

Story on El Dorado film industry

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“Hollywood Hits Filmed in El Dorado County” – cover blurb

“All in a Day’s Filming” – inside headline

MAIN STORY

Remember Robert Redford’s rustic horse ranch, set in a backdrop of breathtaking Montana vistas, in the 1998 film “The Horse Whisperer”?

It wasn’t Montana.

That idyllic property where Redford, as Tom Booker, tamed horses with compassion was represented as Montana, but in fact it was a lot closer to home. The majestic setting, the corrals, the river, even the mountains are all in the Eldorado National Forest, at the PiPi Valley Campground about 35 miles south of Placerville on Highway 88 to be exact.

Yes, Robert Redford hung out for a while in El Dorado County, along with Kristin Scott Thomas, Scarlett Johansson and the rest of the cast and production crew. They’re not the only stars to spend time here.

Moviemaking – from local TV commercials to Oscar-winning films – has become a profitable business in El Dorado County. It’s not hard to understand why: The county can boast of 1,800 square miles of stunning geography, economic diversity, quaint historic towns and great weather.

In turn, film projects, no matter the size, bring in hefty financial resources and often jobs. Production companies pay for the sites they use; and the crews, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, buy food, lodging, coffee, gas, medical care, appliances, even clothes.

The real key to the county's success in winning film contracts, though, isn't its obvious appeal. It's film commissioner Kathleen Dodge, whose formal title is executive director of the El Dorado Lake Tahoe Media and Film Office. Dodge has been nudging movie business to the county since she developed her position 13 years ago. The El Dorado Hills resident runs a one-woman office, housed at the county Chamber of Commerce in Placerville and largely county-funded.

El Dorado County never had a film commissioner until Dodge, who had worked at NBC's Los Angeles affiliate and as an independent producer, wrote a proposal for the job shortly after moving here. No one had heard of El Dorado County at the time, she recalled – "they thought it was in Colorado." Now Dodge is landing as many as 30 projects a year, more than many other locations in what is a keenly competitive industry.

She is successful because she offers filmmakers services that help them complete their jobs quickly and smoothly. "I'm kind of like a trusted guide. They don't want any bad surprises."

The companies know they can rely on Dodge to attend to details – a daunting list that includes scouting for sites, advising on permits, making the cast feel welcome, finding rental homes for actors, hosting premiers and handling public outreach.

At the time of this interview, she was searching for a middle-class farmhouse, an upper-middle-class tract house with a long hall between the kitchen and living room, and a short stretch of train tracks. She figured she'd use tracks in Folsom – she also works with the Folsom Chamber of Commerce – but she would find the houses in her own county.

Selecting a film site involves more than matching a description. The location must be accessible to crews and equipment and laid out to cause a minimum of disruption to the neighborhood. Homes backing up to parks or golf courses and vacant homes, such as vacation houses, are ideal.

Serrano is a particularly popular setting, with its variety of subdivisions and selection of palatial homes, its varied terrain and vistas.

"Serrano has been very film-friendly," Dodge said. "We've used the Town Center, their country club, their golf course, their streets and several homes there."

The classy wedding of Cheryl Ladd and Mike Farrell in "Vows of Deception" (1996) was filmed at the Serrano Country Club. "Gone But Not Forgotten," with Brooke Shields and Lou Diamond Phillips, featured scenes at the Serrano County Club and Town Center,

as well as in Placerville. Several “big, lovely” Serrano homes also have been settings for infomercials, and a salad dressing commercial was filmed on the golf course.

Lori Smith opened her hilltop home on Cordero Drive, along the golf course, for a California Community Colleges public service spot filmed last summer. The shot features movers carrying Smith’s teenage daughter’s purple chaise longue up a long, spectacular curved staircase. At the top, they’re told to take it back down again. The 30-second commercial took about 12 hours to shoot.

Smith was approached four days before the shoot and was at first apprehensive, but it turned out to be a great experience, she says. The work didn’t disrupt the neighborhood and the crews left everything just as they’d found it.

“It was really a kick,” Smith said, “for myself and my family and the neighbors. I’d do it again.”

