

VOYAGERS WITHOUT TRACE

A mysterious sign, a lost diary, a daring journey down canyons of the West and across France in search of three voyagers from 1938.

Documentary - Color/BW, 80-minutes



SYNOPSIS

In 1938, three young Parisians arrived in the American West with kayaks, cameras, and beer. They had a bold, even foolhardy plan: be the first to take kayaks down the wild Green and Colorado rivers. They recorded their journey, creating the first adventure film shot in vivid color. But the reels go unseen for 75 years, until filmmaker Ian McCluskey spots a photo of the trio on a roadside marker. His curiosity sends him on a historical treasure hunt, learning to paddle the same waters and searching for clues. What led an explorer, his new bride, and his best friend halfway around the world on the eve of World War II? What secrets do flooded canyons and a weathered journal still hold? Ian traces the trio's wake back to Europe, uncovering unexpected connections to the French Resistance, the advent of the French Riviera, and the possibilities that free-spirited risk-taking offers to all.

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THE FILM

“A rollicking and reflective documentary.”
— Moviemaker Magazine, pre-release review

Voyagers Without Trace, a feature-length documentary, weaves the first-person narration and original HD footage of a modern search with archival footage, photos, and excerpts from the 1938 adventure. The modern footage is beautifully shot, incorporating cinematic techniques, transporting viewers to breathtaking natural areas like Canyonlands National Park.

The film features hundreds of previously unseen photos and even the original 16mm film the French Trio shot on their 1938 journey. It is a stunning window into the last chapter of the Old West, and the dawn of the Modern West. And it beautifully conveys the spirit of the three adventurers as they travelled and befriended locals on their journey. It is a playful film, with moments of joy and humor.



DIRECTORS STATMENT

“Do you know those stories where a kid finds a hidden treasure map in an attic or a lost letter in an old book? Growing up, I always dreamed someday I'd find a mysterious clue that set me on an adventure.”

—lan McCluskey, director

In the remote southwest corner of Wyoming, I came across a curious historic marker. On the sign was a faded photograph: two handsome men and a fetching blonde. They didn't look like the rugged mountain men or explorers of the American West that I'd seen before on historic signs. Instead, they seemed like they could have been my friends. The sign hinted at an incredible voyage.

What led an explorer, his new bride, and his best friend halfway around the world, on the eve of World War II? And what did these “Voyagers Without Trace” leave to be found? To go further on this search meant one unavoidable thing: I had to go down the river. There was just one problem: I didn't know how to kayak! But that hadn't stopped the French Trio; they weren't professional kayakers, but just beginners. So I assembled my own trio, with acclaimed adventure athlete Paul Kuthe and his fiancée, Kate. We set off down the dangerous whitewater to search for any remaining traces of this journey.

“Voyagers Without Trace” is a story of curiosity leading to exploration, and in that pursuit, forming connections of empathy across time, geography, and culture. The French Trio sparked my boyhood quest for adventure. What started as a mission to research the past became a larger reflection about being open to the unknown and discovering connections to people and places. Along the way were moments of shared joy and humor.

This hybrid film is a blend of historical documentary and adventure film. Woven into my film is their film. In their experience is my experience—past and present layered onto each other. It is a search into lost history, a personal essay, and reflection on the theme of “trace.”

The directorial style is an homage to the personality of the original film shot by the French Kayakers: vivid and beautiful, creative, and sometimes downright silly. Elements of the film are drawn from my background in historic documentary and literary nonfiction, while other techniques are pure experiment and cinematic playfulness. In the end, the film is an evocation of the universal idea that the spirit of adventure is available to those who seek it.

THE CHARACTERS

Genevieve: The fearless forerunner/pioneer. A vivacious 21-year old Parisian, Genevieve grows up in the restrictive house of her father and yearns for adventure. When she meets handsome explorer Bernard, she falls in love, and eagerly joins him on his daring plan to kayak the Colorado. This trip will be her honeymoon, and she will become the first woman to navigate her own boat down the treacherous whitewater.



Bernard: Explorer, ethnographer, inventor. At age 28, Bernard travels deep into the jungles of Central America to record the languages of tribes isolated from European contact. The 1938 kayak expedition is his idea and he will lead his new bride and best friend halfway around the world and down 1,000 miles of America's infamous whitewater. After their return to France, he continues to live his adventure with Genevieve and their family for the rest of their lives.

Antoine: The best friend/chronicler. At age 17, Antoine is serving in World War One. By age 38, he is married with five children. When his best friend Bernard asks him to come along on the expedition to kayak the great rivers of the American West, Antoine readily agrees. Quiet and reflective, he keeps a journal of their 3-month river journey. Upon his return to France, the Nazis invade, and he joins the French Resistance. His legacy continues when two university students from Paris arrive on his doorstep, borrowing his kayak and embarking an adventure as unbelievable as his own.

Ian: The storyteller. Ian embarks on a quest to retrace the French Trio's journey, experiencing the rewards and perils only the waters of the Green and Colorado rivers can provide. The problem: he's not a kayaker.

Paul and Kate: The Modern Trio. Both experienced river enthusiasts, Paul and Kate agree to join Ian on his journey, teaching him to kayak, and forming their own modern team. Paul and Kate help illuminate the experience of the French Trio and show that the best adventures are ones shared with friends.

Kind Strangers and Locals: Along the way, Ian meets a handful of colorful characters, including a melon queen, a dam guide, a cowboy, an archivist, a historian, and a commando. All help fill in missing pieces and together tell the story of the French Trio.

THE PRODUCTION TEAM



Ian McCluskey, Director

Ian McCluskey is an award-winning film director and the founder of NW Documentary, a nonprofit organization that practices, teaches, and shares the art of nonfiction storytelling. His work has garnered more than a dozen top honors, including four Emmys, and has been featured in international film festivals such as Tribeca, London, and Clermont-Ferrand. His films have been broadcast in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. His work has also screened in major museums such as the Boston Museum of Fine Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

John Waller, Cinematographer

John Waller is an award-winning filmmaker specializing in outdoor adventure documentary. His work has been honored at film festivals including MountainFilm and Banff International Film Festival. John is the founding director of Uncage the Soul, the Portland based video production company behind “Treeverse” and “Finding Oregon.”

Luz Carasa, Editor

Luz Carasa is a video editor and motion grapher who strives to create stories of relevance, fun and beauty. She has worked in various places around the world including Barcelona, Berlin and Bangkok with a variety of clients including Toyota, Sunsilk, and Mercedes-Benz. Originally from Spain, she lives in Portland, Oregon. Luz takes joy in the challenge of forming stories from raw material.

Original Music by

Jenny Conlee, The Decemberists, and Johnny Clay, The Dimes.

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