Life on the Other Side of the Moon
by Richard Leacock 1990

Having known Robert Flaherty since I was fourteen; having admired his films; having worked as his cameraman, day after day for fourteen months, filming his last major work, Louisiana Story; having listened to him, over late-night-well-watered-scotch, describe to me, in detail, the structure of sequences in his 1925 film Moana; I felt that I had emerged from the ideal documentary film school; that I had grasped his way of filming and could never go back to the routines of the "industry".

Immediately after returning to New York, in the summer of '47, I was invited to join John Ferno, who had been Joris Ivens cameraman in China where they made The Four Hundred Million and in Spain making The Spanish Earth in collaboration with Ernest Hemingway. We were to go to Europe for 18 months, to make seven half-hour Human Geography films for use in American High Schools. Our wives and children were to go along. My wife Eleanor, who was known as "Happy" then, was preparing to take her doctorate in Anthropology and was commissioned by Ruth Benedict to research child raising patterns in a slice through Europe. Fun! So off we went with our one year old baby, Elspeth, to a Europe, still struggling to recover from the nightmare of World-War II. In no time at all I slipped right back into that cozy groove of being a "professional" cameraman. The set up, the framing, the long shot... It was just like picking up a cigarette after a years abstinence, bang! You are right back where you started! A pack a day!

There seemed to be no alternative. I couldn't wonder around scratching my head; trying this; trying that; looking at rushes; trying again... you crazy? I'd be fired! Bango! Whose war is this? We're working for the great Louis De Rochment! Admiral of the Harvard Navy! You may pan, but only from left to right! Always include a "swish-pan" on each location! Long shot, medium shot, close shot, reverse angle, "P.O.V." shot, record plenty of wild sound and some local music will help... six countries seven films. I never even saw some of them! No rushes! But it was high adventure! Lots of fun!...Having a wonderful time! Wish you were here! Went home as our second child, Robert, arrived so we bought a little house in Greenwich village on the proceeds of eighteen months living on an expense account. Not Bad.

With the Flaherty credit I was "in" as a cameraman and I was reasonably good at it. I could even con my way through a Camel Cigarette commercial for TV. Being a communist, in spite of the Dies Committee and the McCarthy "witch hunts" of that era, didn't hurt at all, in fact I think that in the documentary film world you almost had to be a communist to get a job! We controlled the work force!

Documentary films up to this period had been filmed as silent films and sound was added in the form of commentary and music. This approach had produced a very particular type of film. There were less and less coherent sequences. Cameramen were sent out with what amounted to, a shopping list. In the documentary films of the 1930's such as The Plow That Broke The Plain or The River, the sequences are groupings of shots arranged so that they reinforce the commentary, which, in turn, was reinforced by the music. Using these techniques, it was remarkably easy to have a film "say" just about anything you wanted it to say. Shots of trees being felled; shots of a plowman against a cloudless sky, he stops and wipes his brow DROUGHT. Shots of electric powerlines. Shots of factory smoke stacks, lots of black smoke PROGRESS (a la Vertov!). These films really were made in the editing room and on the typewriter. The cameraman's job was to be in focus and make nice conventionally framed shots and get the exposure right. By the 1950's these techniques had worn out and the word was out...synchronous sound!...(Fiction films had been talking for twenty years already).