Another recent Serrano shoot was a popular Raley’s commercial that ran when a new store opened on Green Valley Road in Folsom. In the film, neighbors dropped what they were doing to follow a Raley’s truck up a long, steep hill.

“Raley’s needed something tremendously specific for this commercial,” Dodge says. “The street had to be newer homes in a higher socioeconomic bracket. Since they wanted people running as they followed the truck up the hill, the houses had to be stair-stepped.”

Dodge knew that hilly Serrano would meet Raley’s needs, but she found a street with a back entrance to reduce the disruption to neighbors.

“This was kind of a neat thing for us to be involved in,” said Janet Sherr, marketing director of Parker Development Company and Serrano. “We shut down the neighborhood for the whole afternoon. It was a fairly big production for a few seconds of air time.”

Most participants in a photo shoot are compensated for the use of their property. For Serrano’s cooperation, Raley’s donated \$1,000 to the homeowners association for new trees.

The list of movies that were partly filmed in El Dorado County is long enough now that the Cameron Park Branch Library has collected them into a special display. The oldest one must be 1951’s “A Place in the Sun,” starring Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters at a hardly recognizable Lake Tahoe. “Memoirs of a Geisha” (2005) includes segments made at Pilot Hill and near Latrobe. Major scenes in “Breakdown,” with Kurt Russell, filmed in 1996, were shot under the bridge along Highway 49 at the south fork of the American River.

Other El Dorado films include “Cobb,” “City of Angels,” “Love Comes Softly,”

“Bushwhacked” and “Almost Famous,” Cameron Crowe’s 2003 autobiographical tale.

One of the perks of Dodge’s job, of course, is meeting the stars. She has found them to be almost universally considerate and generous. Alan Alda starred in the first film she landed. When the shooting wrapped, he signed some props that were being left behind so Dodge’s office could later donate them to a fund-raiser.

Last year, Ed Asner appeared in the TV movie “Out of the Woods.” To help the Cameron Park Rotary Club raise money for a planetarium, Dodge, who often speaks to groups, suggested auctioning off an afternoon for two on the set. Though his participation wasn’t part of the auction package, Asner sat down with the winners and chatted with them for an hour. “Ed was so gracious,” Dodge said. “Those people will have such memories and stories to tell.”

She also related an incident about the late Gregory Hines, who made a short film in Georgetown a few years ago. Kids recognized Hines on the way to school and asked if he would come with them for “show and tell.” Hines said he had to go to work, but at lunch time, instead of eating, he drove to the school and sang and danced for the surprised and delighted students.

Surprise and delight also could describe what keeps Dodge so enthusiastic about her job. Every day is different and most days are fun, and she readily admits she couldn’t imagine doing anything else. But one adjective she wouldn’t use is “glamour.” “It’s not a glamorous job,” she said. “It’s a hard job.”

Dodge’s success is El Dorado County’s success. “Anything the film companies spend here is me doing a good job,” she said.

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SIDEBAR

El Dorado County film commissioner Kathleen Dodge is always searching for properties for movies or commercials, and they don’t have to be mansions.

“There are no rules,” she says. “I’m looking for everything. You never know what filmmakers are going to ask for.” The companies do pay to use a property, and some payments are not taxed.

The properties filmmakers may need include all styles of houses, office buildings and interior office space, historic homes and storefronts, ranch lands, and places with specific characteristics such as a barn or a wide front porch.

Properties next to open spaces, such as parks or golf courses, and vacant properties are especially appealing.

Dodge also considers the owner's personality when choosing a property. "Ideally, I look for someone who is naturally a gracious hostess," she says. "Offering your home is kind of like entertaining, only people are paying you." If small stains and scratches set your teeth on edge, then you probably don't want film crews there.

If you have a property you think might interest Dodge, you can find more information and an application online at www.filmtahoe.com. Click on "Community Development" and then open the pdf booklet, "Your Property in a Starring Role." A full application is at the back of the booklet. Dodge requests that you include photos.

If you're a novice or student filmmaker, Dodge might be able to help you, too. Call her at the El Dorado Lake Tahoe Media Film Office at 530-626-4400.