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Rex and Root: An Original Documentary

Chase Hartsell

Ouachita Baptist University

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Rex and Root: An Original Documentary”

written by

Chase Hartsell

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Professor Chris Babb, thesis director

Professor Brad Pierce, second reader

Dr. Jackson Carter, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 23, 2024

Rex and Root: An Original Documentary

Chase Hartsell

Ouachita Baptist University

Introduction to *Rex and Root*

There is no other friendship in the world like the one shared by Ouachita play-by-play announcer Rex Nelson and Ouachita color analyst Dr. Jeff Root. It's the kind of friendship that can only happen in Arkadelphia: a town of just over 10,000 residents in south central Arkansas. It's the kind of friendship that can only happen at a college like Ouachita Baptist University: a liberal arts institution of less than 2,000 students running alongside the Ouachita River (which gave the school its name). It's the kind of friendship that can only happen when the son of a sporting goods dealer and the son of schoolteachers grow up together in the same Ouachita Hills neighborhood. This is the kind of friendship where childhood best friends spend over 40 years (and counting) working together as broadcasting partners.

The one-of-a-kind story of Nelson and Root deserves to be shared with the world. That is exactly what this project seeks to do. *Rex and Root* is an original documentary short film that provides an overview of Nelson and Root's lives, showing how they've established and maintained a lasting friendship and working partnership. Information in the film comes directly from the source via interviews with Nelson, Root, their friends, and their families. Interviews are supported by archival photos, video, and audio from the duo's experiences both inside and outside of the broadcast booth. The director's hope is that, by combining these elements, viewers will receive an authentic, intimate look at the bond between two notable Ouachitonians.

Documentary Analysis

Introduction

Prior to *Rex and Root*, I had not started a new documentary project since 2020. As a result of this fact, I wanted to go back to my roots to look at projects that influenced me as a filmmaker but also to look at new offerings within the documentary genre. In the fall of 2023, I conducted a directed study titled “The Art of the Sports Feature and Sports Documentary.” My hope was to analyze successful, even award-winning projects from the last decade and find techniques that could be beneficial to my new film. The original study consisted of eight sports features and documentaries from less than five minutes to nearly two hours in runtime. These projects also included productions from Arkansas storytellers as well as work from national outlets. For the purposes of my thesis, I later did a deeper dive into three of the documentary films:

- *The First Boys of Springs* - Arkansas
- *Facing Nolan* - National
- *The Queen of Basketball* - National

The following information in this section consists of my findings from these analyses.

The First Boys of Spring

The first documentary that I analyzed was one of the first documentaries I ever watched, and it is also one of the main sources that inspired me to pursue documentary filmmaking in the first place. That film is *The First Boys of Spring*. *The First Boys of Spring*

is a 2015 release by Professor Larry Foley from the School of Journalism and Strategic Media at the University of Arkansas. Like *Rex and Root*, *The First Boys of Spring* is produced out of a college media department. Unlike *Rex and Root*, however, Foley's project had the benefit of a \$12,500 budget and an eight-time Emmy Award-winning director ("First Boys of Spring"). My project is made on virtually no budget and, while I have won four Student Production Awards from the Mid-America Emmys (including three in my time at Ouachita), I do not have nearly the same level of experience in the industry as Foley. Fortunately, I had the chance to learn about the director's process from the man himself when I interviewed Foley for my 2019 high school documentary *Preserving America's Pastime*.

During my interview with Larry Foley, the award-winning director told me that he became inspired to direct and produce *Preserving America's Pastime* after experiencing the Hot Springs Historic Baseball Trail while on a promotional visit for his other films. The film focuses on Hot Springs' status as the city that inspired and housed the creation of professional baseball's spring training tradition. The city's rich baseball history is highlighted through the perspectives of notable ballplayers and other cultural figures that frequented the area in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Since most of the individuals from this group have passed away, Foley recruited voice actors to recreate quotes said or written by the actual people discussed in the film (Foley). Thankfully, I did not have to recruit voice actors to play Rex Nelson and Dr. Jeff Root, as both men are alive, well, and able to speak for themselves. The idea of people-focused storytelling, on the other hand, is at the heart of *Rex and Root*.

