

LIGHTING DIMENSIONS

OCTOBER 1979

\$2.00

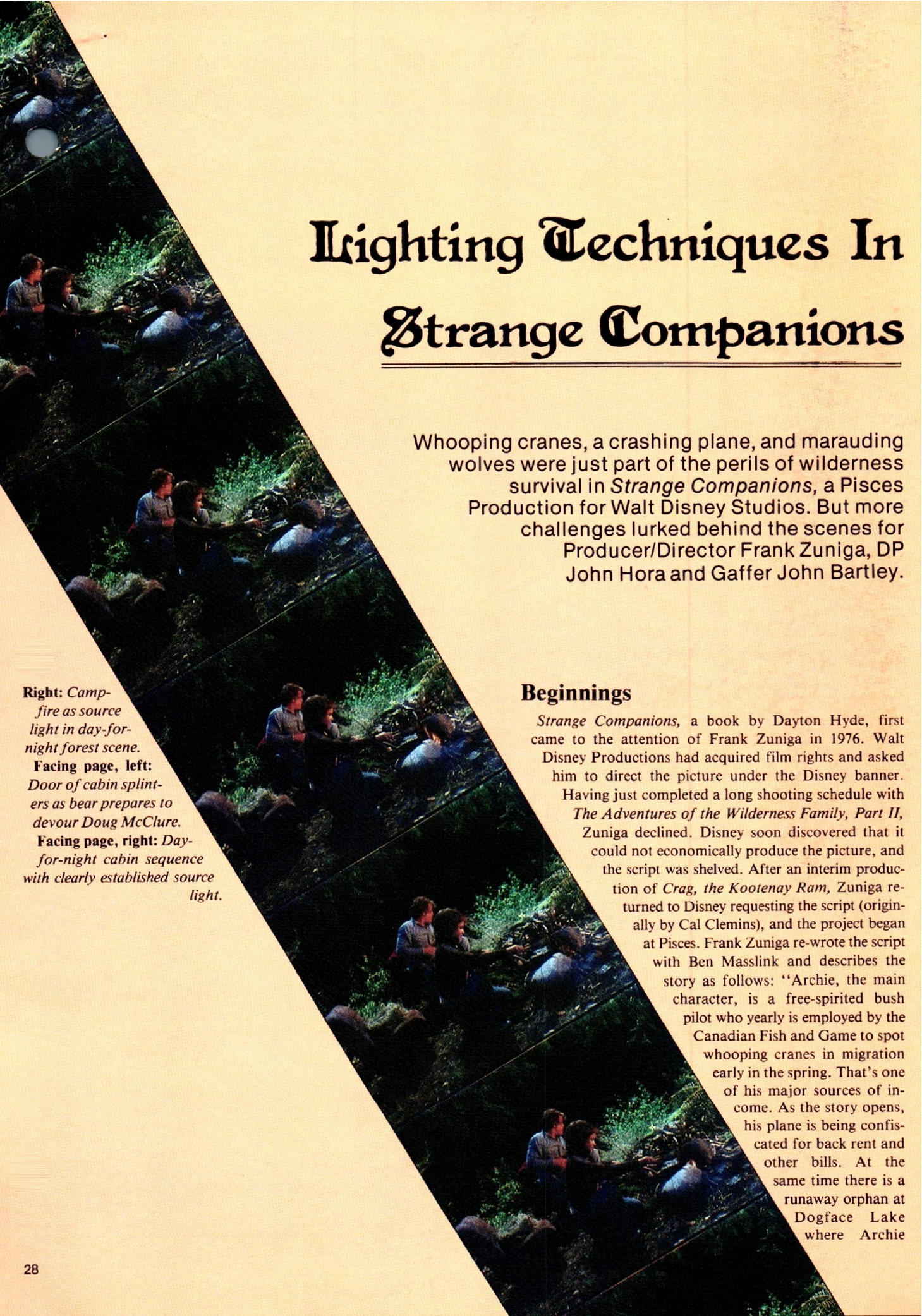


Lighting Techniques In Strange Companions

Whooping cranes, a crashing plane, and marauding wolves were just part of the perils of wilderness survival in *Strange Companions*, a Pisces Production for Walt Disney Studios. But more challenges lurked behind the scenes for Producer/Director Frank Zuniga, DP John Hora and Gaffer John Bartley.

