

Project

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Amazed and amused by the Cheesehead enthusiasm, and since he had his film equipment with him, he shot some video clips of the tailgating and atmosphere at that event, which the Badgers would go on to win.

On a whim, he also purchased airplane tickets to attend the Super Bowl as well, and sure enough, the Packers took home that trophy as well. Again, Mitchell had his camera and again, he shot some footage of tailgating.

“As I’m flying back to California I’m like ‘This is a movie. I think there is something deeper than just the fan,’” said Mitchell. “And so the whole premise of the film is you see me tailgating at the events and I’m flying back and I say ‘I had to go back to Wisconsin to see what the deeper meaning of being a ‘Cheesehead’ was...and to get more fresh cheese curds.’”

Five years, and a lot of humor, cheese, beer, sports, tours and sunsets later, Mitchell had — almost entirely by himself — filmed, cut and finished a feature-length documentary on the essence of a Cheesehead.

The title and tagline? “Cheeseheads: The Documentary. We are so much more than a funny foam hat.”

Evolution of the project

In its early stage, the piece was targeted toward the fandom of the Green Bay Packers.

“Originally the question was ‘what do you think of the fans?’ if I got a celebrity or a notorious person, and then eventually it was ‘fans, what do you think of each other?’” said Mitchell. “The film evolved well beyond the fans thing because we were more interested in

‘this is a love-letter to Wisconsin,’ and the Packers just happen to be a very important part of the culture, but not the only thing in the culture.”

As the film grew, it began to center around three main abstracts: Philosophy, local pop culture and humor.

To convey those abstracts, Mitchell and his inflated cow buckle up and set out to travel the state.

“Me and a camera and a cow,” said Mitchell. “And I’m not kidding, go look in the back seat, she’s still there.”

Why an inflated cow? Because the cow becomes an “everyman,” glimpsed throughout the film; a stand-in for the viewer. And this is Wisconsin after all.

Mitchell spoke with local, state and national celebrities with a tie to Wisconsin, toured factories involved in Wisconsin’s major exports, shot hours of sceneries from across the state, looked in to all of the attractions of Wisconsin and did some more tailgating. He recorded the footage both with a video camera and with his iPhone, and did all of the voice-over narration himself.

“It’s all done in a very fast-paced way ... you are never bored. We don’t hover on any topic for more than five minutes, and when we are on those (longer) topics, it’s either on the beer or cheese, and who wouldn’t stay for five minutes to watch that,” said Mitchell. “I went for the stuff I love about Wisconsin, and I want to brag about it to the world.”

It turned out that the stuff he loved about Wisconsin resulted in approximately 150 hours of video footage. He then pared it down to six hours, then two, then finally made the finished film one hour and 45 minutes long. Much of the footage, however, is available in brief clips on youtube.com/user/iamwords, or by searching

“CHEESEHEADS The Documentary.”

Final storyline

The documentary begins with a philosophical questioning of what it means to be a Cheesehead, laid over stunning shots of the northern lights, provided to him by Shawn Malone, of Lake Superior Photo, one of the many people he met on his journey. It then cuts to a flashback of Mitchell’s childhood in Cameron, which he has since learned is a universal memory of those who grew up in rural Wisconsin.

He then goes to break down the history behind the word Cheesehead, to see if it has meaning beyond the Packer fandom connotation. For this, he went to the UW-Madison campus to talk to some gentlemen that he affectionately calls “Word Nerds.”

“They take the word dead-serious,” said Mitchell. “Doesn’t matter what word it is.”

From there, armed with his definition, the documentary flickers past everything Wisconsin. At the end of the day, Mitchell collected more than 300 releases from those who he spoke to so that he might use their footage in the final film.

Another unique thing about the documentary is that it is not only a presentation of facts and bits, but rather a continuous story, told through 36 short films. Mitchell said that he actively tried to create and preserve a literary experience for his viewers.

Locally

To say that any one city was more or less integral to the story than another would defeat the purpose of the story: To celebrate all of the interesting nooks, crannies and highlights of Wisconsin.

In the Sheboygan, Plymouth, Johnsonville and Kohler area, those highlights included b-roll of the Johnsonville Brats factory and The Kohler Company, the Plymouth Cow, and full clips from an interview with Lou and Louie Gentine from Sargento Foods, an interview

with Master cheesemaker Pam Hodgeson of Sartori Cheese and interviews with actors in “Cheeseheads: The Musical,” when it was performed at the Sheboygan Performing Arts Center.

