

The Emperor of the North

The Emperor of the North was a 1973 film about 1933 **hobos** riding the rails. The plot pits an angry railroad conductor against a couple of vagrants who have illegally jumped onto the train. Train jumping was a common practice during the Great Depression era when unemployed individuals would jump onto freight trains to travel around the country looking for work or other support. This movie was directed by Robert Aldrich and starred two Academy Award winners, Lee Marvin and Ernest Borgnine, and future Academy Award winner Keith Carradine. The original title, Emperor of the North Pole, referred to the king of the hobos who ruled over a cold wasteland. The title caused confusion as some parents thought they were taking their kids to a sweet little Christmas film, not a violent film about a brutal train conductor. The word Pole was taken out of the title as a result.



Actor Ernest Borgnine

The Willamette Valley was exactly what the producers were looking for as a backdrop to this film. A 1972 article explains, “This town proved a bonanza, for it boasted the Oregon, Pacific and Eastern Railway—18 miles of vintage track up the Row River, an engine house, lots of cars and a wrecking yard for train parts. Best of all, a highway paralleled the rails for miles, fine for long tracking shots with **nary** a TV antenna to spoil the '33 look.” Only one scene in the movie was not filmed in Cottage Grove.



Harry Caesar plays Coaly, a railroad fireman. A singer as well as an actor, Harry occasionally played at the Village Green while in town filming.

It was ironic that although Ernest Borgnine played a cruel character in the film, locals found him to be a gentle and polite man. Apparently, he was a little taken aback by how **convincingly** he played evil. In a 2012 article he said “I would go home at night and say to my wife, honey you saw me do a couple of scenes today, am I really that kind of a person?”



Lee Marvin had a personal connection to Cottage Grove, his first wife's family lived on 1st Street in town for a number of years. Lee thrilled the kids of Culp Creek School one afternoon, when he played a ballgame with them. One student said that he was going to be in trouble for getting home from school so late, so Mr. Marvin knocked on the door and told the boy's very surprised mother why her son was late.



Lee Marvin with students from Culp Creek School.

Although the characters in the film were all bitter enemies, in real life the actors became very good friends. Keith Carradine said this in a 2016 interview about his career "...I got a chance to spend eight weeks up in Cottage Grove, Oregon with these two legendary actors. Talk about film school. Talk about acting class. But even more than that it was a class in professionalism and just how you come to work every day and how you do

your job. It was an extraordinary opportunity as a young actor, and as I say, I stayed friends with those guys all their lives."

Many Cottage Grove residents were extras in the film, particularly in the baptism scene. This was shot in the Row River, just downstream from the Dorena Grange. Cottage Grove Mayor Bill Whiteman and his children Kim, Rob and Jeff were among the church goers in the film. Two lucky local boys, William Jackson and Jody Brockamp, were selected for a scene in which they steal a chicken with Keith Carradine. The boys got to work with the stunt coordinator to learn how to take a punch and fall convincingly.

Discussion Points

1. Why did the producers consider Cottage Grove an ideal place to film this movie?
 2. How do you think life in Cottage Grove was different for community members while filming took place in the summer of 1973?
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Vocabulary

Convincingly: in a way that causes someone to believe that something is true or real

Hobo: a homeless person; a tramp or vagrant

Nary: nonstandard form of not

