiah Johnson* which was a Sidney Pollack movie, another Redford film. The roads around Diamond Valley [Washington County, Utah] where they were doing work on the movie, *The Car*, are still there. There [weren't so many] places to stay, the lodging or anything like that. The crews would come in and film for a couple of days and then be gone.

WS: How were the locals involved in these productions or, if applicable, involved in providing food, lodging, entertainment, etc., to the cast and the crew?

SA: I think that has been answered by more knowledgeable people like Art Hill and Glen Blakely, as those productions came before I got here. For me, my orientation as a filmmaker was, we would use the LDS [Latter-day Saint] Institute, the old one, that became [the] theater arts [building] for awhile. It speaks to how much things have changed. That is where we would load up our equipment, drive off and film. Now some departments moved to [the] Jennings [Building]. Then [there is] this little setting up there on the hill. My office changed — everything just moves around. Lodging and housing is not as pertinent to my experience, but the main drag of [St. George] Boulevard was a place loaded with motels, restaurants and places where crews could have quick access to the nearby landscape attractions.

WS: Draw from your experiences working with and interacting with movie and TV professionals in Washington County. Are there any others you want to add to what you have spoken of?

SA: No, I don't have anything.

WS: Thank you very much.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]