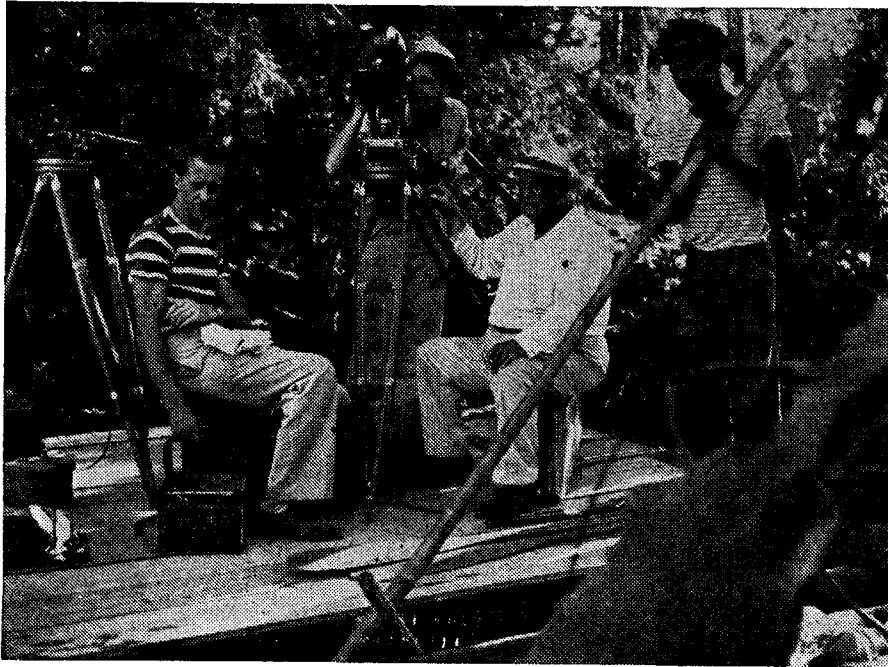


A Flaherty Festival -



—Standard Oil Co. (N. J.).

Flaherty and crew working on "Louisiana Story"—"far more than just a film-maker."

THE PRODUCTION of documentary films, the films of fact and social interpretation, is as sharply individualistic and competitive a field as any on the American scene. The men who make these pictures fight for contracts, watch their costs, operate like keen business men—or go under. All the more remarkable, then, that some seventy-five of America's most prominent fact-film makers through their Screen Directors Guild have come together to do honor to one who is still very much their competitor. For three successive evenings, from January 9 through January 11, they are sponsoring a Flaherty Film Festival at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, a three-part retrospective presentation of the works of Robert J. Flaherty. On the closing night he will be presented with a special award by the Guild.

The answer is that Robert Flaherty is far more than just a film-maker. Not only is he the founder of documentary—it was actually to describe a Flaherty film that John Grierson first coined the word itself—but he has worked constantly to uphold and dignify his medium. From "Nanook of the North" in 1920 to last year's "Louisiana Story" Flaherty has set a record of achievement equaled by few, a record of constant progress.

It was in 1918 that Michigan-born Bob Flaherty first used a movie-camera. Already an experienced explorer through Northern Canada he took one along to supplement the still photographs he habitually made to docu-

ment his explorations. "Nanook" did not result from this trip. According to Flaherty the pictures he brought back that first time were impossible, and the negative was destroyed in a fire anyway. But this experience gave him the basic idea for "Nanook of the North," an idea which he finally succeeded in selling to Revillon Frères, the fur people. In 1920 he returned to the Arctic and spent over a year with the Eskimos there, filming their way of life, creating a sense of their society's structure and the character of the people themselves.

MAKING a Flaherty picture is no simple process. Each of them, whether shot in the Arctic or the South Seas, exotic India or prosaic USA, is produced in precisely the same way. Essentially they are camera explorations—explorations in human geography. He settles in with the people, studies them, becomes part of their community before ever a camera is turned. The theme of the picture develops slowly out of the lives of the people themselves, drawn from his conversations with them and from what he has observed. No set script is ever prepared. Incidents caught by the camera suggest sequences; and entire sequences are completed that may be supplanted by better later ones.

Flaherty learned early the sad fact that simply making a documentary is not enough, that there remains still the fight to get it shown to an audience. With "Nanook" he tramped from distributor to distributor and

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met with refusal after refusal until Pathé—with some prodding from Revillon Frères—agreed to handle the release. Only after the astounding European successes of "Nanook" did the American film companies realize that they had something special in their hands. Perhaps they were not too aware just what that something was, but the belated success of "Nanook" in this country was enough to make Paramount give Flaherty carte blanche to go off and make "another 'Nanook'."

After two years he returned with "Moana," an exquisite film record of life in Samoa. And the fight to get his pictures on the screens of America began all over again. Paramount expected another "Nanook," not an idyl of the South Seas. "But there's no blizzard in it!" one executive expostulated. The distributors were at a loss to exploit something this far off the beaten track. Only after a great deal of hard argument was Flaherty able to win a grudging trial run for his picture. Six of the toughest show towns in the United States were selected. If the picture succeeded in all of them Paramount would put "Moana" into general distribution; if it failed the picture would be shelved.