Upon reviewing *The First Boys of Spring* recently, I noticed that it employs what is known in documentary filmmaking as "the Ken Burns effect." According to Backstage,

which provides resources and casting opportunities for creatives in film and other media, “The Ken Burns effect is a pan or zoom added in post-production across a still image.” This slight movement often highlights certain details in a still image or is used to add visual interest to the scene - especially in documentaries (“The Ken Burns Effect”). Foley, on the other hand, goes a step further by layering the still image over a blurred video or background image. Over the years, I have developed my own modified version of the Ken Burns effect that utilizes a similar technique to Foley’s (though I blur my background images to a different degree and almost exclusively use still images for said background). Such an effect can be seen at multiple points throughout my creative project.

Finally, one of the techniques that Foley specifically mentioned to me during our 2019 interview was the idea of “book-ending” his film. To visualize the concept, one must look at a film’s runtime as a bookshelf. At the end of this bookshelf are two bookends - one representing the introduction of the film, and the other representing the conclusion of the film. The books in the middle are the remainder of the film’s runtime. Bookends appear virtually the same, meaning that, in this example, the introduction and the conclusion of the film will address relatively the same idea or topic. The key is finding a way to use the books in the middle to complete the story’s circle. If the director does so successfully, he or she has successfully “book-ended” the film, which is exactly what Larry Foley does through the example of the Hot Springs Baseball Trail plaques in his own film (Foley). “Book-ending” is used to a small degree within *Rex and Root*. The interview portion of the film opens and closes with the same interview of Rex Nelson. The film starts with examples of Nelson and Root’s commentary work before going back to their childhood and slowly unrolling the story of how the two got to where they are now in the profession.

Facing Nolan

Similar to *The First Boys of Spring*, Netflix's *Facing Nolan* is a feature-length documentary rooted in baseball. This, however, is about where the similarities end. *Facing Nolan* is not the work of a college communications department but professional studios TBD Post and The Ranch Productions. It is the only film in my analysis to receive a widespread theatrical release, which earned the film over \$400,000 at box offices across the United States ("Facing Nolan").

Facing Nolan documents the life and career of National Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan. The film begins with a cold open that shows Ryan's 5,714th career strikeout - the final of his career - before going back to the first stages of his life in Alvin, Texas, and slowly working back to that final strikeout (Jackson). This is another example of the "book-ending" technique that Foley detailed above. In the childhood section of the documentary, in particular, Nolan's family and friends introduce and describe notable locations from the pitcher's formative years. All the while, photos show the locations as they appeared then, while modern video recordings display those same locations' current states (Jackson). *Rex and Root* tackles the titular men's young lives in a similar way. Rex Nelson and Jeff Root describe growing up in their Ouachita Hills neighborhood as photos show what they actually experienced and videos reveal what some of their favorite childhood spots look like today.

One technique that *Facing Nolan* does not share with *Rex and Root*, however, is dramatic recreations of the subject's experiences. From rides around the neighborhood as a newspaper boy to notable strikeouts in Major League Baseball games, *Facing Nolan* often recreates key moments from Ryan's life as a way of illustrating said moments to the audience. Actors' faces are almost always omitted, but enough detail is given to assume that the person being portrayed is Ryan (Jackson). The director likely chose to implement these recreations as a way to heighten the drama of important anecdotes and give a close-up glimpse into scenes that fans may not have experienced firsthand. Using such a technique can be a gamble, as such dramatizations can take away from the realism of the moment. *Facing Nolan's* crew, though, uses the scenes sparsely, and the segments carry greater weight as a result (Jackson). While I will not be using the same strategy in *Rex and Root*, I will keep it in mind for future projects.

The Queen of Basketball

Unlike the documentaries mentioned above, *The Queen of Basketball* is a documentary short (22-minute runtime) rather than a full-length film. Also unlike those documentaries, *The Queen of Basketball* is an Academy Award winner in the category of Best Documentary Short. Produced by *The New York Times*, the film recounts the remarkable career of Lusia Harris: the first (and, thus far, only) woman to ever be drafted to the National Basketball Association (Proudfoot).

In contrast to aforementioned films, *The Queen of Basketball* features only one interview subject: Lusia Harris. The interview shots do not use the typical setup of a medium shot abiding by the rule of thirds. Instead, the camera is consistently zoomed in tight on

Lusia's face, which is front and center for the audience to see (Proudfoot). While this type of angle is not utilized in *Rex and Root*, it is very effective at capturing the emotion on Harris' face (which was likely the director's intent). The film also stays away from the Ken Burns effect, simply using still images as points of emphasis within the B-roll (shots layered over the top of the actual interview - referred to as the A-roll) of the film (Proudfoot). I did not practice this technique within *Rex and Root* but, similar to *Facing Nolan's* dramatizations, I will remember it as a tool for potential use in future projects.