When I first saw The Plow That Broke The Plain in 1936, I was still a schoolboy, I was deeply moved. I didn't know that America had any problems other than the fact that many Negroes were lynched. But that Music, that stentorian voice, that pseudo poetic "Wheat for the French! Wheat for the British! Wheat will win the war!! As the symphonic music of Virgil Thompson, borrowed freely from Mademoiselle from Armentieres surged up and we cut to WW-I footage of tanks crashing into trenches...WOW! That same evening my brother, Phil took me to a pub on Deane Street in London and I was raving about the power of this film to none other than John Grierson who cut me off with the comment that by the end of an era you should be good at doing what you had been doing for years, but that Documentary had to face the real world of Synchronous Sound and get into Talkies..."in a few weeks you will see what I am talking about, a film called NIGHT MAIL" and I did and I projected it so many times on 35 mm that I still remember where the reel change comes "where's that Hollyhead stuff?". It was some time before I noticed that the dialogue, almost all of which takes place in a post office sorting-van, besides being incredibly stilted, was odd! The people were all rocking back and forth as if on a moving train but the mail-bags in the background were motionless...and from there it was easy to see that the scene had been shot in a stationary van on a siding. No problem with that; bulky sound equipment and the mike-booms... and gradually this staging of reality took over and for me reaches an apex of absurdity in films such as A Diary For Timothy by Humphry Jennings. But this is the route we took and there was no alternative at the time. Or so it seemed.

In 1950 I went to work with Affiliated Films (we sometimes called it Afflicted Films) and we made public information "Documentary" films for the Department of State, Industrial films for industry and Mental Health films for the Mental Health Film Board. To this day it is not clear to me who looked at these films. The form now was scripted films with a lot of dialogue. At first we went to "real" places and used "real" people to act the written

parts. They were not very good at it. The same problem that we had in Louisiana. So, we started using actors and that seemed better. But again, we couldn't afford very good actors.... we had discovered a new form, the soap-opera! We were making grade-Z fiction films. And it was like a miniature Hollywood location shoot. Tons of heavy equipment moved into "real" homes in order to systematically destroy what we had set out to record.

This was not what I had dreamed of when working for Robert Flaherty! So I set off with my wife and our two children aged 3 and 5. We went and camped with a group of Neskapi Indians in central Labrador. We camped with them on the edge of a beautiful lake, Davis Inlet. Happy was collecting data for her doctoral thesis, and I was determined to make a film, a la Flaherty. I had a 35mm Arriflex, tripod, lenses, an incredibly heavy battery (and no way to charge it) and film. Not much film and not much time. So; tell them what to do and don't waste film... disaster. However, the fundamental problem remained; the absence of sound. Even if we had the sound capability, the additional problem of language. Filming people who spoke a language that Happy had a smattering of and I no more than a score of words. We talked together about this problem and how it was forcing us back into a "this is how they do it..." film, a process film, making canoes, making snow shoes, cooking, hunting, cutting up and dividing what ever it is that they catch... back to Nanook without the charm, knowledge or skill for that matter!

We received a letter; Mr. Flaherty had died. I never completed that film.

1951. About the only good thing that I can say about this period is that our growing family, three coming on four, were absolutely wonderful. The house in New York was fixed up. We were fixing a barn by a lake in NJ on Happy's family acres. It was lots of work and all seemed well.

As an active Communist (not a very good one!) I was involved in a program, training black film technicians who wanted to work in the film industry. I was told that the school had started out by showing some Soviet classic films such as The Battleship Potemkin and The General Line followed by discussions of film theory a la Eisenstein. Apparently this had not generated much enthusiasm. The students wanted to know what they needed in order to get a job as a cameraman, an editor or an assistant... so a group of us practical people were brought in.

The classes were held on Saturday mornings in a studio on 125th Street in Harlem. It was the most practical, realistic, film school ever. I remember endless sessions teaching the functions of an assistant cameraman; how to move a Mitchell Camera without dropping it, the most minute details and then a question is raised "...OK, I arrive on location in the morning and someone tells me to go get coffee. Do I go get the coffee? Is this someone else's job?..." I loved this school and finally, as a result of our success, the students said "OK. We've learned all that. Now! When do we go to work?". This was the early fifties, the beginnings of the giant swell that became the civil rights movement of the sixties. The time of the desegregation of the Little Rock, Arkansas, schools. Remember, most of the people who, today, claim that there is no trace of racism in their make up, had not been born. This was not a popular endeavor even in

the "enlightened" strata of the white community. We learned what it can be like to be a leper, let alone a Black! At this time there were two trade unions in the film industry; the venerable I.A.T.S.E.(AFL)and the young A.D.T.F.C (CIO) which we had formed after WW-II and which was "influenced" if not controlled by the "party". So, we had the full support of our union and we were able to work with "mixed" crews. Looking back it is hard to imagine what all the fuss was about. It was there! Years later our little union was not so small anymore and was amalgamated with the IATSE which, as a result became integrated overnight.

