

Grass

By Dennis Doros

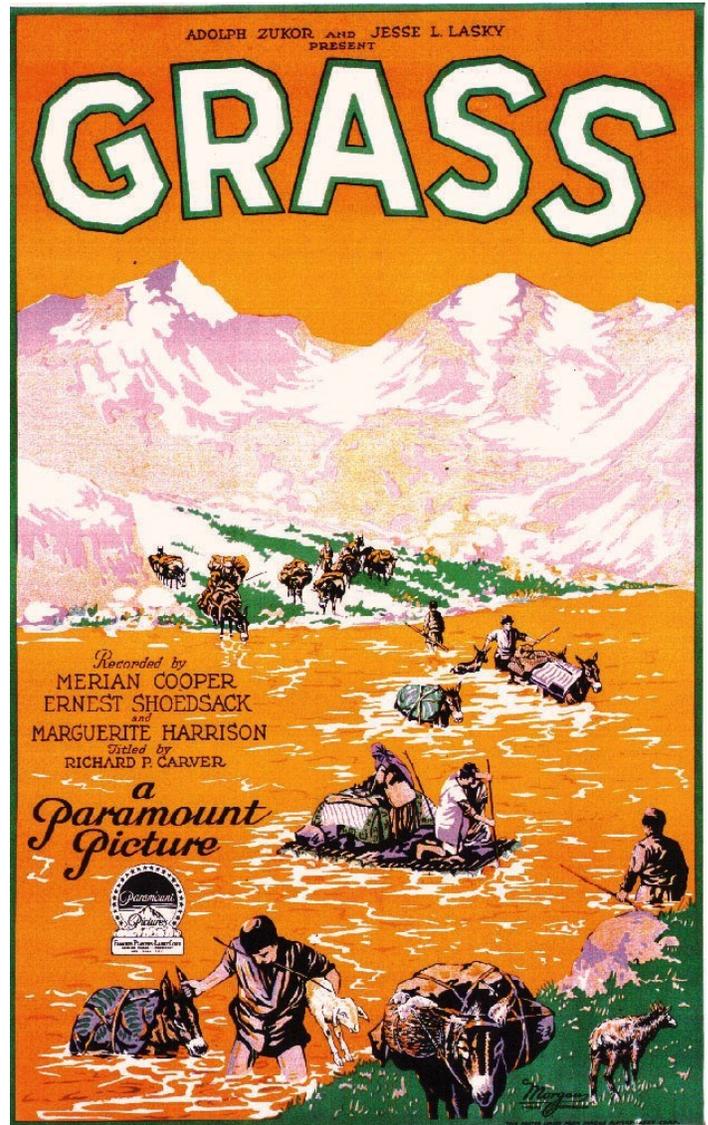
In 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th president of the United States, extolling the love of the wilderness and man's desire to discover its mysteries. He ushered in the 20th century with a wanderlust and bravura that prophesized an age of exploration that began with epic struggles to the far reaches of the world, then to its highest mountains and deepest oceans, and finally, to the moon in just 70 years. And the century's fastest growing art, the moving camera, was there every step of the way.

It took the pairing of cinema's greatest odd couple — the short, fast-talking dynamo Merian C. Cooper with the tall, taciturn Ernest B. Schoedsack — to best embody the Roosevelt spirit of adventure. Their first documentary masterpiece, however, wouldn't have happened without the resources and bravery of another of America's greatest voyagers.

The two men had met after World War I. The newsreel cameraman Schoedsack described his first meeting with pilot Cooper in 1918 Vienna: "I was at the Franz Josef Railroad Station. Down a platform came this Yank in a dirty uniform, wearing one French boot and one German one. It was Coop. He was just out of German prison and he wanted to get to Warsaw. He had once been kicked out of the Naval Academy and had sold his sword. Now he'd found the guy who had it and he'd bought it back."

