



Filming the Kenojuak Ashevak Heritage Minute in Cape Dorset, NU. *Historica Canada photo*

Canada at 150: Minute by Minute

Anthony Wilson-Smith

When the Heritage Minutes debuted in 1991, it seemed so foreign—so somehow un-Canadian—to be dramatizing much less glorifying our own relatively brief but colourful story that they were greeted with a sort of awed cognitive dissonance followed by gleeful parody. Now, they are as much a part of Canadian culture as hockey, Tim Hortons and maple beer. Contributing writer and Historica Canada President Anthony Wilson-Smith celebrates one of his favourite parts of the job.

What becomes a legend most? In Canada, our national legends include bearded figures with swords and ornate pantaloons, women in wartime nursing costumes and indigenous soldiers fending off American invaders during the War of 1812. Some of the people telling those stories are Colm Feore, Dan Aykroyd, Graham Greene, Kate Nelligan, Jean l’Italien (*Lance e t Compte; Virginie*) and Jared Keeso (19-2 and *LetterKenny*.) The settings range from the bright lights of big cities to dimly-lit hockey rinks, an

old movie theatre, operating rooms, and the frigid beauty of Cape Dorset, Nunavut. Those elements are all key components of stories that are, as the saying goes, ‘a part of our heritage’. In other words, they are Heritage Minutes.

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The Minutes—produced by Historica Canada, the non-profit organization where I work—are now 25 years old. Their format, 60-second vignettes that tell stories of memorable Canadian events and people, is as familiar to most Canadians as it is unique. As we approach the 150th anniversary of Confederation, two new Minutes are set for release (stay tuned!) and more are in the pipeline. The stories and format many Canadians saw for the first time as interstitials during children’s programs are not only surviving, but thriving. Since our return in 2012 from a seven-year hiatus from Minute-making, the audience for new ones has grown exponentially. Over the last year, the Minutes—there are more than 80—had close to six million views. They aired on television across the country more than 116,000 times. You can see them on national airlines and Via Rail trains, and on video screens in high-rise office buildings. One Minute, on the Nova Scotia civil rights activist Viola Desmond, has been seen more than one million times online.

All of this is thanks, in the first measure, to philanthropist Charles Bron-



The cast of the Winnipeg Falcons Minute, with Jared Keeso as coach, on set. *Historica Canada photo*

fman (still a member of our Historica Canada board) and his reflections more than three decades ago. As Charles recalls, he was frustrated that young Canadians then had little idea of their country’s history, and few means of correcting that. “No society can be of merit unless it has heroines, heroes and myths,” he said recently. “While there were many in Canada, hardly anyone knew of them, nor that they had had a marked effect on our society.” With a small team that included Thomas Axworthy, Michael Levine, Patrick Watson and others, they came up with the idea of ‘selling’ Canadian history with 60 second stories—just like most television commercials of that time.

From the start, the Minutes told tales Canadians hadn’t heard, in a format no one had seen before, with plot, character development, and story resolution all within 60 seconds. The bite-sized format was a good idea then and is perhaps even better suited to today’s impatient internet era. Because the Minutes are Canadian in everything from casting to set location, crew and content, they have qualified for special status from the Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). A station airing a Minute can potentially claim credit for 90 seconds of Canadian content. We thus can and do accurately de-

scribe the Minutes as ‘certifiably 150 per cent Canadian.’

From the outset, the producers paid tribute to the country’s linguistic duality, including Minutes on the artist Paul-Emile Borduas; the early 20th century singer La Bolduc; 19th century journalist Etienne Parent; and, more recently, a Minute on the key role played by Sir George-Etienne Cartier in bringing about Confederation. To their credit, they also decided to show dark aspects of our history as well as celebrated ones. A Minute on construction of the national railway depicts the exploitation of migrant Chinese workers. Others with indigenous themes depicted both tragedies and contributions. One on Aboriginal World War One hero Tommy Prince describes his struggles against prejudice upon returning from war, while another shows a First Nations family teaching settlers how to make maple syrup. Several Minutes focus on women’s struggles for equal rights.