In the summer of 1954, having worked as Cameraman and as Editor on so many films directed by others, I was asked to make a reportage on a Traveling Tent Theater in the Middle West, a Toby Show. It was to be my final attempt to make a Documentary using classical film industry techniques. A 35mm Mitchell NC Camera weighing about 100 lbs with it's massive tripod and power-supply, a Reeves 35mm magnetic tape recorder and its attendant vacuum tube amplifier at about 80 lbs (it was said to be portable and had handles on the two cases, we called it the knuckle-buster), and a hand-held Eclair Cameflex for pickup shots, plus a vast array of lights and cables, a dolly and tracks.... a truck full. All of this and a "minimum" crew, an assistant Camera man, Kevin Smith; a soundman, Morgan Smith (who was a graduate of the Harlem School); an electrician, Michael Margolies. This was no ordinary crew, we had worked together many times and I could rely on them always to do their level best at any time of the day or night.

I had visited the Toby Show before and written an approximate script outlining the structure of the film. I went out to Missouri ahead of the rest, who drove out with the truck.

When I arrived in La Plata, the city fathers were in a tizzy. Our producer at Omnibus, in New York, had told them that my crew included a black man. The only hotel had flatly refused to allow him to stay there. The restaurant had indicated that Morgan could eat in the kitchen! The leading citizens were eager for the film to be made as it was to go on national television in prime time; they told me that they had always been proud that no Negroes lived in their town, now they were not so proud. They suggested that Morgan and I be the personal house guests of the Mayor for the duration of our stay, alternatively we both stay with the towns richest family, the owners of a local turkey hatchery, or that Morgan stay with the closest black family who lived some twenty miles away and would be glad to accommodate him. As I recall it, I shrugged and suggested that it was really up to Morgan to decide what best suited him. The crew arrived, Morgan suggested that he and I spend half the time with the Mayor and half with the turkey man; the restaurant owner never did object to us all eating there excellent food and that was the end of the matter except for the first night of filming in the tent when Toby introduced each member of the crew to the capacity audience and each received a polite response except for Morgan who got a standing ovation.

I edited the Toby film myself. Today it seems a little bit stiff and formal but by contemporary standards it was amazingly live. We had the advantage of an event that kept repeating itself every night. Hence we could get a bit now, some more tomorrow and the next night. In spite of our elephantine equipment a trace of spontaneity was retained. The film was well received and got Bob Drew so excited that he came down

to New York from Harvard, where he was a Nieman Fellow, to see me. We met and had a chat. More came of that chat than from most international conferences! Today one would expect that the racist incident would be part of the finished film but we were still chained to antediluvian equipment and the thinking of the past. It was not yet time to do as the Canadians did in “Waiting for Fidel”.

Later that year Roger Tilton came to me with what seemed at that time, to be a wild idea. He wanted to make a short on 35mm film that could run in theaters, of young people dancing to a Dixieland band. He wanted the camera to be mobile, hand held ;but it should be "synch". He had spoken to several documentary cameramen and been told that he should do it with "control", that is, with the big Mitchell camera on a dolly and the clap-sticks...the whole deadly professional thing.... I liked his approach and we did it. He rented a hall and the band from Nicks with Peewee Russell on clarinet. We lit the hall with the new high intensity spot lamps deciding that we would not bother to hide them...let them be in the picture. I shot on the floor. I had two Eymos, hand held "news" cameras. Their maximum load was 100ft (one minute of film) and the spring motor would only shoot about 20 seconds till it had to be wound up again. I had two, so that Hugh Bell, a superb still photographer and another graduate of the Harlem film school, could reload while I shot. Bob Campbell, the other cameraman, filmed the band with a rudimentary synch system attached to his camera and was therefore less mobile. We spent a fabulous evening shooting to our hearts content. There were slow numbers, medium numbers and fast numbers... Roger and his editor sorted it all out and made up a mosaic that certainly looked to be in synch and was wild and free and wonderful. This was Roger Tilton's JAZZ DANCE. What a lovely film (made a full year before Mother Don't Allow) however this was only a teaser. We couldn't make anything else this way. A good question to ask is; how would you shoot this film with the equipment we have today? Take a good look at some contemporary MTV's!