After a disastrous expedition with Captain Edward Salisbury as the camera crew on the failed around-the-world tour of the *Wisdom II*, Cooper and Schoedsack decided they could do better. "Nanook of the North" had just opened and they believed they could do the same for the nomadic Asian tribes. Research at the National Geographic led them to the Kurds who had the reputation for magnificent costumes and local scenery. While searching for funds, Cooper came across his old friend he had met during the war, Marguerite Harrison. A beautiful, ex-debutante, she became a journalist for the "Baltimore Sun" after the death of her husband. Seeking adventure and danger, she became a spy for the OSS during the war and then afterwards was twice captured and imprisoned by the Soviets as a spy during their nascent beginnings.

All three were missing the action they had found in war and were looking for new adventure. Together, they raised \$10,000 and with Schoedsack's lightweight Debie camera and 20,000 feet of film, they



Poster used to promote the original release of the picture. Courtesy Milestone Film & Video.

went off to make a movie following their motto they chose later in life, "The Three Ds: Keep it Distant, Difficult and Dangerous."

After planning and much travel they arrived in Turkey but soon discovered that the Kurdish tribes were less cinematic than they hoped. They moved on to Iraq with dwindling funds and film stock. Luckily, Harrison had previously interviewed the legendary Middle East kingmaker Gertrude Bell who guided the trio to the Bakhtiari of then-Persia (now Iran). Found in the southeastern part of the country, the Bakhtiari played a large part in the politics of 20th century Iran. Yet it is in their annual migration — and the many films of this event — that they are known.

It took many months and a great deal of negotiations to finally gain permission to travel on the 42-day migration of the Baba Ahmedi tribe led by Haidar

Khan. As the tribe's valley grasses dried up in the summer heat, fifty thousand people and half a million animals annually would traverse over an impossible terrain up the mountains to their winter pasture. It was an astonishing migration never captured on film before. Each day, Cooper and Harrison worked with the Bakhtiari tribe to gain their confidence while Schoedsack would film their travels. Near the end of each day, Schoedsack would often travel ahead to figure out the best way to film the tribe that next day. It proved to be a journey far more arduous — and cinematic — than the filmmakers ever could have planned.

The Bakhtiari men swam the raging waters of the Karun River for three days while guiding the animals that could swim and those that had to travel across on rafts buoyed by inflated goatskins. They ascended in bare feet an almost perpendicular mountain only to face the even more towering Zardeh Kuh, creating paths covered in the deep snow with pick axes. Finally the tribe descended to their goal — as Schoedsack risked his life from another towering mountain to create one of the great long shots in documentary history — a fertile and grassy valley.

It has been said that Cooper and Schoedsack's greatest film, "King Kong," moves forward as if in a dream. Each scene is followed by an even more incredible event. "Grass" shares this exact quality — the achievements of the Bakhtiari migration grow more astonishing as they and their animals face greater and greater struggles. The film's magnitude is that unlike the "King Kong" story, this one *is* amazingly true. Since 1925, there have been many films following the Bakhtiari journey; their annual migrations have been well documented. Yet none of those films show a journey nearly as hard nor faced it with such primitive gear. None of them faced the

same danger to make a film as Cooper, Schoedsack and Harrison when they made "Grass." Though there are some Bakhtiari still practicing a nomadic life in Iran, many of the three million people have been scattered around the world after the revolution. Many took other jobs even before then — in Bernardo Bertolucci's 1967 documentary "The Path of Oil," many of them worked on the oil fields that are on their land.

Cooper traveled with the film on the college lecture circuit to limited response before Paramount executive Jesse Lasky saw it at a private dinner party and acquired the rights for his studio. Early film critic/historian Terry Ramsaye was hired to write the intertitles. Harrison never liked those titles — she thought they were old-fashioned and hokey. Yet, when "Grass" was released and it opened to large audiences, the intertitles really worked — as they still do today. The film stands out as an early masterpiece of the documentary form and a tribute to the early days of filmmaking when those involved, kept it distant, difficult and dangerous.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Dennis Doros, with his wife Amy Heller, found Milestone Film & Video to devote themselves to discovering, restoring, and distributing films of enduring artistry. Milestone, has restored many films including The Connection, Portrait of Jason, Killer of Sheep, The Exiles, and On the Bowery, to name a few. Doros served three terms on the Board of Directors of the Association of Moving Image Archivists, is an advisor to the Albanian Cinema Project, and has served as a consultant to Turner Classic Movies since 2005.