

Dobbs Productions-Thirty Years of an Eye on Maine

Many would say that the best place from which to see almost anything is from above. We even have an expression for such an all-encompassing point of view. It's the same phrase we use when we want to say that someone is taking in the entire subject from a broad perspective. We call this a "bird's-eye view." Considering the sweeping scope of the land and communities of Maine – especially Northern Maine – that bird's-eye comes in mighty handy in terms of considering both the images of land itself, and the deep, rich history of the people.

One person who's been keeping that bird's eye on Maine for almost three decades is Jeff Dobbs. His media company, Dobbs Productions, is based in Bar Harbor, but his cameras have traveled far from that Downeast base, reaching all points on the compass – and even up in the air, for that very special bird's-eye view.

Dobbs Productions has been integrating a wealth of words and images, from that aerial footage to archival documents and photos, into documentary and commercial film projects since the 1980s. And Dobbs himself has come to know that some of the best stories and the best views can be found in the North. In projects such as "Katahdin: The Mountain of the People" and "High on Maine," the great northern reaches of the state play a leading role.

Jeff Dobbs now has more than 20 full-length films to his credit, but his career began in still photography. He majored in film at Boston's Emerson College, but after graduating, just couldn't shake his interest in maritime history and scenic and marine photography. He collected hundreds of old photographs of steamships and all types of sailing vessels, from coasting schooners and full-rigged ships to America's Cup contenders. Later, he took his own shots, and used a sepia technique to give the photos a nostalgic look.

In 1970s, Jeff's retail stores, Down to the Sea In Ships, in Bar Harbor and in Northeast Harbor, sold his photography and nautical brass items. Hundreds of these photos still hang in restaurants, hotels, and homes around the country. But it wasn't long before Jeff traded that still camera for video. "There's a timelessness to still images that just sticks with a person, and I'll always love still photography," Dobbs says. "But, there were things I wanted to do and places I wanted to explore, and video and film gave me the means to do that."

Back in the "stone age" of media, when cable television was a new thing, Jeff got ahead of the curve by leasing time on the Bar Harbor local access channel. That was the beginning of Dobbs Productions. With some old video equipment rented from a Bangor production company, and the help of an old college roommate, Doug Wornick, Dobbs Productions launched "Island Update." The first two seasons of Maine's first tourist-information channel were broadcast not from a fancy studio, but from Jeff's dining room, and Jeff himself wore many hats, including that of host and cameraman. "It was an interesting start," Dobbs says, "switching from one role to another, and never quite knowing how well it would all work in the long run. But it took off."

“Island Update” thrived, offering short stories about local history and tourist activities, including golf, fishing, and hiking reports, as well as a place for local restaurants, shops, and museums to advertise. All the reporters were local business people, including the editor from the town newspaper. Soon, “Island Update” expanded, morphing into “MDI Tv,” and came to include the work of Penny Purcell, a local actress and friend of Jeff’s, who co-hosted the show for many years.

Eventually “MDI Tv” became the tourism and entertainment standard it is today, “The Acadia Channel.” True to its roots, “The Acadia Channel” still features a wealth of information about Mount Desert Island and surrounding areas, but now also includes shorter versions of the numerous documentaries Dobbs Productions has produced over the years. But that’s now, but back then Jeff Dobbs was just making the move from shorter stories to longer ones.

The first major production Dobbs undertook was “Portrait of an Island: The Story of Mount Desert Island.” The film was written by a friend of Jeff’s, longtime Mainer Gunnar Hansen, who is probably most widely known as an actor in the “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” but whose creative work goes far beyond that one cult film. “Portrait of An Island” was hosted by Jeff himself, and though it never had the broad distribution that later Dobbs Productions have enjoyed through with Maine Public Television, the film became quite well known locally.

The next turning point in the history of Dobbs Productions occurred rather by accident, as many big, important things tend to do. In the early 1980s, noted national broadcast journalist Jack Perkins had just retired from NBC and moved to Bar Island, just off Bar Harbor proper. Retired, yes, but Jack was still active in work on camera and in producing, and he began using the Acadia landscape he had come to love as a backdrop for many of his commentaries for national network, cable, and PBS programs. Jeff Dobbs was more than once behind the camera for Jack, and a partnership was born.

That partnership also included Jeff’s best friend, Bing Miller, who came to work with Dobbs Productions around the same time. The two have worked together for so long now that when people call Dobbs’ studios, they can’t tell the two men’s voices apart.

Jack Perkins, meanwhile, has been the on-camera voice for many of the Dobbs films, bringing his journalist’s sensibilities and inimitable style to the projects. Other Dobbs films have featured the work of former CNN reporter and Maine resident Jennifer Skiff, in “Wild Maine,” a story about Maine’s abundant wildlife, and Tim Harrison, president of the American Lighthouse Association, hosting “The Lighthouses of Maine: A Journey Through Time.”

Many of the Dobbs projects also feature the evocative, original music of local composer John Cooper, who is currently a professor at Maine’s College of the Atlantic. And as the film projects grew in scope and number, Jeff added more talent to his team by engaging writer and researcher Catherine Russell, whose work has been seen on PBS, on stage, and in print.

Nearly all of the Dobbs projects have been seen on Maine Public Television, and many of them have been broadcast on national PBS. Over the

years, these documentaries have become a staple for Maine viewers, and a feature of MPBN pledge events.

As the century changed, so did Dobbs Productions. His films were in stores across the state and available on the web, and people had long been purchasing tapes and DVDs for themselves and as gifts and souvenirs of their time in Maine. The films offer a chance to see the state from a new angle and a way to share some piece of the Maine they love with others. But, these weren't the only folks interested in Maine landscape and history.

Jeff knew that there were still countless stories to be told – about the Stanley family, Longfellow, Edmund Muskie, Joshua Chamberlain, and a long list of other statesmen, industrialists, writers, and other creators. And it had come to his attention that Maine teachers and libraries were eager to add more Maine history media materials to their classrooms and libraries.

So, Jeff put the pieces all together and founded the Jefferson Davis Grant Foundation, a non-profit corporation named in memory of Dobbs' great-grandfather, Jefferson Davis Grant, through which he can foster both the production and distribution of Maine history film projects and related materials. The Foundation provides a way for people to become a part of the film projects as individual and corporate underwriters, thereby giving the people of Maine an active hand in documenting and preserving their own history on film.

According to Jeff Dobbs, this is probably the single most important effort of his career. "There's just so much important Maine history that we don't have documented, and if we don't capture it now, it will be lost, or found only in the pages of very old books," he says. "All those back-room memories, anecdotes told in a person's own words, and precious bits of history. If we don't get it while we can, we never will, and it might be forgotten."

The collaboration that is Dobbs Productions – including Jeff Dobbs, Jack Perkins, Bing Miller, John Cooper, Gunnar Hansen, Catherine Russell, and others -- continues today as they venture into the world of high definition film and television. But for Jeff Dobbs, it's just the next step he's taking behind a camera with an eye on Maine.