

Where's the Camera?

The cold, snowy weather taunted the fact that it was our Spring Break week. Easter came early that year, because by April there wasn't usually any threat of a significant accumulation of snow. Our anticipation for this day grew over the past few weeks, which made it hard to fall asleep the night before. As a military man, accustomed to rising earlier than the typical farmer, my dad had us awake, dressed, and piled into the car before the morning sun cracked the horizon. Dad drove our silver Ford Taurus; Mom sat next to him. Beth, my sister, Jenny, my best friend, and I slouched in the back seat, barely awake, and not yet familiar with the power of the coffee bean. We traveled for approximately thirty minutes before reaching our destination: Woodstock, Illinois.

A lot of people had been visiting Woodstock recently. One of our national phenomena was taking place there: the making of a Hollywood movie. The whole town square and various other parts of town received temporary facelifts to fit in with the theme of the movie. The movie was actually supposed to take place in a small town in Pennsylvania, and since our family was originally from the Pittsburgh area, we wanted to see what changes they had made.

It had snowed the night before, but just enough for the grass and the trees to get a fresh dusting over what had already accumulated over the past week. We didn't know exactly where they would be filming, so we stopped at the diner in town to see if we could get any "hot tips" on where the shooting would be that day. After ordering breakfast, my dad asked the waitress about the curious events happening around town.

The waitress had nothing but nice things to say about the cast and crew of the movie. She said that Bill Murray ate at the diner on occasion and she complimented the friendly cast and crew. Only one person did not meet with her approval: Andie McDowell. She secluded herself in a rented house in a nearby exclusive neighborhood to the tune of \$10,000 a month. The waitress informed us that no one had anything good to say about her. She spent all of her time in that house and rarely came out, except to go running with her bodyguard early every morning.

Since the trailers were parked in the street right next to the diner, the waitress guessed that they would be shooting somewhere close by today. After breakfast, the five of us ventured down the street in that direction. A security officer halted our investigation. She told us that the scenes for the day were being prepped two blocks away at a house in a residential section. As she talked, Bill Murray himself came out of a trailer and headed in our direction. Jenny, Beth, and I stood there with our mouths hanging open and then started backing up the street.

My dad started laughing. "Hey! Bill Murray is that way! Where are you going?"

He couldn't believe our reaction! In my own defense, the only celebrities I had seen up to that point had been on a movie screen, and I didn't know what to say or how to act. I didn't get a chance to change my mind or my direction. He walked up the steps to another trailer and shut the door behind him.

Beth, Jenny, and I giggled and laughed at our strange behavior. My dad told us that we better hurry over to the site, and we walked briskly to the house where the security guard had told us to go. This particular home had been converted to a bed and breakfast specifically for the movie. A crew had painted the outside of the house a different color, repainted the white picket fence, planted additional shrubs, and posted a wooden, oval sign in the front yard that read "The Cherry Street Inn" in bright red letters. On the

inside, they had wallpapered several rooms, changed the carpeting, and brought in additional furniture to achieve the look they wanted.

We were not allowed to get very close to the house; several policemen guarded the barricades placed at both ends of the street in front of the house. We stood next to the fence that outlined the perimeter of the lawn. From our vantage point, we could see two cameras set up along the sidewalk leading to the front porch. Quite a few people scurried about, carrying poles and props of various shapes and sizes. One fellow in particular worked on shading the sign to get just the right effect of the “fresh snow” that had fallen. A snow machine loitered in the street, making a horrible racket while three guys sprayed additional snow up and down the sidewalk in front of the “bed and breakfast”.

After all of this preparation, it seemed as if they were ready to start. A red Cadillac pulled up to the curb right in front of our little cluster. Harold Ramis climbed out of the back seat wearing a dark khaki jacket that looked like a sleeping bag.

My dad said, “Mr. Ramis, can I take your picture?”

He smiled as he stopped and said, “Sure, as long as I don’t have anything hanging from my nose.”

My dad snapped a picture, thanked him and then handed the camera to my mother.

Shortly after Mr. Ramis disappeared, another red Cadillac stopped at the curb. This one had Andie McDowell and Bill Murray in it. Bill Murray got out of the car wearing a chocolate-colored wool trench coat and a tan scarf. He started walking swiftly in our direction. This time, I didn’t move.

