



Photo: Dave Stambaugh

On location in Frostburg, where their hour-long documentary was filmed, are Teresa Brady, David Insley, Bob Mugge and (kneeling) Dave Stambaugh. Insley and Mugge are coproducers. Teresa was assistant to Insley. Stambaugh handled the sound.

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# 'FROSTBURG': THE CAMERA AS A MICROSCOPE

By FREDERIC KELLY

A FEW minutes after the film ended, a tall, gaunt, elderly man struggled self-consciously to his feet and announced that he had liked the picture very much. He sat down quickly, ducking his head to hide his embarrassment, but in his own way the man seemed to have spoken for a majority of people in the Frostburg auditorium, and his words, delivered with deep, simple sincerity, had an electrifying effect on Bob Mugge and Dave Insley.

For the two young filmmakers, it was the first indication that their film was a success. Perhaps not a critical success; that judgment would come later. For the moment, it was enough to know that in some way the film had reached out and touched the hearts of the people it was supposed to be about.

Bob Mugge and Dave Insley are co-producers of the film, "Frostburg," an hour-long documentary on "a day late in the life" of a rural American town—Frostburg, Md. The film attempts a subdued, orderly presentation of life in the town, blending historical information with contemporary events.

"It focuses," says a foreward written by Mugge, "on a reality which is fading calmly, unavoidably into the past, and it illustrates also the diverse elements of a young, energized future which is pushing that reality aside."

In its simplest terms, "Frostburg" is a film about yesterday and today and tomorrow; about change and the wrenching, tearing effect it can have on the lives of people who are clinging to the past. The film has neither heroes nor villains, just people, and the problems these people face are the problems faced by people in dozens of other rural American towns: a sagging economy, a ravaged countryside, a steadily declining youth population; and a change in the old order, the old values.

The film was shot last summer after Mugge, a tall, bearded, 22-year-old graduate (in film and associated art media) of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, was awarded a \$9,000 youth-grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities. His project was one of 29 funded nationally by the NEH under its "youthgrants program" for groups or individuals 18 to 30 years old.

He chose a documentary about Frostburg for a couple of reasons. He was familiar with the town because he had

attended Frostburg State College for two years before transferring to UMBC. More important, though, was a chance to portray what he describes as "an area actually suffering the textbook problems of a rural Appalachian town in the Twentieth Century real world," the migration of the young to larger cities, the demise of local industries, unemployment, the change-over from traditional coal mining, approaches to ecologically-damaging strip mining techniques and the introduction of new ideas, new life-styles by way of modern electronic media.

But in addition to documenting the problems, the insecurities and the misfortunes of the people in Frostburg, he hoped to carry the project a step further. "We hope," he wrote in a description of the project, "to study and portray the basic strengths, roots, joys, routines, creations, etc., which both exemplify and nourish the most colorful and distinctive parts of their unique existences." He also hoped that the film would shed light on the somewhat precarious relationship between the town and the college.

"While I was in Frostburg I was aware of the tension that existed between the two, a kind of uneasiness or wariness, a conflict between the two cultures. On the one hand you had the townspeople, simple, ordinary, everyday people, many of whom had little education; on the other you had the hip college crowd, students and professors, intelligent, educated and sometimes impatient with the so-called 'old ways.'

"I was as guilty as the next guy. I felt the conflict. I went to Frostburg because I thought at one time I wanted to be a writer and what could be better than to go into the mountains and write. The problem was I got so depressed I couldn't write, and I decided I had to get out of there before the environment swamped me. The minute I got out of there, though, I started to sympathize with the other side, and somehow it seemed right to make a film about non-urban oriented people."

INSLEY, who co-directed the project (although his official title was "chief project assistant") had no idea what to expect in Frostburg. The tall, slim, 22-year old UMBC screen arts major had "a sort of mental picture of a seedy town full of old people and redneck racists running around burning crosses on lawns." He was pleasantly surprised to discover that the people of Frostburg "were the nicest people I ever met, warm and friendly and really kind."

The film took its basic form from that. If there was ever any thought of producing an expose-type documentary, the

idea was quickly abandoned. The two decided, instead, on a simple film about people. Moreover, they resolved that the people were going to tell the story, not the filmmakers. "We wanted to show the people as they are," says Insley, "and in order to do that we had to become observers. The challenge was to let the story tell itself, to avoid looking for the things we expected to find and just take the town as we found it. We felt strongly that it would be very dishonest to impose our values on the film."

The film can be broken into three fairly distinct, though not isolated, parts: a prologue, a main body and a series of interruptions. "Frostburg" begins with a clock sequence, a metaphorical introduction to the film, followed by a welter of flashing images that are meant as symbolic references to the town's past, present and future. The camera captures wild flowers in a field, a desolate mound of coal, a sun-splattered college walk; it plays on the faces of churches and bars and gas stations and burger pits; and for one breathless moment it lingers on gravestones for sale in a weedy town lot.

THE main body of the film is informational. Senator J. Glenn Beall (R., Md.), natty in a blue suit, speaks knowledgeably about the history of his native Frostburg; Mayor Arthur Bond, the articulate owner of a home improvement business, talks about the town's problems, admitting, obliquely, he's powerless to do much about them since the job of mayor is "mostly ceremonial."