Beginnings

Strange Companions, a book by Dayton Hyde, first came to the attention of Frank Zuniga in 1976. Walt Disney Productions had acquired film rights and asked him to direct the picture under the Disney banner. Having just completed a long shooting schedule with *The Adventures of the Wilderness Family, Part II*, Zuniga declined. Disney soon discovered that it could not economically produce the picture, and the script was shelved. After an interim production of *Crag, the Kootenay Ram*, Zuniga returned to Disney requesting the script (originally by Cal Clemins), and the project began at Pisces. Frank Zuniga re-wrote the script with Ben Masslink and describes the story as follows: "Archie, the main character, is a free-spirited bush pilot who yearly is employed by the Canadian Fish and Game to spot whooping cranes in migration early in the spring. That's one of his major sources of income. As the story opens, his plane is being confiscated for back rent and other bills. At the same time there is a runaway orphan at Dogface Lake where Archie



Right: Campfire as source light in day-for-night forest scene.

Facing page, left: Door of cabin splinters as bear prepares to devour Doug McClure.

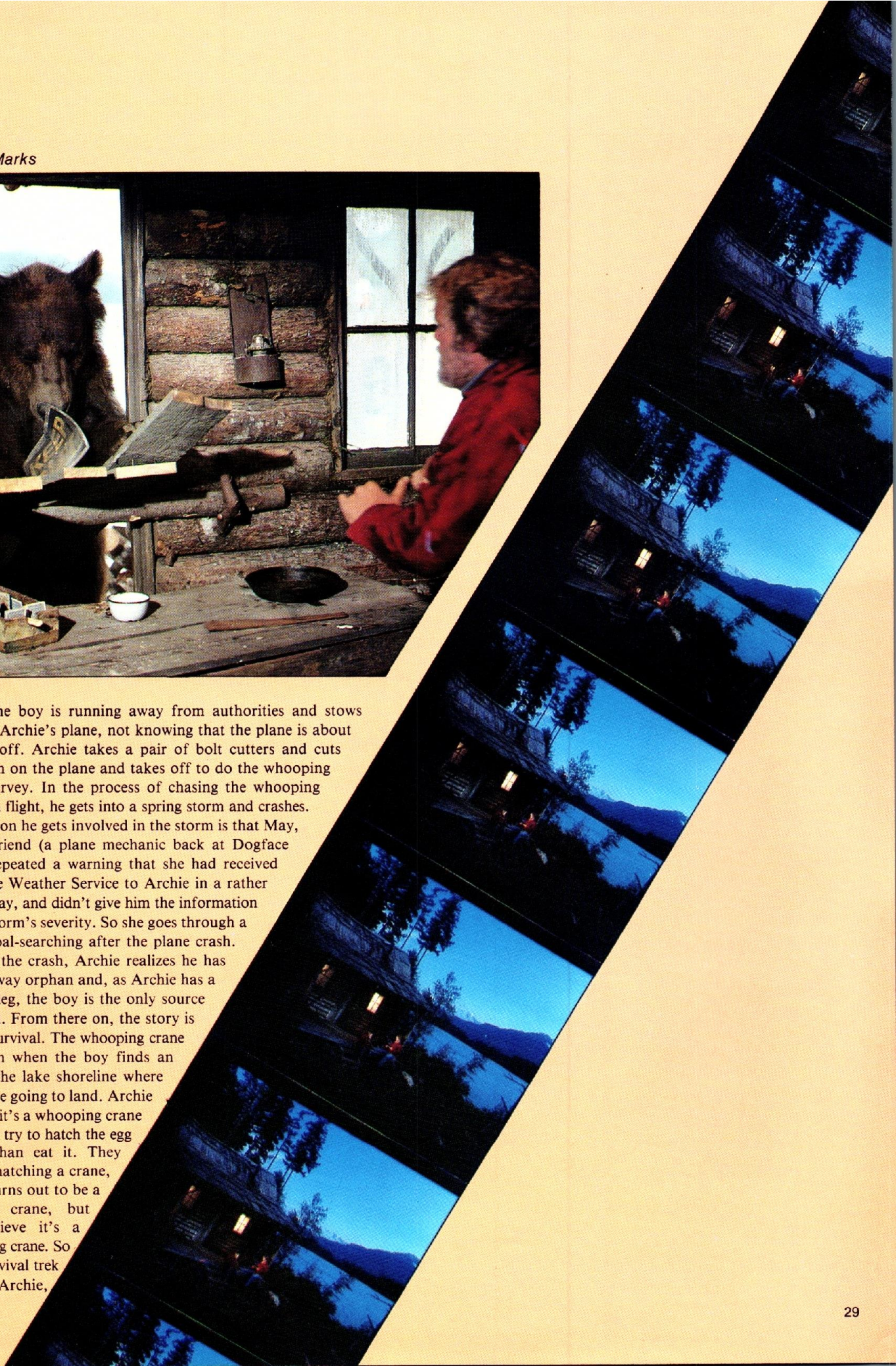
Facing page, right: Day-for-night cabin sequence with clearly established source light.