It seemed hopeless and I was losing patience. We were stuck! Hopelessly stuck! Try feature films? I did. On the basis of the Toby film I was hired to shoot some retakes for Ellia Kazan's wonderful film BABY DOLL, superbly photographed by Boris Kaufman. I was eager for this encounter with "serious" filming and I admired Kazan. But I am not an illuminating engineer and I don't have the infinite patience required by this ludicrous and creepy way of making movies. I hate it! Never mind, they don't need me.

Around this time Morris Engle made a feature film, WEDDINGS AND BABIES staring Vivica Lynfors. I was enormously impressed, not by the story but by his way of filming which in turn affected the acting. Engle was a well know still photographer as was his wife and collaborator, Ruth Orkin. Morris was accustomed to the mobility and ease of shooting with a Leica, he was a photographer of the Life Magazine style and was horrified by the stupidity of sound filming. He had a 35mm hand camera adapted to work in synch with a small tape recorder using a tuning fork as a time control. His was a clumsy, cumbersome solution and noisy too. But it worked and he managed to create some wonderful scenes. I wrote an article on this work which was published in Harpers. We became friends. In the interim I had made a second film for Omnibus; all reenactments of testing an F-100 fighter plane. Bob Drew, beside being a Life Magazine editor was a former fighter pilot and a nut on flying. He visited again and

talked about maybe getting Life Magazine to fund some experiments in TV Journalism...a kind of Magazine of the Air.

Again, a call from Omnibus, could I go to Israel with the young Leonard Bernstein, who was to conduct the dedication concert of their new symphony hall in Tel Aviv? Well of course I could!

I had known Lenny when I was an undergraduate at Harvard University and he was Serge Kousevitsky's assistant conductor with the Boston Symphony. Lenny was huge fun to be around, his unfashionable enthusiasm for the music of Verdi was refreshing in that period. We had worked on a production of Aristophanes' PEACE for which he had composed music and which he conducted. Also a production of Aaron Copeland's opera THE SECOND HURRICANE. We were friends. But how to film a conducting tour? In Israel! I had to have synch sound. I had to have a super quiet camera. I had to have good sound. I had to have mobility. How? In those days Television regarded 16mm film the way they now look at Video-8. We were leaving tomorrow so I grabbed the only thing possible, an Auricon camera that was very quiet, took big loads and recorded sound optically and not very well, on the film. In addition we (a sound man and me) took a "portable" 1/4in. Ampex tape recorder the size of a medium suitcase and heavy, in order to record quality sound even though it would not be synchronous. We went. We had a wonderful time and the film, all things considered, is rather sweet and was well received. We missed absolutely everything! But only Lenny, his lovely wife Felicia and I knew it. The spectacular moment when Lenny lost his temper and had a bang-up tantrum in mid-rehearsal because of the noise made by carpenters, plumbers, welders...desperately trying to ready Tel Aviv's new concert hall for the dedication concert that Lenny was to conduct that night...the camera was not yet plugged in and wired up! Could I ask him to do it again? Don't be ridiculous!...and so it was with every other wonderful "real" thing that happened.

This sobering experience did give me a definitive idea of the precise nature of the equipment that we needed. There is nothing more difficult to capture on film than the rehearsal of a symphony orchestra. To get a shot or two is not hard. To get an accurate, comprehensible idea of what happened, with one camera is extremely difficult. The camera must be mobile, it must be silent, it must be independent of the microphone with no wire connecting them, and the quality of the sound must be superb. I stress that this is for a rehearsal where you can not predict what will take place as you can in a performance.