“Both Lou and Louie are both in the film,” said Mitchell, on the topic of Sargento Foods. “The son is CEO, and the father is chairman of the board. It was a funny father-son thing turned out cute: Two very important men of an important company were having fun being goofy cheeseheads for 10 minutes in front of a camera.”

“It’s a large state, and in less than two hours I had to cover all of it, so some towns, in the first six-hour draft were well represented, but in the 1:45 version they’re a clip or two,” said Mitchell.

Breaking out

Mitchell’s “day job” as a freelance producer means that he has been involved in the film industry for many years, but has always worked as a subcontractor, doing projects along the lines of voice-overs and commercials, always for other people.

“I really wanted to go make my own (film) rather than being just the producer guy who sets schedules and pays bills. Producer may sound good at the Academy Awards, but it’s a very tedious, managerial job,” said Mitchell.

Mitchell believes that making this film has made him a better person. He notes that the film production scene in L.A. names the final product to be the paramount portion of the project.

“Here, what I learned was: No, the people that I’m making it with and for are paramount,” said Mitchell. “The end viewer is the person I care more about than the project itself. So if I don’t finish it, I’m letting down those people and if I don’t make it really good or at least really fun, I’m really letting down my friends, because now they’re all my friends and extended family.”

“All my friends” is another portion of this project that Mitchell hadn’t

quite expected.

“On a personal level, I made friends ... well, like the gentlemen whose house we’re in,” said Mitchell, motioning to Jeff Kahlow’s (of Big Guy Hats, Fond du Lac) dining room, where he was interviewed for this story. “I can stay almost anywhere in this state because someone will help me, someone will put me up or give me their man cave or throw me on their couch, or whatever ... or my friend Todd (Winkler), who is CEO of the hotel chain (Wisco Hotels).”

Another aspect of the documentary that Mitchell pushed for was the integrity of the project, in regards to sponsorships. Every penny of the production came from his own pocket.

“No one paid to be in this movie, and no one was paid to be in the movie,” said Mitchell, suddenly drawing a line on the table. Mitchell smiles, and continues: “Almost every brewery said ‘how much’ and I said ‘nothing, I’m doing this out of my own pocket — this is a real documentary, not a pay for play.’”

The reply from the breweries?

“Oh yeah! Come on by! No problem! We’ll give you a brewery tour!”

“I got the owners or CEOs every time,” laughed Mitchell. “They gave me private tours every time,” because, he said, they were excited that he wasn’t charging them.

And Mitchell’s Wisconsin nature wasn’t lost on the people he interviewed.

“Always good to see a ‘Connie native go to California but love his home state so much he makes it a documentary project,” said Eric Paulsen, a DJ with 99.1 The Mix in Milwaukee, co-host of Discover Wisconsin, owner of Wellstream Media and StateTrunkTour.com, Wisconsin native and one of Mitchell’s interviewees. “He seemed very genuine, and he’s been fun to talk with about this project and very open to feedback. He’s ensconced in California and Hollywood madness all the time, but he approached this with

the Wisconsin humility and honesty that helps make our state special.”

Mitchell met with Paulsen to discuss the history of Wisconsin’s roads, and the two worked together on a “Lake Express trip,” which will be featured in the final film.

The next generation of Cheeseheads

Mitchell has much to say about his documentary, which is to be expected after something consumes several years of your life. He is also optimistic for it to be completed, regardless of whether or not it becomes famous.

After the DVD is made available to the public, Mitchell plans to make sure that every library in the state receives a copy, free of charge.

“That’s important to me for the simple reason that, while not everyone may have expendable income to buy the film, and many don’t, they should still have some kind of access to see it. Libraries are an obvious choice for that,” said Mitchell.

Mitchell doesn’t have an exact timeline for when that will happen however, because of the cost. He said that he likely won’t be able to facilitate the donation until 2016, “unless a charitable someone or company steps in to help.”

“While the film is quite entertaining, it’s also an insightful observation on love of place, and some of the many wonders of Wisconsin and our beloved Cheesehead Culture, and I want as many people as possible to be able to share in that,” said Mitchell.

Screening tour

The documentary will go on a launch party tour in November, stopping in Green Bay, Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Madison, Eau Claire and Cameron. In addition, Mitchell hopes to host DVD release parties in Appleton, Wausau and Sheboygan, among other locations.

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