While there are evident contrasts in the style of this project and my own, this film (among the three analyzed) is the most similar to *Rex and Root* in terms of format. *Rex and Root*, like *The Queen of Basketball*, is a documentary short (though my project possesses a shorter runtime). Delta State, Lusia's alma mater and the main setting of the film, is an NCAA Division II institution in the southern United States (Cleveland, Mississippi) (Proudfoot). This setting is very similar to the NCAA Division II setting of Ouachita Baptist University in the southern United States (Arkadelphia, Arkansas). As a result, there is a chance that the films feature slight cultural overlap despite the distinct nature of their topics. Finally, *The Queen of Basketball* utilizes photographs, videos, and archival resources to help its story flow as natural as possible - especially in transitions (Proudfoot). *Rex and Root* looks to use archival resources for the same purpose, even if the actual style of presentation is marginally different.

Researching and Producing *Rex and Root*

Pre-Production Research/Interviews

During the pre-production process, I created a pool of approximately one dozen candidates for interviews to be featured in the film. This pool included Rex Nelson, Dr. Jeff Root, and various friends, family, and community members from both Arkadelphia and Ouachita. Due to limits in both production time and the film's runtime, I ultimately chose to conduct five interviews for the project. These interviews included:

- Rex Nelson
- Dr. Jeff Root
- Dr. Deborah Root
- Lynda Samons
- Chris Babb

The rationale behind Nelson and Root's selections is obvious: they are, after all, the focus of the film. Dr. Deborah Root is Dr. Jeff Root's wife, with the two having met when they were undergraduate students at Ouachita Baptist University (OBU). From student editors to graduate students to communication specialists to college professors, Jeff and Deborah have consistently worked alongside one another. They embrace the possibilities of working together, and they do so at nearly every chance that they get. Dr. Deborah Root can provide a wealth of perspective on this unique relationship - an interesting, complimentary one to that of Jeff and Rex. As Jeff's wife, she understands her husband as well as anyone on the planet. At the same time, she offers a one-of-a-kind point of view when it comes to the friendship of the film's subjects.

Lynda Samons, on the other hand, is Rex Nelson's sister. She also grew up in the Ouachita Hills neighborhood and attended college at Ouachita Baptist University, meaning she could provide insight into Rex and Jeff's early lives and friendship. She could also give

more context on how their relationship has evolved from younger children to experienced professionals in their craft. Furthermore, Samons has invaluable knowledge on the Ouachita Hills and OBU communities.

Chris Babb was selected due to his extensive experience working with both Rex Nelson and Dr. Jeff Root. Babb is a 1999 graduate of OBU, where he studied under both Dr. Jeff Root and Dr. Deborah Root. He also worked alongside Jeff on Arkadelphia High School football broadcasts during his college years - a trend he has continued into his professional career. Today, Babb is a professor in the Rogers Department of Communications - a department deaned by Dr. Jeff Root. In terms of working with Nelson, Babb started calling Ouachita Football Network broadcasts with Rex as a college student. Babb remains an active member of the Ouachita Football Network as he directs and advises his own student-led broadcasting network at the university: the Ouachita Sports Digital Network. Babb is continuously communicating with both Nelson and Root, further adding to his status as an ideal candidate for interviews.

I conducted the five interviews between the months of August 2023 and April 2024. Sessions ranged between 20 minutes and roughly 70 minutes in length, with the longer interviews belonging to the film's subjects. The location of the interview varied for each interviewee, meaning that the film features five unique interview locations. Each location serves its own unique purpose - whether it be a traditional podcast studio, an office, or even a dining room table. All five interviews take place indoors. The intimate settings seek to welcome the viewer into the story. They seek to provide a space where it appears as if the interviewee on screen is having a one-on-one conversation with the audience member.

While interview setups were designed to ensure the viewer does not feel intimidated, they still employ professional techniques. Lighting consisted of two or three lighting sources, which produced a three-point lighting system of a main light, fill light, and backlight. Light sources included studio lights, table and floor lamps, room interior lighting, and natural light from windows.

