

TWO ON THE AISLE: "GOOD MAN IN THE WOODS" - Review
Club Finndigo: January 13th, 2017
By Joe Kirkish

Among the many critical reviews and awards heaped upon this film (not only regionally) is this sample:

Magnificent scenery, interesting people, fine photography, and professional editing characterize this early film from Michael Loukinen, now teaching at Northern Michigan University.

I could call the film "leisurely, almost relaxed," since it doesn't actually fit in with the traditional follow-the-numbers of most documentaries. Dr. Loukinen has devised a system of presentation that seems to come from the heart and from the people interviewed. By blending in shots of their environs and using old black-and-white pictures of the men and their places of work, he makes it all so believable that they remain in one's memory long after the film has ended.



"A Good Man in the Woods" lays a foundation for the film with a brief history and description of the Upper Peninsula, making good use of rare old photographs to show the early boom days of mining and lumbering, then bringing us up to the present, interviewing those few who still live here, representing one hundred and fifty years of solitude in the woods, on the lakes and streams, and below the earth in mines: grappers, fishermen, and woodsmen. Several of the men try to explain why in plain U.P. language their lives have been lived in someplace special – as one man put it, adding, "By God, it is!" - and they go on to define what is meant by that high compliment paid to all those the good men in the woods.

One logger tells how he lost his arm and yet returned to the woods for his entire life. In another scene are a group of men lying around in an after-lunch relaxation as they discuss unions, the effects of supply and demand, and more, all against a background of trees being felled and logs being hauled to the landings. The scene then shifts to commercial fishing, wherein we hear individual fishermen muse about the past and present on the lake, including one fine narrative in which a man tells about how his boat was run down by a freighter.

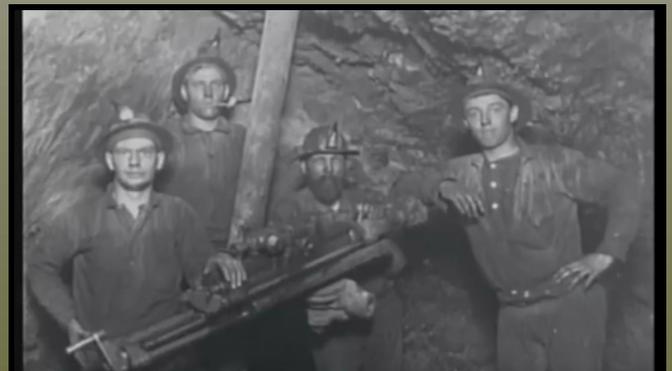
Mining completes the trio of stories about these pioneers with scenes including men of all ages (down to the lower teens) - coal-dusted, grimy, tired-eyed. They reveal lives they might not have enjoyed that dangerous work, but it did put food on the table for their families.

And so much more. Loukinen permits the men to express themselves openly – their occupations, family life, and their fears and hopes for the future. Sometimes deadly serious, sometimes funny, sometimes simply colorful, the stories pour out, all within their locales, creating a fascinating back story to the foundation for Copper Country as we know it today.

Loukinen presents his men as a vanishing breed and by presenting them candidly he allows us to appreciate them thoroughly. As a result, what began as a simple historical documentary turns into a believable, vivid background of the people who created our U.P. as we now know it. They may be dying out, but they've been captured on film and we will never forget them.

"Aren't you ever lonely out here, alone?" one fisherman is asked at one point, with the wholehearted response, "Who's gonna get lonely out here? God almighty!"

It's that kind of ongoing first person revelation that makes this movie one that - in one critic's words - should never be missed.



Special Thanks to Michael Loukinen for allowing us to show this documentary and to Finlandia for supplying the copy.

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