The trial screenings were all extremely successful. But Paramount failed to see the implications of Flaherty's campaign which brought into theatres for the first time the tremendous latent audience that exists in this country for better films. They released "Moana" as an ordinary exploitation feature, sold it as "The Love Life of a South Seas Siren," and as such it flopped — although European success was again phenomenal.

It has been the same story with variations for all the subsequent Flaherty pictures—"Tabu," "Man of Aran," "Elephant Boy," "The Land," even the recent "Louisiana Story," although to a far less extent. They fit uncomfortably into the normal distribution channels, lend themselves not at all to routine exploitation schemes.

What commercial distributors pointedly ignore is the longevity of a work of art—even a work of film art. "Nanook" has been in constant circulation since 1922 (and carrying with it everywhere the name of its sponsors, Revillon Frères). Only recently it was re-released in this country with a new sound score, as was "Tabu" of 1931. Great films never die.

In arranging this program of pictures by Robert Flaherty—the first time any director has been so honored in this country—the Screen Directors Guild salutes a true pioneer, the man who blazed the trail for American documentary. —ARTHUR KNIGHT.

The Film Forum

DOCUMENTARY MASTERPIECE

The Saturday Review's Guide to Selected 16mm. Sound Films.

NANOOK OF THE NORTH

Produced by Robert Flaherty for Revillon Frères. Directed and photographed by Robert Flaherty. New sound version produced by Herbert Edwards with commentary by Ralph Schoolman, and music by Rudolph Schramm. (55 min.)

There couldn't be a nicer New Year's present to 16mm. film users than the news that Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North" is now available for non-theatrical screening. However you look at the film—as one of the all-time classics in motion-picture history, as one of the great grandparents of the present-day documentary film, as a striking photographic achievement, as an exciting romance of life in the Arctic, or as an epic tale of man against the elements—one thing is certain: "Nanook of the North" is a wonderful film, and Robert Flaherty is a greater man for having made it.

The history of this film is only one small chapter in the remarkable history of Flaherty himself. Flaherty, according to all accounts, was and still is a man of remarkable wit and warmth, unconventionality and stoutheartedness. He began working as a mining engineer and explorer and on one of his early ventures into the Arctic took a camera to record what he saw. The film he brought back from this trip was subsequently destroyed by fire from his own cigarette. But the loss was not mourned, for Flaherty found that he had taken a series of unrelated shots—"a scene of this and a scene of that." It was enough to make him decide to go back and make a really good film about Eskimo life.

After having been turned down by a number of potential backers Flaherty interested the Paris fur company Revillon Frères in financing his trip and his film. The Eastman Kodak Company showed him how to develop and print his film as he shot it, so that he could see the "rushes" as he worked. The equipment was heavy and often had to be carried over long portages. Flaherty nearly froze to death on several occasions. He spent another year with the Eskimos, and he seems to have loved every minute of it.

When he returned to New York he had a film the likes of which had never before been exhibited. And within the next few years it was seen and loved by people all over the world. Now that 16mm. distribution of "Nanook" has been announced, twenty-eight years after the first release of the film, it seems unlikely that its popularity will ever diminish. This new sound version adds to it a remarkably fine commentary and musical score.

Nanook, the hero of the film, is an Eskimo of great prowess and beauty, who performs before the camera in much the same spirit as Flaherty performs behind it. So closely related are these two that one feels it a mere geographical whim of nature that one man was the director and one the protagonist.

Good humor is the keynote of the film, despite the grimness of the setting. Everyone seems to be playing jokes on everyone else. There are so many little jokes that sometimes it is hard to tell where they begin and end. In the introductory scene, for example, who can help laughing when about a dozen happy people—men, women, and children—crawl out of the top of what seems to be a bottomless kayak? And who is kidding whom when later at the trading post Nanook bites into a phonograph record which he grinningly has mistaken for a new kind of canned food? After trading his furs for civilized products he presumably has no interest in (practically no equipment or clothes or food from the outside world appear in the rest of the film) Nanook sets off in the same jovial manner for a new year of catching fish through ice holes, hunting for food and fur, building magnificent one-night homes, outwitting and outpulling walrus, and in general providing for his family and his dogs as well as a man can be expected to, circumstances being what they are.

There is beauty in "Nanook of the North"—real beauty seldom equaled on the screen: the faces and postures of the people and animals; the skilled hand at work on an igloo; the peaceful dogs rolled up into snowy roundnesses on a stormy night; expanses of snow, hills and valleys, light and shadow. And there is drama such as only a skilled artist can convey: hunting, eating, and sleeping; the training of the child to take the place of the father; the fierceness of starving huskies; the limp, dead seal; the code of the walrus; the menacing sky; the magnitude of the place and the occasion.

As long as films can be preserved, and longer, this film will live as a masterpiece unique in motion-picture history. But my word is not enough—here are comments of other reviewers: "It contains more beauty, drama, suspense, and excitement than a dozen average films." "Every shot is composed with the eye of an artist." "Nanook" is film-making as we had almost forgotten it—a sequence of moving pictures telling their own story through the eye." "What gives 'Nanook' its astonishing vitality? The secret is something in Flaherty himself."

—CECILE STARR.

For information about the purchase or rental of any films, please write to Film Department, The Saturday Review, 25 West 45th St., New York 19, N. Y.