To record the actual video of the interviews themselves, I used a Canon XF300 model camera and tripod. Footage was recorded on a collection of CompactFlash cards, with clips later being downloaded to a computer and imported into an Adobe Premiere Pro file for editing. Each interview shot employed the rule of thirds, with the interviewee (the point of interest in the shot) sitting in either the left or right third while facing the open two-thirds of the frame. All five interview shots were conducted at a medium angle (i.e. torso and up) that allowed for an appropriate amount of space both above and to the side of the interviewee. In the final film, the interviewees are introduced by name via a lower-third graphic at the bottom of the screen. These graphics were made from a custom template on Adobe's Photoshop program.

I recorded interview audio through a Sennheiser wireless lavalier microphone set (the 100 G2 wireless model, to be precise). Audio is sent wirelessly from the microphone to the camera via a wireless transmitter connected to the camera itself. I monitored levels through the camera's display and made level adjustments as needed both during and post-production. Post-production edits were made through features built into the Adobe Premiere Pro editing software.

Collecting B-Roll

As I interviewed the individuals featured in the film, I asked them for access to any photos, videos, or archival resources they had related to the subjects they discussed in their sessions. In addition to these personal photos, I also collected B-roll from Ouachita publications as well as select regional and nationwide outlets. The B-roll also includes a few instances of stock footage, with these clips being used via a license with Envato Elements. Each external source of footage or visuals is cited in the film's credits.

Editing the Film

After interviews had been conducted and B-roll had been collected, I began editing the film in Adobe Premiere Pro. All editing took place on a desktop Mac in Room 341 at Ouachita's Lile Hall. I uploaded the full interviews into the program and selected sound bites (smaller clips of the interview) relevant to the story. These sound bites range between lengths of eight seconds and about one minute of runtime, and they are essentially the "skeleton" of the film. Using Adobe Premiere's timeline feature, I arranged the sound bites in a linear order that told the core story of the film.

Any storytelling gaps needed to be filled with voice overs that bridged the spaces between one scene and the next. After assembling the "skeleton" of the film, I cataloged the different storytelling gaps and wrote out voice overs that helped the story flow better or that gave the audience any additional information that it would need heading into the next scene. I later recorded the scripted voice overs in Ouachita Student Media's podcasting studio. At the end of the recording session, I uploaded the voice over audio from the memory card to an extended storage device on the editing computer. I then put the individual clips into their proper spots along the timeline.

Another audio element featured in the final product is music and archival audio. All music featured within the film is licensed from Envato Elements, with each individual song and its creator also being credited at the end of the film. Archival audio (and video) of Nelson and Root's broadcasts are courtesy of the Ouachita Football Network, the Ouachita Sports Digital Network, and arkadelphiabadgertv.com. Audio from the intro of *The Sam & Jesse Radio Show* (produced by Jeff Root's father, among others) is sourced directly from a 1977 episode titled "La Forza Del Destino," which is available for free listening and downloads online in Ouachita's Scholarly Commons (Root et al.).

After all audio tracks had been laid, I began to layer B-roll over the top of the A-roll. This B-roll covered up blank spots in the A-roll (e.g. voice overs with no visual element) and cuts from one sound bite to the next. In multiple instances, I also added B-roll to give visual context to what was being described in the A-roll.

The Final Film

The final cut of *Rex and Root* clocked in at a runtime of 18 minutes, 11 seconds. It is the longest documentary that I have ever produced, with my next-longest film (*No One Fights Alone*) sporting a runtime of just under 14-and-a-half minutes. In its final form, *Rex and Root* is presented via an H.264 video file that is exported directly from Adobe Premiere Pro.

In all, production took place over a span of just under eight months. During that time, I dedicated well over 100 hours of interviews, research, filming, editing, writing, and narration work to the project. At the time of this writing, *Rex and Root* is the most ambitious media project that I have ever completed.

Distributing *Rex and Root*

Online Distribution

When *Rex and Root* wrapped production on April 23, 2024, I uploaded the final film in its entirety onto YouTube. This upload can be viewed for free at the following link:

<https://youtu.be/EbuPi5O0YMk>

Premiere Screening

Rex and Root's official public premiere took place at the Carl Goodson Honors Program's Scholar's Day festivities on April 24, 2024. Audiences viewed the full film at an in-person screening in Ouachita's Young Auditorium, which is located on the second floor of the university's Hickingbotham Hall. It was part of a larger presentation billed as "*Rex and Root: An Original Documentary*." The presentation also included background information into how the film was made.

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