

## CHUCK DUNKERLY

MADISON: Today is March 19th, 2009, and we have with us today Chuck Dunkerly who is a producer and director for the National Park Service. He has come out to Shepherdstown today to screen his most recent film "Land of Dreams: Homesteading in America." So welcome, Chuck. Glad you're here.

DUNKERLY: Thank you.

MADISON: Tell us a little about your most recent film, what's about.

DUNKERLY: "Land of Dreams: Homesteading in America" takes a look at the 130 years of the Homestead Act. The Homestead Act was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, and it went all the way up to -- into the '80s before people stopped homesteading. 93 million Americans are descendant from homesteaders. And it's just a huge, huge story in American history.

In this film, briefly in 20 minutes, briefly touches on that history and the impacts today. We went out, we talked to homesteaders in Alaska who actually did homestead and gained title to the land. We talked to homestead descendants whose parents -- or grandparents had homesteaded land, and they used to actually live on the farms that were homesteaded. And we also talked to American Indians who were displaced from those lands by the government so they could be made available for homesteading.

To try to get this complicated land story told, it's a huge, huge transformation of land through the Western states. Homesteading also affects the Southeast as well, but mainly when you look at it, the largest numbers were in the Western states, and it's a huge transformation of land. So we look at that,

we explore that in the film, and it was just a fantastic process to go through.

MADISON: Great. What was the most interesting thing you learned in the process of making this particular film?

DUNKERLY: Oh, wow, two phase... the one is just being able to meet the -- the actual homesteaders and the people who were descendants of homesteaders still on the land, still on the land they had homesteaded.

The stories they have are just fascinating to me, the amount of tenacity and forethought and -- or lack of forethought, you know, just being lucky. All the different ways people made it work -- made it go out there, and a lot of the ways people didn't make it work.

And also learning about the American Indian story and how that wave across the country actually took place and what the government's role was in it and how they're doing today and how the farmers are doing today as well.

It's amazing to stand in the high plains of Montana where they're bringing in wheat and you're on a 10,000 acre farm and, you know, I tell the guy, "I don't even know what 10,000 acres looks like."

MADISON: Right.

DUNKERLY: And he points it out to me. "You can see so far."

MADISON: Was it very big? I don't know if --

DUNKERLY: It was gigantic. It was miles and miles by miles and miles, but you just see that far. And everyone up there has about that much land just to make a living. So you'll be driving 20 miles down a dirt road with nothing but wheat on either side of you and no house in sight. And it's just an amazing -- the scale of that sort of production and the scope of what that takes and the money

that it takes to do that is just incredible, and to think it all started with some immigrants from Northern Europe and a bottom plow and picking rock out of those fields, you know, just to really -- not too long ago, early 20th century -- really throws your mind for a loop.

MADISON: Where can people, besides tonight in Shepherdstown, where can people see this film? And describe the park a little.

DUNKERLY: The film is screened daily all day out at Homestead National Monument of America, and that's in Beatrice, Nebraska. So if you're familiar with Nebraska, it's about 45 minutes south of Lincoln, is where it is. And it's a beautiful little town in Eastern Nebraska, and the park is an interesting site in that it's the site of the very first homestead. Daniel Freeman, he staked his claim January 1st at 12:01 a.m., 1863. So he was the very first person to claim land. He was the very first person to prove up. And it's the site of the first homestead.

So that -- this little site, just a few hundred acres, commemorates this huge American story. And they just built a brand-new gorgeous museum, just opened two years ago, film opened last year, new exhibits all throughout, and it does a great job of telling the story in depth, and the staff out there is fantastic and they have a great historian and ask answer any questions. And the film can also be bought through them. So if you're not planning any trips to Nebraska but want to see the film, if you go to [www.nps.gov/home](http://www.nps.gov/home), you can get a contact for us and give a call out to the park and find out what that is.

MADISON: Great. Chuck, tell us a little about your background. How did you become a producer/director for the National Park Service?

DUNKERLY: I went to school at Shepherd University and graduated with

a degree in communications and a minor in theater, and wanted to do film, but there were -- at the time there wasn't a lot of filmmaking schools outside of Hollywood, or feature sort of work, and I was very interested in documentary work. So when I left shepherd, I started to volunteer at the National Park Service, which had just a great film unit there, and started editing, started working with producers there, got mentored by everyone there and learned the ropes at Harpers Ferry Center, worked my way up through the line, and now I'm producer/director there and have -- feel I have big shoes to fill at that position because there's some really great producers who have retired, some great producers who are there, and it's just a great -- it's great colleagues to have that always push you to perform well. So that's how I got to where I am.

MADISON: What are some of the other films you worked on before "Land of Dreams"?

DUNKERLY: Some of the films, I produced a film on leave no trace ethics, backcountry ethics, which will be redistributed this spring going -- it's about the seven principles of leave no trace and -- that about says it.

MADISON: It's a great film. We're excited to have it rereleased.

DUNKERLY: And worked on an interpretive film for Olympic National Park on the Olympic Peninsula and also worked on a film for Selma-to-Montgomery National Historic Trail which commemorates the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and that Tim Bradford actually produced and directed both of those films. I was coproducer on Olympic.

But those films were very -- large jobs and very important stories as well, especially the Voting Rights Act because -- probably about a million-dollar

production and lots of products that spun off of it.

But those are some of the other jobs that I have.

Currently ongoing right now, I'm executive producing the exhibit elements -- the A-B exhibit elements for U.S.S. Arizona Memorial, the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor December 7th. And I'm making -- actually producing a film for -- a new film for Lake Mead National Recreation Area out in Nevada. So looking forward to sinking my teeth into those.

MADISON: Well, thanks for coming in to NCTC today, Chuck. Thanks for doing this Podcast.