

"Tall Tale" to Tell

Back in the early 1990's, a couple of scouts from Walt Disney Pictures were in Pueblo looking for props for a film they were planning to shoot in Colorado. Someone in an antique shop suggested they talk to Wes Stratman about locating some old machinery.

Thus began the saga of several Flywheelers' involvement in the filming of "Tall Tale", a story of a young boy's effort to save his family's farm from an evil land-grabber. Nick Stahl plays young Daniel Hackett, who feels helpless against the overbearing JP Stiles (played by Scott Glenn). In a dream sequence, Daniel meets up with three of his father's heroes: Pecos Bill (Patrick Swayze), Paul Bunyan (Oliver Platt) and John Henry (Roger Aaron Brown).

As Daniel and his new-found friends struggle to save Pleasant Valley's idyllic way of life, each is tested according to his special talents. John Henry must beat a machine in a pile-driving contest, and that machine belonged to Wes Stratman. In the movie, the machine wins the race. Wes says that, despite promises made by the production company, he never got his machine back after the filming. It had been seriously altered and damaged during filming.

I talked to Wes, John Troutman, OJ Johnson and Bill Tunstall during the 2009 Chaffee County Fair about their rolls in the making of "Tall Tale". All said they had provided machines and equipment to be used as props, and all had played minor parts in crowd scenes. Although most of their footage ended up on the cutting room floor, they obviously enjoyed telling me about their experience.

Filming on location took place at the old New Jersey Zinc mine at Gilman, at Glenwood Springs, at Redstone and elsewhere.

All the guys talked about the hours and hours of effort that went into each snippet of film time. They would arrive on set at 6:00am to fire up the steam engines owned by Wes and Bill. Make-up took hours. Wes had fake facial hair glued on every day. The cameras might get one small scene done all day.

John and OJ were hired to do maintenance on the machinery as well as playing miners in crowd scenes. They told of being powdered with coal dust to look more authentically dirty. Most other guests gave them plenty of space when they arrived back at the Glenwood Springs Radisson Inn at night. Laughing, they said they've never left bathrooms that filthy before and wondered how the Radisson staff managed to clean up after them day after day.

Bill told me that wardrobes were custom-made in California and then shipped to Colorado. When costumes were handed out, he had no pants. "Now, how do you suppose they lost somethin' that BIG?!" he hooted. Bill provided a steam engine (now owned by John Lange) and a saw mill to the production crew. Several other Tunstall family members had small parts in the movie.

John, OJ, Bill and Wes told of their interest in the construction of the movie sets. Buildings that appeared to be huge steel structures were actually built of plastic at angles of perspective that made them appear much larger than they really were. Likewise, mining flumes and tree stumps covering a hillside were largest close to the camera and then got progressively smaller, making the distances seem much greater than they were. And those stumps? Styrofoam. They could pick them up and move them around. Wes has a lump of coal that's made the same way.

Everyone remembered what a nice guy Patrick Swayze was, and what a jerk young Nick Stahl was. OJ says one day Nick was more vile than usual and OJ asked what his momma would think if she heard him talk like that? Turns out Momma was there; Nick was making enough money she didn't care what he said. Sad.

When the film was released in 1995, all our club members were amazed to discover that most of their scenes and many shots of their engines and other equipment had been cut by the film editors. OJ says, "Oh, if we watched the movie together, I know exactly where I am, but by the time I started to say 'See, I'm right there', it'd be too late. I'd be gone." So much for stardom, they laughed.