By Jill Marks



lives. The boy is running away from authorities and stows away in Archie's plane, not knowing that the plane is about to take off. Archie takes a pair of bolt cutters and cuts the chain on the plane and takes off to do the whooping crane survey. In the process of chasing the whooping cranes in flight, he gets into a spring storm and crashes. The reason he gets involved in the storm is that May, his girlfriend (a plane mechanic back at Dogface Lake) repeated a warning that she had received from the Weather Service to Archie in a rather casual way, and didn't give him the information of the storm's severity. So she goes through a lot of soul-searching after the plane crash.

After the crash, Archie realizes he has a stowaway orphan and, as Archie has a broken leg, the boy is the only source for food. From there on, the story is one of survival. The whooping crane comes in when the boy finds an egg on the lake shoreline where they were going to land. Archie believes it's a whooping crane and they try to hatch the egg rather than eat it. They end up hatching a crane, which turns out to be a sandhill crane, but still believe it's a whooping crane. So their survival trek begins. Archie,



Strange Companions...

because of his leg, begins to lose hope, and after twelve weeks in the bush, fall begins to come on and he feels that he has to let David walk out and get some help. The boy refuses and they form a tremendous bond.

All of the search parties give up, except May, who keeps searching and at the climactic point in the picture when Archie is telling the boy, 'I'm kicking you out,' May shows up. At the end of the picture, May and Archie get married and adopt David as their son."

Location

The action takes place in the supposed location of Wood Buffalo Park in Northwest Alberta. The actual shooting of forest and lake sequences was done at Bunsen Lake, twenty minutes from Vancouver, and the Dogface Lake location was actually Delta Air Park, south of Vancouver in the town of Delta. Frank says he chose the Vancouver area primarily because the crew available was recommended strongly by Patti Allen, production coordinator and Paul Tucker, unit production manager. DP John Hora and Script Supervisor Connie Lee Walkling were the only non-Canadian crew members. "This was

the first time I'd worked with John Bartley, the gaffer, and it worked out very nicely," says Hora. And, according to Zuniga, "the facilities are excellent." Lighting and grip equipment was supplied locally by William F. White, and most of the picture was shot with Panaflexes supplied by Panavision in Vancouver, although two 35mm Arriflexes were brought from California.

John Hora became associated with the production when Zuniga was re-writing and planning *Strange Companions* in mid-May 1979. They had worked together on *The Wilderness Family, Part II* a year and a half before, which worked out well. They developed sequences such as the Aurora Borealis (John is an avid astronomer) together, and by June, Hora officially joined the production staff.

