

Feather River Bulletin

Portola Reporter

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'A Human Comedy' Portola backdrop for film

By Sandra Gubel
Portola Editor

A young boy ran to the railroad tracks. When he reached the crossing, he was just in time to see the passing of the whole train, from locomotive to caboose.

"He waved to the engineer, but the engineer did not wave back to him. He waved to five others who were on the train, but not one of them waved back. They might have done so, but they didn't.

"At last a Negro appeared leaning over the side of a gondola. Above the clatter of the train, the boy heard the man singing ...

"Ulysses waved to the Negro, too, and then a wondrous and unexpected thing happened. This man, black and different from all the others, waved back to Ulysses

"... "The small boy and the Negro waved to one another until the train was almost out of sight.

"Then Ulysses looked around. There it was, all around him, funny and lonely — the world of his life. The strange, weed-infested, junky, wonderful, senseless yet beautiful world ..."

This scene, the beginning of the humanist writer-playwright William Saroyan's "The Human Comedy," was recently filmed for a documentary illustrating the late

Pulitzer Prize-winner's life. The backdrop was the Portola Railroad Museum.

As the friendliness the black man demonstrated, the young boy, Saroyan as a child, was a great influence to the writer, another great influence extends to this time. Paul Kalinian, a Fresno photographer, was so moved by his contacts with Saroyan that he has endeavored, at great personal expense, to put the life and times of Saroyan on film.

The production, is expected to debut at a gala affair in Saroyan's birthplace, Fresno, next year. It will later be donated to public television stations and educational institutions across the country, said Kalinian.

Kalinian, his bald head shaded by a floppy fisherman's hat, has never made a movie before. He admitted that he never expected so much work, but he called it a labor of love.

He spoke of the first time he met the reclusive painter of words, explaining what made Saroyan tick.

Numerous shots of the Feather River Rail Society's oldest flatcar, pulled by a diesel locomotive, were filmed to put together the particular segment of about one minute.

Bruce Cooper engineered the train, pulling it forward and back countless times.

Local "actors," playing the part of the hobos, black and white, included rail fans Hap Manit, Ken Roller and Rich Lema. Another "hobo" on the splintering flatcar was a visitor to the museum on the particular day in May.

Harold Kalinian, son of the film's producer, also played a hobo role. Fred Kent of Portola portrayed the part of the memorable black man.

Kalinian was tipped off to the local museum as a site for filming from Portola resident Doris Hyder, who also has a home in Fresno.

While Kalinian is an accomplished studio portrait photographer, the occupation is now a sideline to put food on the table, he said. The dream of completing the film dominates his waking hours.

Kalinian receives requests from around the world for reprints of the photos which first brought him in contact with the man of modest beginnings.

Although he could have capitalized on the photos, rare glimpses of the elusive writer, Kalinian takes a kind of Saroyan like pride in what he has done.