

NEWS RELEASE

June 26, 2002

For immediate release

The Spirit Wrestlers premieres on History Television, July 31

It was Canada's most protracted terrorist threat.

What had begun with the use of nudity as a form of political protest, soon escalated and from the 1920s to the 1980s, waves of bombings and arson destroyed schools, railway tracks, bridges, power poles, public buildings and homes.

The protesters were Sons of Freedom, or "Freedomites" a small group of pacifist and communalist Russian immigrants--Doukhobors who had begun arriving in Canada at the turn of the century and who had, since that time suffered mistreatment and persecution for their beliefs.

The Spirit Wrestlers, by Vancouver filmmaker Jim Hamm, takes a vivid look at this troubled episode in Canadian history. It premieres on *History Television*, **Wednesday, July 31 at 9:00 pm ET**.

While the mistreatment of Doukhobors had started with their arrival at the turn of the century, it was during the 50s and 60s that the British Columbia government seized 170 children of the Sons of Freedom sect in an attempt to bring this group to heel.

The children were held for six years behind chain link fences at a residential school. Today, a lot of those former students have taken their case to court demanding compensation. It was only one of many heavy-handed methods taken by federal and provincial authorities in their attempt to assimilate generation after generation of Doukhobor children.

Director Jim Hamm has uncovered previously untapped archival records, film and photographic evidence to explore this thorny issue through the eyes of children ensnared in a net fashioned by others. In interviews with Orthodox Doukhobors, former Freedomites, retired RCMP officers and historians, Hamm has created a remarkable film, which makes an important contribution to Canada's social history. The film was written by Larry Hannant and PJ Reece.

The Spirit Wrestlers was recently seen at Hot Docs in Toronto (May 2002) and received a Leo Award nomination (celebrating excellence in B.C. film & television) for Best Sound Editing in a Documentary Program.

Produced by Jim Hamm Productions Ltd., in association with History Television, Vision TV, Knowledge Network and Saskatchewan Communications Network. Produced with the participation of the CTF: Licence Fee Program, BC; Film Television and Film Financing Program, Canadian Heritage: Canadian Studies Program, Rogers Documentary Fund, CAVCO and Film Incentive BC. ©2002 Closed Captioned.

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THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

Synopsis

The Spirit Wrestlers is a vivid 94-minute look at a troubled episode in Canadian history. Examining a century of Doukhobor experience in this country, it focuses on the harrowing events in the 1950s and 60s.

It was then that the British Columbia provincial government, in an attempt to bring to heel a small group of pacifist and communalist Russian immigrants, seized 170 children of the Sons of Freedom sect, a small and radical offshoot of the Doukhobors. The children were held for six years behind wire fences at a residential school. Today, 125 of those former students have taken their case to court, demanding compensation.

The Spirit Wrestlers explores this thorny issue through the eyes of children ensnared in a net fashioned by others. A POV documentary, the film shows that seizing these children was just one of many heavy-handed methods taken by federal and provincial authorities in their attempt to assimilate generation after generation of Doukhobor children.

Doukhobors have at times been treated heartlessly. To call attention to their plight, many Sons of Freedom, or “Freedomites” as they were often called, used nudity as a form of political protest. But as protest escalated some of these Freedomites, began committing violent terrorist acts. From the 1920s to the 1980s, waves of bombings and arsons destroyed schools, railway tracks, bridges, power poles, public buildings and homes. In the early 1960s, jail sentences for Doukhobors totaling more than 2000 years were imposed by courts in British Columbia. Their acts constituted Canada's most protracted terrorist threat.

The Spirit Wrestlers is the story of this tempestuous relationship. It asks the questions: When a nation prides itself on being a multicultural society, what happens when one group demands special treatment? Does support for diversity extend to allowing people to live in ways that defy our accepted social, religious and economic norms? In a democracy, is the majority prepared to allow a difficult minority to flourish?

Director Jim Hamm uncovers previously untapped archival records, film and photographic evidence. In interviews with Orthodox Doukhobors, former Freedomites, retired RCMP officers and historians, Hamm has created a remarkable film, which makes an important contribution to Canada's social history.

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THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

BIOGRAPHIES

JIM HAMM

Producer / Director

Jim Hamm has been writing, producing and directing documentaries for through his company, Jim Hamm Productions Limited since 1983. He has a degree in History, a Teaching Certificate and Film Studies from Simon Fraser University. Jim creates award winning environmental, social and political documentaries for broadcast.

His most recent documentary **TURNING DOWN THE HEAT: The New Energy Revolution**, a co-production with the *NFB*, was broadcast on *CBC's Nature of Things*. Narrated by Dr. David Suzuki, the film travels the world showcasing renewable energy and energy efficiency as practical and economically viable solutions to global climate change.