Today, we seek the same balance. On the one hand, we have recently produced (among others) the story of Canada’s most successful sports dynasty (the Edmonton Grads women’s basketball team) and the Olympic champion hockey team the Winnipeg Falcons. On the other, we have a Minute on the persecution suffered by Desmond as a Black Nova Scotian in the 1940s and the wrenching story

of Chanie Wenjack, the Indigenous boy who died running away from a residential school in the 1960s.

Minute-making starts at about \$150,000 and climbs if special effects or large casts are required. For every Minute, we issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) to which any Canadian film company can respond. Our most recent drew more than 110 applications. Other than two indigenous-themed Minutes funded by the government of Ontario, all Minutes since 2012 have been paid for by the federal Department of Canadian Heritage (with some additional private support). To answer an oft-asked question, no one has tried to influence or engage in the creative process.

Another frequently-asked question concerns how we decide on the subject of a Minute. We combine historical research, polling, consideration of communities, topics or regions that have not had much previous attention paid to their stories and plain gut sense as to what makes a good story. We ask the teenage participants in our Ottawa-based Encounters with Canada program what they would like to see. Film companies seeking to co-produce Minutes are encouraged to suggest topics. We have informal rules on what does *not* make a Minute. We don't editorialize in our closing voiceovers (initially and memorably voiced by Patrick Watson). We don't make Minutes on living people. We avoid having actors play people with whom Canadians are very familiar, because that would diminish the realism we seek.

All Minutes, like all our programs, are offered in both official languages; one, on Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak, is offered in Inuktitut. We aren't infallible, but we try very, very hard to be accurate. A number of the 35-40 staff members in our head office have post-graduate history degrees, and we have a wide network of consultants. We fuss over details. In the Viola Desmond Minute, we knew that the film showing in New Glasgow, N.S. the

day she was asked to move to the balcony of the theatre because she was black—she refused and was arrested—was *Dark Victory*. In our opening shot, we show her approaching a theatre with that title prominent on the marquee. In the closing shot, a magazine on a desk is one that was actually on sale in the area during that month in 1946. In addition to consultants on period dress and speech, we engage experts in and around the communities we portray to provide a balanced perspective. Our Wenjack Minute was co-produced with a production company owned and operated by Indigenous filmmakers, and shot at a former residential school at the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ontario.

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The most engaging evidence of the Minutes' status as prime Canadiana is the reactions they provoke. Drop the phrase 'I smell burnt toast' to someone 25-40 years of age, and chances are they know it comes from the Minute on Dr. Wilder Penfield's pioneering brain surgery. There is a whole genre of spoof Minutes—some of the best of which are on our site, www.historicacanada.ca. We know of several theses by post-grad students mulling the Minutes' effect on the national psyche. Several pubs have held Heritage Minutes trivia nights in which full houses of competitors face off to show who knows the collection best. A couple from Ottawa have set up a Twitter account describing their efforts to visit as many sites of Minutes as they can. A British Columbia journalist provoked lively online debate when he ranked each

Minute in order of preference, along with critiques. There is also a university drinking game based on the Minutes—which, as I advised the student who informed me, I find interesting but cannot, for the record, condone.

The Minutes are loved by many, though not by all. Some complain they inadequately summarize the stories they tell. Others dislike the approach to individual stories or the selection of topics.

We pay attention to those concerns. An event only happens once, but can be interpreted in endless ways. A story told in 60 seconds is never complete. The excellent historian Tim Cook, in his recent book *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend*, argues that a 1990s Minute on the battle makes too much of Canadian Gen. Sir Arthur Currie at the expense of his British superior, Sir Julian Byng. The Minute does not identify Byng as the British commanding officer to whom Currie is shown speaking in the Minute. The net effect, Cook writes, is that Byng is unfairly 'cast aside'.

That sort of debate is healthy. To work on the Minutes is to learn first-hand what moves Canadians, whether the overarching emotion is delight, pride, anger or sometimes sadness and shame, as with the Wenjack story. When the Minutes succeed, they create a desire to learn more—not only about the event at hand, but ideally, about all our history. We support a larger discussion through supplementary learning tools, and resources on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. The end result is greater awareness—and with it, hopefully, greater engagement as citizens. So perhaps the *real* story of the Minutes is not the way we make them—it's that after 25 years, more Canadians than ever are eager to embrace them. Thank you again, Charles Bronfman. **P**

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