

From One Rose

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It's been several months since I sat sniffing through interviews with Festival supporters and leaders as they were filmed for our motion picture. That particular Saturday afternoon was filled with unforgettable moments like listening to our 1991 Rose Festival president and longtime auto race chairman Bill Hildick describe how he felt back in 1984 when he finally heard that well-known announcement -- "Gentlemen, start your engines" -- and the Indy-cars zoomed down the track at Portland International Raceway for the first time.

"I nearly jumped out of the bleachers," he said, and his eyes reflected the pride and excitement of that day 23 years ago when his own personal dream was realized and Portland hosted its first Indy-car event. "It was one of the best moments of my life," he said.

His memories are part of the Rose Festival story.

In telling that story, we realized it was impossible to do a traditional documentary-style treatment of our most important Centennial product, our motion picture. Rose Festival history is just too subjective for a facts-and-figures approach. The word 'history' itself is defined as "a continuous, systematic narrative of past events," and a documentary supposedly relates history in a factual manner without editorializing or inserting fictional material.

There's very little in life that is really systematic or continuous, especially when it comes to the winding course of a 100-year old volunteer-driven festival! In trying to ferret out the facts about the festival, I've learned that even newspaper accounts can be contradictory and confusing. And in collecting the stories of festival devotees, we've come to believe that even the foggiest recollection has its own ring of reality when it comes to the overall spirit of the festival.

So in telling our story, we decided to do just that -- to rely on the recollections of a narrator whose road would be intertwined with the festival from its roots in the early part of the 20th Century, whose life and loves would flower as the decades passed and whose sometimes thorny path would eventually lead to the full bloom of today's modern world. And it went without saying that the narrator should be a woman. Although the festival was started by visionary men, it was inspired by women -- women like Georgiana Pittock who started the Rose Society. Women may not have had the right to vote in Oregon until 1912, but they certainly exercised their considerable influence in everything that mattered, including the planning of the early Rose Festival.

And as women's roles have evolved, so has the festival. The very first 'Queen Flora' was Carrie Lee Chamberlain, the daughter of the governor. Less than a decade later, Rose Festival courts were made up of working women from businesses all over Portland. Thelma

Hollingsworth, the first elected queen in 1914, was a secretary for a transportation company. By 1930 the princesses were selected from Portland high schools, and since that time, hundreds of thousands of dollars have come through the Portland Rose Festival Association to these young women to further their educational goals.

So chronicling the life of one woman who lives during the century that birthed the Rose Festival could perfectly illustrate the tremendous growth of both the city and the central character herself as she experiences the fateful events and dynamic change of the world around her.

Our heroine's life is also reflective of the symbol of our festival, the flower that has inspired the world since the beginning of civilization. Thus the title of our Centennial motion picture, 'From One Rose.' The rose has had a fascinating role throughout history and has come to mean many things to many people -- disparate things, like romance and royalty, religion and even war. It's a flower used for both weddings and funerals and every event in between, and it comes in every imaginable color and a variety of scents. The founders of the festival chose well when they looked for an appropriate and positive way to 'brand' the festival and the city. And the story of the festival wouldn't be complete without a nod to its real queen, the queen of flowers.

Choosing the right actress to portray this un-named narrator took months, and I have to admit to an occasional pang of impatience with Ira's reluctance to make a decision. Then, just a few weeks ago he announced he had found our heroine, and he shared the tape of the voice of Rebecca J. Becker, his inspired final selection. I sat in awe as I heard her reading the eloquent words written by Ira and David Waingarten, Ira's talented writing partner who came from New York to work on this project.

Of course I cried, just as I did when I heard Bill Hildick describe how he felt during that first Indy-car race.

Why?

Because Rebecca's voice conveyed the same depth of emotion that Bill's had when he remembered that day more than 20 years ago. Ira had managed to find a gifted actress who was able to make our fictional heroine's voice ring true, as true as the voices of the real people whose collective stories are what make up the Rose Festival's story.

I can't wait to see the finished motion picture, now being furiously produced by Ira and Brian and the team they've assembled, including our Student Producers. And I can't wait for the rest of the world to see it and to marvel at the technology that helps animate the images and the sound and music that help accentuate the action. I sincerely doubt anyone is prepared for the sensitive and fascinating tale used to recount the story of the Rose Festival. But I know people won't be able to help but identify with it.

Because it's really our story.

Everyone who has experienced the Rose Festival, each in his or her own unique way, helped write it.