Mix of Fixtures

Strange Companions was filmed with "a few of everything," according to Hora. A pair or more of HMI lights (depending on budget and working order), a complement of normal studio equipment (a 5K, six babies, four juniors, inkies, reflectors) and a pair of nine-light FAYs. The nine-lights were equipped with a mixture of globes for greater flexibility. Hora used five blue or daylight-corrected dichroic

globes and four tungsten-balanced globes to facilitate a quick change between tungsten and daylight effects. "If I wanted a sunset effect or a warm edge," says Hora, "I just clicked on the four tungsten globes. If it was just being used for fill light, then I'd use just the dichroic globes."

Rigging the Crash

The most time-consuming shots revolved around the plane crash, which took almost a week of shooting. "We actually crashed the plane into the trees," says John. "If we could get two takes in a day we were lucky." Two towers, one forty-foot and one twenty-foot, supported cameras, and large construction cranes held the plane by unseen cables.

Five or six wind machines, five fog machines, and rainheads mounted on the towers supplied the scene with a severe thunderstorm. The plane is buffeted by high winds, hits a tree, shearing off the wing, and plunges into the ground. The sequence was sometimes hampered and sometimes helped by its canyon location. "The problem," says Hora, "is that you obviously can't see any clear blue sky or sunlit area in the background. So you have to have either cloud cover or have it

blocked out with fog machines. If the wind changed direction, just as we were about to call action, we had to stop the whole thing and change everything. That was a major sequence."

The Trek: Warm Daylight

The daylight scene on our cover with Doug McClure (Archie) and Michael Sharrett (David) was filmed about five minutes from the main location. The ethereal hazy atmosphere was created with an effective combination of camera and light filters. John Hora explains: "I used double 85 on the camera, which is twice the normal correction, so it was the same as if I used tungsten light outdoors with an 85: everything was super-orange. Then, to keep the skin tones normal, we used a full blue correction on top of the HMIs which are normally the correct color temperature anyway. So the people were lit effectively with blue light; I checked it with the color meter and it was about 18-19,000° Kelvin, whereas normal daylight is about 5,500-6,000°. So the lights were up around 19,000 and the double 85 on the camera exactly compensated for that. So the skin tone turned out normally and the forest foliage turned out extra-warm."

At the Cabin: Day for Night

Sequences at the forest cabin, where Archie and David hope to recover from their ordeal enough to press forward, involved a great deal of day for night work. Hora chose day for night primarily because California child welfare laws precluded shooting scenes with Michael Sharrett past seven or eight p.m.

Also, explains Hora, "when you do real night for night, in almost all cases you can only light so far, then you have blackness. The real human, outdoors at night, can really see a great deal if he has any kind of moonlight. Even with starlight you can see pretty far after 20-30 minutes. It's unnatural to have a black background very far back, so in most cases, I like doing day for night. But then you immediately have certain limitations and there's really no way out of them. You just can't see sky. With a mountain range behind you, like we had in this film, it's difficult because you don't have any straight lines to put right on the frame line. The mountains dip down on one side and you've got to get the sky out of there, with branches or re-framing."

John Hora makes up a filter pack with which he makes the scene "colder in color



Left to right: Frank Zuniga, Doug McClure, Michael Sharrett and John Hora.

than normal," which he says is "partly a tradition. In a lot of films, day for night is blue; I backed away from just taking the 85 off, which I did years ago, and I use an 85C, which is half correction." Hora says the psychological effect of cooler colors is important in that night is cooler than daytime; the breezes come up when the sun goes down.

In addition, he employs a black net which takes a lot of sharpness out of the scene. This is because black and white rod vision, which humans use at night, is more sensitive, but we still see less detail than with daytime vision. "Ideally you should have the scene halfway black and white, but that's pretty complicated and must be



Northern lights sequence set up with 12' x 12' net, HMI and nine light.

Strange Companions . . .

done in the lab," John explains. A number one fog filter is then added for "mystery," and causes the highlights to glow and lowers the contrast slightly.

