



Becoming Tom Thomson – Case Study

BECOMING TOM THOMSON – CASE STUDY

Our documentary, *Becoming Tom Thomson*, is about an actor researching a character for an upcoming feature film that is inspired by Canadian wilderness painter Tom Thomson who died mysteriously in Algonquin Park in 1917. From learning to paint, canoe and fish, to camping and fending off bears, our host takes us on a journey back in time scouting some of the locations that inspired the Canadian icon while also gaining a first hand experience about what might have taken the young artist's life.

Our shoot (28 days long) was shot in 10 blocks over 14 months at 3 locations in Northern Ontario that were 200 - 250 kilometers apart. We live in Southern Ontario. It was clear from the beginning travel was going to be our biggest carbon contributor.

BASE CAMP, ACCOMMODATIONS AND LOCATIONS

Our closest location was a family cottage on a small lake. It was over 300 kilometers away. We decided to use this location for accommodation and a base camp from which we would do our filming. The cottage also became our set for a portion of the documentary (more on that later).

Knowing that going from the cottage to the other 2 locations was going to add over 400 more kilometers to each block, it was decided to keep those trips down to only 4. The other blocks would be shot at areas around the cottage which could all be accessed by foot or canoe.

The other locations just so happened to be around provincial campsites so a tent and sleeping bags became our accommodation for those blocks. Electricity like we had at the cottage wasn't available there, so we used solar powered lights and rechargeable batteries for LED'S. A battery pack was brought along to charge the camera or other equipment. The battery of the car was also an extra backup if needed.

These types of accommodations and set ups are definitely not going to work for most productions, but were a natural fit for our film. Camping was actually mandatory for the last 2 blocks we had planned. Staying in a hotel would have totally defeated the purpose of the journey, not to mention, added to the carbon footprint.

NARRATIVE

The story of the film evolved with the arrival of Covid-19 and a lockdown. The provincial parks we were planning to film at were all closed and we were only able to get insured to film around the cottage property. So, as the spring thaw began, we made a shift and focused our efforts on getting into the time period of 1917. We took away running water as it already didn't work during the colder months at the cottage (we filled up buckets from the lake) and, although we had electricity, we chopped wood and used a fireplace for our main source of heat. The fire also served to heat water up for showers (which was literally a milk jug you poured over yourself). In addition, the fire also helped dry out our clothes/wardrobe which we had to wash by hand in a pail.

As it got warmer outside we went further down this rabbit hole and moved to a cabin on the property which had no plumbing or wood stove inside. We shut off the electricity, used a battery pack to charge the camera, used candles as a light source and used the outside fire pit to heat things up. Food was adjusted so it didn't need to be refrigerated and we used the lake to get clean. Phones were even shut off which made it very interesting to know what time it was - but that was all part of the process.

When the lockdown was finally lifted and things opened up, we started making plans to head out into the backcountry and finish the film. However, given the remote locations, risk factor and lack of access to medical care, we were unable to get insurance. So, once again, we had to look at other options. On the lake where our story actually took place, there are no campsites. There is, however, a summer camp which, for the first time in its 100 years of operation, was not open for the season because of Covid. So, after contacting the camp and gaining their generous support, we reapplied for insurance. We addressed all the safety concerns they had, implemented the new protocols put in place and this time, thankfully, we were able to get approved.

We may not have been able to go to all the places we planned and experienced the backcountry in exactly the way we wanted but we ended up with locations that were closer to our basecamp than planned. This helped reduce our footprint and also allowed us the unique opportunity to connect to the character and story in a way that we hadn't thought possible before.

CARBON CREATED AND OFFSETTING

We did simple things to reduce our carbon footprint such as consuming less electricity, using reusable water containers, eating more raw food and even switching to a local coffee company but travel was by far our biggest contributor. We drove a small gasoline car over 7,500 km even after canceling the last trip. Given the nature of the project, travel was bound to be our biggest issue. This is one area we would like to improve on next time.

To offset, we donated to TreeCanada who have a very simple carbon calculator to figure out what your footprint is and how many trees need to be planted. It actually matched our Albert calculation exactly.

We are also looking at planting some trees on our own to help offset any additional carbon created in the marketing and distribution of the film.

PLANNING FOR OUR NEXT PRODUCTION

The documentary wasn't just an acting exercise and location scout, it was also a test to see what worked and didn't work when it came to sustainability. I knew the kind of locations and conditions that I visualized in the feature film I've been developing about Tom Thomson and so this was really an exploration to find those spots and see just what would be required to make the film work there.

One example is the distance we had to travel on the water. Having a much larger cast and crew paddle a canoe or row a boat loaded with gear to a set way down the lake will take far too long and cost too much money (not to mention people would be tired). So this is one area we are most likely going to be creating carbon - using a motorboat to shuttle people from base to locations.

Another example is the summer camp we were able to shoot at. It actually had several cabins and sets that would be perfect for the film. It's accessible by car, easy walking distance to the set, close enough to plug into mains power and has accommodation for cast and crew. Clearly, using this location would help us lower our footprint.

Sustainability isn't about creating no carbon. It's about finding the places you can reduce it and offsetting for the places you can't.

TAKEAWAYS

If there is one thing to take away from our story is that Covid has been a wake up call. It forced us to change our narrative and reduce our travel. Not only that, it pushed us to uncover a much more personal, transformative story while also highlighting the changes that need to be made going forward. One place that can definitely happen is in the screenplay.

As scripts are the blueprint of what your film will be, writing with sustainability in mind can be the first step in the process. Looking at how you are going to shoot something is another way to help reduce your footprint. Bringing lights with us into the wilderness wasn't really an option. It would have given the documentary a less organic feel. Films like *The Revenant* and *Nomadland* used very minimal lighting, choosing to go with a more natural, raw look. And those films have done pretty well if you ask me. I think that says something.

A lot of people think it costs more to be green. In our experience it did not. After we undertook green initiatives we were able to save 6% on our small budget.

One way to help us move toward a more sustainable landscape is for unions and funding bodies to adopt protocols to ensure every production is calculating carbon and creating an offsetting program. This isn't just about ensuring our kids have a better future (although that's a huge motivating factor - especially for us). It's also about business. Younger generations, customers and even investors are all shifting to products and services that meet this new vision of sustainability. As demand grows broadcasters and studios will change as well. By not making the necessary adjustments now and implementing these new practices, in the coming years you may find that selling your non sustainable film is like trying to sell a VHS in a streaming world. People just aren't going to buy it and your hard work won't be seen.

Our industry has the amazing ability to set trends in the world. I believe it is our responsibility and duty to lead by example - not only for our industry but also for the many others who are contributing to the problem instead of being part of the solution. We can be that change. We **must** be that change.

Steve Belford
Producer
North Bear Pictures

