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A century of movie making - New Mexico

[New Mexico Business Journal](#), [March, 1998](#) by [Stephen Siegfried](#)

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New Mexico hopes its 100th year of filmmaking will be an exceptional one

Filmmakers come to New Mexico for the same reason painters and photographers come here," said Josh Bryant of Enchantment Films Inc., an Albuquerque production company. "I know a cinematographer who says this is where clouds are made before they're shipped off to everywhere else. Ask anyone in the industry. The light here is celebrated."

This year marks a century of filmmaking under the auspices of such magnificent clouds and light. Thomas Edison, who pretty much invented the industry, checked the state out in 1898 and liked what he saw.

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Became of its authentic old West locations and dramatic landscapes, New Mexico has a rich history in Western cinema. The latest in the genre is *The Hi Lo Country*, shot last fall in and around Las Vegas and Santa Fe. based on a novel by Max Evans, the film is a post-WWII drama (starring Woody Harrelson, Billy Crudup and Patricia Arquette) about two ranchers struggling to make it in the cattle business in fictional Hi Lo. The film is directed by Stephen Frears (*Dangerous Liaisons* and *The Grifters*), and Martin Scorsese is the executive co-producer.

But despite New Mexico's considerable attributes, some people in its film industry believe the state hasn't been able to capitalize on them.

"I don't know if others realize just what a healthy film industry could mean to New Mexico," said Charlie O'Dowd, an Albuquerque-based producer. "Those involved in film productions make a very good living when they're working. But a lot of those in the industry have been constantly leaving for production centers like Los Angeles and New York. There's a wealth of (filmmaking) talent here, but there hasn't been enough work."

Those at Enchantment Films agree.

"That's why we're committed to using New Mexico writers and crews and shooting here whenever possible," Bryant said. "We're producing a film based on a Max Evans' novella, *Xavier's Folly*. Max is

writing the script. The film will be shot in New Mexico, and we'll be using local production people. The more film activity we have in the state, the better," Bryant said, adding that the industry has an economic impact "that translates well with tourism."

As an enticement, the state has waved the gross receipts tax for film companies that shoot on location here. But that may be more than offset by the anti-donation clause of the state constitution, which prevents the state film office from wining and dining producers looking for locations.

"I guess I would need to know what (the film industry) should be," stated Linda Hutchinson, director of the New Mexico Film Office, in response to these criticisms. She believes the various parties involved need to arrive at a consensus and then work to achieve it.

New Mexico's strength is its locations, she observed, and "location production is inconsistent."

But the news is not all bad. The state has experienced a "significant rise" in the number of film productions since the spring of 1997, according to New Mexico Economic Development Department (EDD) spokesperson Jackie Campo. If inquiries continue at the current rate, Campo said, there is "every reason to be optimistic about production activity in 1998."

The film office promotes the state as a location for feature films, commercials, documentaries, and still-photo shoots. In addition, the office publishes The New Mexico Film and Video Personnel and Business Directory, a statewide register for those who work in the industry. For its fiscal year running from July 1, 1996 to June 30, 1997, the film office reported 117 projects such as feature and television films, television segments, television commercials, music videos and still-photo shoots. The money spent on these productions amounted to \$15,320,000. The economic impact, which the EDD arrives at by multiplying the production dollars by three, was about \$46 million.

Though the number of projects reported by the film office in the first half of the 1998 fiscal year numbered only 31, the money spent on these projects, \$21,148,000 (with an economic impact of \$63 million) surpasses the totals of the previous year. These figures do not include any productions done in New Mexico that did not enlist the assistance of the film office. There are no figures available for those productions.

There's another end to filmmaking that's "not as glamorous as Arnold Schwarzenegger coming to town," said Arnie Lerner of Lerner Films, an Albuquerque production company.

The cost of a 30-second commercial for this year's Super Bowl was \$1.4 million. Lerner produced two such ads for clients (Mailboxes, Etc. and autobytel.com). Various commercial production companies such as Southwest Productions, Sunrise Teleproductions and Bandelier Films serve local, regional and national clients, he said.

"New Mexico is attractive because it has an exotic edge to it. Once an ad person decides he's going get on a plane and go somewhere (to shoot an ad), New Mexico looks pretty good," he said.

New Mexico is also benefitting from the industry-wide trend of decentralization. "Films and commercials that 30 years ago were made in Hollywood, now because of more portable cameras and video technology, can be shot on location," Lerner said.

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