Hora also uses a neutral filter which equals two or three stops of neutral density on the lens. "The reason for that," Hora says, "is that in most night situations, if you're really shooting at night, you shoot with your lens fairly wide open, and you don't have a lot of depth of field. If you're shooting day for night, not using a neutral density filter and you try to underexpose, you end up with the lens stopped very far down. Then you have a great deal of depth of field, which is just the antithesis of what real nighttime photography looks like. So I try to keep the f-stop up around 2.8 or 4

Hora generally underexposes at least a stop to a stop and a half, but notes that how far he goes, depends on the studio. "Some studios get nervous," he comments, "and if it's really for TV you shouldn't go as deep as for theaters. To round out this filter pack, John sometimes uses a Pola screen to darken the sky, if there is sky, or to control other elements in the scene.

Source Light at Night

In a genuine night scene, some areas are lit up to key normally, Hora notes, "unless you're working into a super-moody thing." He often tries to get part of the scene — edge light on an actor's face, for example — almost up to a normal exposure, which means that if the overall

scene is a stop and a half down, there would be portions where an actor would stand in a light for a moment and be almost normally exposed, or no more than half a stop down.

"The reflectors are the only things that really have the punch," claims Hora. "The HMIs fully spotted in, do fairly well; nine lights do better. We used a mixture of nine lights and reflectors to get close to full exposure at certain points. In two or three scenes (see photo) they were sitting around the campfire and we took the nine lights and added extra 85 gel in front of them. We used tungsten globes as much as possible, but they weren't spot globes, so sometimes we had to go with the dichroics, and I tried to use the ones which were the most burned-out, where the dichroic material was the least effective. Then we would put several layers of 85 gel in to bring it up to the eye, anyway, where it looked like the orange color of the fire. We had only two nine lights working maybe five feet away from the actors to get their faces lit up enough, and used tree branches to flicker the lights."

Another day for night sequence in *Strange Companions* will involve lab addition of the Aurora Borealis. Hora set up a 12' by 12' screen (visible in photo) which was employed for two reasons: primarily to get the value of the background down (thus avoiding excessive hot lighting in the foreground), and secondly to add atmosphere and distance to the scene. The net was hit with some sunlight, which added haziness and distance between the actors and the back-

Strange Companions . . .

ground. Here, too, Hora employed a Pola screen.

The Real Strange Companion

"*Everyone* wants to know how we got the bear to break down the door!" exclaims Hora. In one sequence, a Kodiak bear (see photo page 29) invades Archie and David's shelter, and the crew viewed this shot with understandable apprehension. "We had a back wall which could be taken off, and a black cloth tent so we could get back. Because of the bear, we had to keep our distance," John explains. "The bear had been trained for two months that his dinner was always on the other side of that door. The crew was warned that any equipment left between where the bear starts out and the cabin, he will eat!"

Hora had worked on Lincoln-Mercury Cougar commercials before, and notes a special problem in lighting wild animals: their fur is designed to soak up light. "I guess nature wants them to be camouflaged in a way," Hora surmises. "I often lit the bear two stops above the actors. In the film it looks fairly natural, but you have to watch out, because if the actor gets into the bear's light, you have a problem." In the bear scene, Hora used a 4K HMI on the door and a 2.5K carrying another area. They broke up the light with a ladder to give the impression of beams in the way. Nine lights to the side were used for fill. In addition, the 12' x 12' net was used outside the windows to balance light levels in the scene.

Wrapping Up

Scheduled for release or televising in the spring of 1980, the film has not yet been specified as a theatrical or television production by Disney. Hora hopes, for the sake of his meticulously crafted day for night work, that the release will be theatrical. "That kind of sequence will be beautiful in theaters," he remarks, "but if it's released primarily as a TV movie, I have more reservations about day for night: it depends on the people's sets." Also, Hora admits, "I love theatrical films. I think they're really where it's at. To hear the audience (in a theater) react and know that you're really entertaining them is a delayed thing, but it's a two-way street."

Frank Zuniga is enthusiastic about the outcome. "This was by far the most fun I've ever had making a film. And I think also by far the best film I've made." □