

Seven Fields Enjoys the Limelight

Hollywood came to town recently, and residents quickly got into the act

We'd been waiting hours for night to fall, but when our call to action finally came, the sky above Cumberland Drive was as bright as a high school football field. Movie lights mounted on two enormous cranes were flooding hordes of trick-or-treaters on this Seven Fields street. It was the first Saturday night in November, but eager, costumed kids were re-creating Halloween for an R. L. Stine movie titled "Don't Think About It."

As my daughter and other young extras shivered in the cold, straining for a glimpse of star Emily Osment (of Disney's "Hannah Montana" fame), one resident who joined the crowd of hovering parents joked, "Hot cocoa, get your hot cocoa here, \$5 a cup!" We would have paid that much, too, but the man's chocolate profit would have been relatively small potatoes on this \$3 million movie set.

The straight-to-DVD production, set for release next Halloween, is part of a recent resurgence in local movie making that's bringing action not only to recognizable Downtown landmarks but to lower-key suburban sites such as Seven Fields. We're used to spotting the famous Pittsburgh silhouette in movies. "Inspector Gadget" featured much of PPG Place, with its distinctive roofline. Bruce Willis and Sarah Jessica Parker sped across our rivers in "Striking Distance," and the Civic Arena got blown up in "Sudden Death." But less well-known places in Pittsburgh suburbs and beyond get plenty of camera time. Their share of the action – and the money that comes with it – will only increase as the state's new tax incentives continue to snare more movie work.

"Our biggest selling point is the diversity you can get in such a small space," said Pittsburgh Film Office Director Dawn Keezer. Various city neighborhoods can "stand in as New York City, but within 10 minutes you can be out in farmland. The region's "unofficial" selling point, she said, is "the friendliness of the people" to the Hollywood visitors. Block parties, enthralled bystanders, home-baked cookies for the crew – "those are the stories that get taken back to L.A."

When the R. L. Stine movie took over part of Seven Fields, the production crew rented the community center, generating "about \$2,000 in rental fees," said borough Manager Tom Smith. Film crews spent about a month in Seven Fields and other local spots. They also rented a

couple of local houses for interior and exterior shots. "Depending on a movie's budget and the extent of the intrusion, said location manager James Mehathey, a homeowner might receive \$500 a day. Some residents were asked to allow crew members to redecorate their front lawns for the Halloween scenes", he said. "Everybody was nice enough to say, 'Sure, set up whatever you need.'"

The business owners and residents whose properties are chosen aren't going to make "a huge amount of money," Ms. Keezer said. "It's not going to be a year's house payments," but it will be a reasonable sum and a memorable experience.

Sometimes, the fleeting presence of a star is enough to make one of these locations a mecca for avid fans. Valliant's Diner on Babcock Boulevard in Ross boasts perfect retro décor – lots of chrome and stainless steel, vintage signs and art, pastel yellow and aqua on walls and booths – that's apparently heaven to set designers. A few weeks ago, an MTV crew rented the space for a scene from "Chloe," a short film slated for broadcast in 2007. Earlier this year, Valliant's was the scene of Ben Roethlisberger's post-Super Bowl Disney World commercial. "I've had people coming in to find out where he sat," said Gerri Valliant, who's run the family's nearly 40-year-old business for 10 years. "He was here maybe 45 minutes or an hour." The process, Mr. Valliant said, "was like a tornado – they're in, they're out. The same day they contacted me, they filmed it." The diner might get \$100 an hour, less per hour for longer shoots. "They tell you how much they can afford to pay you," said Mr. Valliant. "It's always good to do it, just for the advertisement."

Through local governments' tourist promotion agencies and location scouts like Mr. Mahathey, the Pittsburgh Film Office is always adding to its library of 30,000 photos, Ms. Keezer said. She recommends that people interested in getting their properties in movies visit the office's Web site and read the Location Information page titled, "So you want to be in pictures."

Having gotten its first "very positive" taste of movie magic, Seven Fields would welcome another opportunity, Mr. Smith said. "The kids were coming home from school, finishing their homework and setting up lawn chairs to watch the festivities. "That's the kind of experience we were hoping for," he said. "Ten years from now, people will say, 'Do you remember when that movie was shot here?'"

Happily, the way the industry is growing, the response to that question might someday be, "Which one?"

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