In two years we were able to come up with a solution based on the development of magnetic recording machines, the discovery and use of the transistor which, for the first time made it possible to build amplifiers and recorders which would run on batteries, and the development of mini-tuning-fork timing devices (watches). With these developing technologies and funding from Bob Drew's "Time Inc." connections, we were able to solve our problems, with little or no help from the “industry”.

Far more was involved than the technology of portable equipment. The film industry had, with the exception of Robert Flaherty and few if any others, been divided up into craft categories. Directors were the "creators", writers, editors and cameramen served

them. As Jean Renoir had recently pointed out, the bulky camera and sound machines were the altars before which all was sacrificed...as far as I was concerned this system didn't work. I do not recall any discussions of what we did in fact do. I know that I was a rare bird in that I believed in writing, directing, photographing and editing my own work. D.A. Pennebaker, with whom I shared an office and some equipment in New York, also worked this way. So, after several brief efforts to cover stories with Bob Drew, using equipment that was not yet right, Drew came up with the wild idea of covering a primary election in Wisconsin which pitted Sen. John F. Kennedy against Sen. Hubert Humphry. What a motley crew we were! Spring 1960. We had only one Auricon camera with a cable connecting it to a portable tape recorder. Drew and I used this rig, the others, Pennebaker, Maysles and Terry MacCartney-Filgate, an acerbic Englishman brought up in British India, used noisy old Arriflex cameras and "wild" recorders. Pennebaker was in charge of a crazy machine built for us by Lorren Ryder, a Hollywood sound "expert" which was to put the non synch sound in synch with the non synch picture. We all worked out of a hotel room. What was remarkable was that we edited our own material with Bob Drew and his journalist yellow pads hovering over us. It worked! We made a film that captured the flavor, the guts of what was happening. No interviews, No reenactments. No staged scenes and very little narration. When we returned to New York we showed our film to visiting English documentary film maker Paul Rotha and he was astounded and said "..my God! We have been trying to do this for the last forty years and you've done it..." and was in tears! We went out and got smashed!

Shortly after making PRIMARY we had the equipment we had dreamed of and sometimes it worked. The important thing is that we were experimenting. All the rules were new. We were in fact, developing a new grammar which was entirely different from that of silent film making. We were acutely aware that by this emphasis on sound we might be losing the visual basis of our medium. Looking back at the results it is apparent to me that the visual strengths remained largely because of the avoidance of interview, which I still regard as the death knell of cinematic story telling.

The impact of these developments on the documentary field and on Television Documentaries was very limited. These techniques did allow the News gatherers far greater scope which is evidenced in the coverage of the civil rights struggle in the USA and the coverage of the Vietnam war. However, the interview technique so loved by TV practitioners remained and remains their favorite way of dealing with the "real" world. It is an approach that is wide open to abuse, so easy to influence in anyway that suits your purpose. The documentary "crews" of today are just about as heavy handed, clumsy and insensitive as they ever were. On the other hand many have taken advantage of the new potentialities and progress has been made.

For me personally, the greatest change took place three years ago when I retired from teaching at MIT and "joined the 20th Century" by acquiring a computer and going to work on Video-8. Ever since the introduction of the CCD and the refinement of video editing equipment I have accepted the quality of the image and the sensitivity of the editing and shooting techniques. For the first time we can all work as Flaherty liked to work. Shooting what ever we choose, as much as we choose, when we choose. Editing at home so that we can go over and over our material, shoot some more, come back to look, edit again...and again. Try new approaches, experiment with lenses, with ways of

shooting, with relationships to the people you are depicting and to the people you work with. Create different versions for different situations. There is no limit and it is eminently affordable.

For me this is bliss, a dream come true, but it is hard work and requires constant practice. It is not unlike sketching or playing a musical instrument, or singing or writing...perhaps it can be all of these.