Two previous films broadcast on CBC Newsworld *Rough Cuts* were **Between The Rock and A Hard Place**, about Newfoundlanders who have started a new life in Fort Nelson, British Columbia and **The Air We Breathe**, an examination of urban smog and transportation in several North American cities that was co-produced with the *NFB*.

Smile And Dial, a docu-drama exposing a charity fundraising scam that used teenagers as telephone solicitors in an environment reminiscent of a Dickens novel was broadcast on CBC *Canadian Perspectives*. It was screened at the Grierson Documentary Festival and the Vancouver International Film Festival,

Over the years Jim has line-produced, production managed and location managed dramatic features, docu-dramas and television series.

LARRY HANNANT

Co-writer / Researcher

Dr. Hannant is an author, broadcaster and professional historian. He has written **The Infernal Machine: Investigating the Loyalty of Canada's Citizens**, which examines the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's scrutiny of civil servants and armed forces personnel in the years up to 1945. His most recent book, **The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art**, won the *Robert S. Kenny Prize*.

Dr. Hannant also writes articles for newspapers, magazines and journals and has broadcast for CBC national radio's This Morning program. His profile of Dr. Norman Bethune's relationship with writer Ted Allan appeared in the April 1998 issue of **Saturday Night** magazine. Dr. Hannant reviews films for the **Canadian Historical Review** and has published a number of popular history articles in **The Beaver: Exploring Canada's History**.

Over the past ten years he has been a professor of history at Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria and currently at Camosun College.

PJ REECE
Co-writer

PJ Reece graduated from the University of Alberta in 1967 with a Geography degree. He immediately took up residence in the Zambian bush and for two years maintained a hydrological survey on the rivers of central Africa.

Fifteen years a director/cameraman, Reece co-founded Edmonton's Filmwest Associates. Since trading the camera for the pen eight years ago, Reece has inked ten feature film scripts, a novel, numerous documentaries, a play and several articles. He has collaborated with Jim Hamm (the producer) on Jim's last three documentaries, **The Air We Breathe**, **Between The Rock and a Hard Place** and **Turning Down The Heat: The New Energy Revolution**.

Reece is currently the writer and story editor for the series, **Weird Homes** and **Weird Wheels**. The previous year he wrote and directed an episode of **Storm Warnings**.

Urban Safari, Reece's first feature (co-edited) is a wacky escapade set in a Manhattan apartment. An insanely ambitious family tries to maintain the illusion of success.

His **Days of Black and White** was a finalist (top 8 out of 4,000) in the prestigious *Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowship* competition sponsored by "The Academy".

Electrojuice, scripted by Reece, won enough awards around the world in 1993 to earn an invitation to be screened for an *Oscar nomination in Short Subject*. The same film earned Reece a *runner-up citation in the first John Cleese Award* for humour at the *1994 Cindy Awards* in Los Angeles.

Smoke That Thunders and **Billy Gun** are currently under option.

Smoke That Thunders, the novel, is recently published.

The following are descriptions for the photos on the JPEG Format CD provided.

1. Child Arrest For THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

A Sons of Freedom Doukhobor girl being apprehended by RCMP officers for not attending school as her distraught mother looks on. The child was then taken to join other Freedomite children at the New Denver Sanitarium. Probably Krestova, B.C. circ. 1954.

2. Children in jail For THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

Doukhobor children surrounded by barbed wire fences in Nelson jail complex after the arrests of over 600 Sons of Freedom and Orthodox Doukhobors for nudity in mass political protests repeated over several weekends at Thrums, B.C. Nelson British Columbia, 1932.

3. Family in jail For THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

Doukhobor family surrounded by barbed wire fences in Nelson jail complex after the arrests of over 600 Sons of Freedom and Orthodox Doukhobors for nudity in mass political protests repeated over several weekends at Thrums, B.C. Nelson British Columbia, 1932.

4. Director Jim Hamm (Vertical framing)

Orthodox Doukhobor communal house in background. National Doukhobor Heritage Village, Verigin, Saskatchewan, May 2001.

5. Police and nudist 1950

Sons of Freedom members partially disrobed and kneeling (a splinter group of the Doukhobors) while being questioned in a farmyard by B.C. Provincial Police. Krestova, 1950

THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

Short Synopsis (38 words)

Jim Hamm's feature documentary lays bare the brutal ways that successive governments' sought to forcibly assimilate generations of Sons of Freedom Doukhobors, producing in response, the most sustained campaign of terrorist bombings and burnings ever seen in Canada.

THE SPIRIT WRESTLERS

Short Synopsis (59 words)

The Spirit Wrestlers exposes the troubling story of the century of Doukhobor life in Canada. The film lays bare the sometimes-brutal ways that successive governments' sought to forcibly assimilate generations of a unique and stubborn group of Russian immigrants. Producing in response, some of Canada's worst acts of terrorism, perpetrated by a radical Doukhobor faction, the Sons of Freedom.