My mom asked, “Mr. Murray, could I take your picture?”

“Sure,” he replied, and slowed his pace to a stroll.

My mother started to panic. “Where’s the camera? Where’s the camera?” She squeaked in excitement.

My dad deadpanned, “Judy, it’s around your neck.”

I couldn’t decide whether to ignore my mother or be totally mortified from her behavior. She was having her own moment of being star-struck too. Bill stopped and let her fumble around for the camera. She managed to take a couple of shots and Bill walked down the sidewalk. After that almost disastrous episode, my dad decided that he would take over the camera duties.

Andie McDowell did not get out at the curb with Bill. She stayed in the car, cruised right through the barricades, and got out another fifty yards down the street. Bill Murray and Harold Ramis could have done the same, but instead, took an extra moment of their time to make some young fans incredibly happy.

We spent the morning watching them film one scene over and over again. First the lighting wasn’t quite right. Then, someone’s dog was barking. Bill didn’t have enough enthusiasm when saying his lines. The kiss wasn’t right. A noisy car was revving its engine up the street. Between takes, there were dozens of readjustments that had to be made each time. Since this scene was supposed to take place in the early morning, the footprints on the snow-covered porch and sidewalk could only go one way – coming out of the house. This meant that Bill and Andie had to walk around to the back of the house to go in again for the next take.

After more than a dozen takes from the top of the porch, they shifted the scene to the sidewalk. More problems developed at this point. The latch on the gate was frozen and wouldn’t open for Bill. Andie

needed more enthusiasm. It went on like this until they stopped for lunch. Bill and Andie got into their chauffeured car and drove away. Dad mentioned that we should get some lunch, and our group trudged back to the diner to warm our frozen toes and cold noses.

Once refueled with warm food and hot cocoa, we set out to explore the town square. Many of the storefronts had been converted to match those in Punxatawney. One locally owned store had chosen to capitalize on the unexpected tourist season that the movie had brought with it. The store windowfront had t-shirts, sweatshirts, and ball caps proudly bearing “Groundhog Day and a picture of Punxatawney Phil on them. Jenny and I both purchased a t-shirt, and Beth picked out one of the stuffed animal versions of Phil to add to her extensive collection of furry friends.

With our curiosity satisfied, we returned to the row of trailers, hoping to catch one more glimpse of Bill Murray. A small group of fans had gathered outside his trailer, and we joined those waiting patiently. As time passed, the crowd kept getting larger and larger. A policeman came over and put up flimsy yellow “POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS” tape at the edge of the sidewalk to hold back the expanding crowd.

Finally, Bill came out of his trailer. He started shaking hands with the people behind the police line and making jokes about the cold weather. People held shirts and pieces of paper, but he didn’t sign anything. When he came over in our direction, Jenny and I held out our shirts. Bill shook our hands but still didn’t sign anything.

My dad spoke up. “Mr. Murray, will you please sign this shirt for my daughter?”

“Sure,” he said, taking the shirt and marker out of my hand. He signed his name right under the movie logo and handed back my shirt.

“Thank you very much,” my dad replied

“Thank you,” I echoed.

He signed Jenny’s t-shirt and my sister’s autograph book. He laughed and joked with the crowd as he continued to sign shirts and hats. He even signed the back of a love note – after reading aloud the contents. He had everyone laughing and smiling despite the frigid atmosphere.

Nobody slept in the car on the way home. All five of us excitedly jockeyed for the chance to say something about our incredible, unforgettable day. I didn’t even realize that my whole face was red with sunburn until I put on my new, autographed t-shirt and went to look in the mirror. I didn’t even care; I still couldn’t wipe the grin off of my face.

As Jenny, Beth and I smiled for the camera, I etched this day into my permanent Top Ten list. My stinging, crimson cheeks glowed with sunburn, and my toes still tingled slightly from standing in the snow all day. Having that positive encounter with a couple of real live celebrities made a world of difference to three young teenagers. I will always think of Bill Murray fondly. After the film in the camera was developed, Beth decided that she had sole rights to the photographs. I didn’t care. The memories that I got to keep were worth far more than any Kodak moment.