The camera moves in to record interviews with the chain-smoking owner of a large coal company and a wheezing ex-miner with black lung; it focuses on a college president, a bullnecked strip miner, a Bologna maker, a newspaper publisher, a hip boutique owner and a frail, gently humorous lady whose life has spanned nearly a century of the best—and the worst—Frostburg has had to offer.

The smooth, low-keyed flow of information is broken repeatedly by interruptions—blaring music, livestock reports, fundamentalist sermons—which are calculated to fragment the film the same way commercials fragment a dramatic television performance and destroy the mood, pace and illusions an audience has grown accustomed to.

"This sabotaging of the film's otherwise restful form," says Mugge, "is intended to symbolize current attacks on the town's older, established reality. It also serves to document the most significant source of this erosion—the media's

Continued on Page 17



Photo: Dave Stambaugh

Frostburg Mayor Arthur Bond, on ladder extreme right, both top and center, is in film. So is ex-miner Arch Davis.

# 'Frostburg': Portrait of a Town

Continued from Page 15

complete commercialization of traditional values and the imposition of newer ones."

The project was researched over a period of several weeks by Mugge and an assistant, Mark English, a graduate of Frostburg State. The actual filming took about two weeks. Insley handled the camera work with the help of Teresa Brady, a student at UMBC. The sound was handled by Dave Stambaugh, a former UMBC student and a part-time art teacher in Baltimore county. Mugge, in addition to designing, directing and researching the production, also did all of the film interviews.

WE shot over 13,000 feet of film and ended up with 1,660 feet, which is really a low ratio," says Stambaugh. "Most documentaries run 50 or 100 to 1. We ran about 8 to 1. It took us nearly 5 months to edit it, working day and night. UMBC, incidentally, gave us complete access to its film editing facilities, otherwise I'd estimate it would have cost us another \$6,000 to make the film. As it was, we had to go back to the National Endowment people for another \$1,000 to pay our incidental expenses."

The endowment people were probably only too happy to advance the extra money. The project, the first film to be funded under the youthgrants program, "absolutely delighted everyone here," says Nancy Moses, coordinator of the program. "It was an exceptional film,"

adds Armen Tashdian, NEH director of planning, "and a success in terms of accomplishing what it set out to do and in involving a group of young people in an in-depth research project."

Leroy Morais, head of the screen arts department at UMBC (and, along with two other UMBC professors, Dr. James C. Mohr and Dr. Philip J. Landon, an adviser on the project), calls "Frostburg" a professional film, "as good as any I've seen. It comes off with freshness and warmth."

"I think," says Mugge, "that the Frostburg people who appear in the film feel they were treated fairly and sympathetically, although we did get some criticism from a few. They thought, for example, we should have dealt more with the local service groups in town since nearly everyone belongs to at least one of them."

"They also felt we didn't show enough of the town and what we did show was too fast; they wanted us to stop and dwell on things more so they could get their bearings. On the other hand, one of the things they liked most was the way the camera caught them. I remember one man said something like, 'It looked us in the eye and didn't try to be tricky.'"

One of the harshest criticisms of the film was delivered by a Frostburg State College student who reviewed the film for the college paper, *State To Date*. The reviewer, Ken Hudson, called it "an uncritical overview of local problems" and "as cursory and uninvolved as the [Frost-

burg State] students themselves."

"The implication," says Mugge, "was that the film is harmless. We reject that unless by harmless he meant that we didn't try to harm anyone. The point of the film was not to 'do a job' on the people of Frostburg; we wanted to approach them as human beings."

THE negative of the film remains with Mugge and Insley, although the NEH retains the right to "an unlimited number of prints for humanities-related purposes." Copies sell for \$500 each and a few have been sold already to a number of schools, colleges and libraries in the state. In addition, the film has been entered in several film festivals and is being considered for a regional showing by WETA-TV (Channel 26) in Washington, an affiliate of the Public Broadcast System.

In the meantime, the two are considering possibilities for other films. "There's nothing definite yet," says Mugge, although they will probably be "in the documentary area." As a long-range goal, they would like to make a dramatic film. "Frostburg," says Mugge, was a big step toward that goal.

"In a way," adds Insley, "it was like someone giving you the materials to make the Empire State Building. You want to do it so bad, you do it, even though you know it's a huge task. We wanted to make this film so we could say, 'This is us. This is what we can do.' It was a mission of the soul." □

## On Screen

THE film, "Frostburg," will be shown at 8 o'clock Wednesday evening in Room 207 of the Fine Arts Building at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The film is open free to the public.

In addition to the award given to Bob Mugge and Dave Insley for the film project, the National Endowment for the Humanities granted awards to three other Maryland residents. They are:

Sherie P. Sachs of Randallstown (\$1,414), for the study of the effect of children's television programs, involving fantasy and animation, on the views of young people. Miss Sachs, 18, is a student at Catonsville Community College.

Eleanor D. Fryer of Bethesda (\$4,622), for a study of artistic interpretations of the American Revolution in order to understand how artistic works perpetuate or create popular views of history. Miss Fryer, 24, is a graduate of American University in Washington.

Joan W. Cove of Potomac (\$8,077), for the preparation of a comprehensive history of Toby Town, Md., a small, wholly black community. Miss Cove, 27, is a student at George Washington University in Washington.

Bob Mugge and Dave Insley discuss their film in an office of the Screen Arts Department at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. They are assistants in the department. Far right, Insley while he was working on film.

