



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Hollywood Finds Harmony

“News travels fast, by word of mouth, in Harmony, population 947,” said Joe White, who ought to know, having lived there for 23 years with his wife, Delsa. In September 2015, there was quite some news to talk about. Filmmakers, “big time filmmakers,” as Joe called them, were coming to Harmony, north of Pittsburgh, to shoot scenes for *American Pastoral*, based on Philip Roth’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book by the same name. *American Pastoral* rolled into town and turned back the clock to the 1960s to match the setting of the film.

Joe and Delsa had a front row seat for the activity. They live in one of the original

Harmonist homes, built in 1811, on Main Street. The Whites are too modest to say this, but it is clear that they gave the house a new life by restoring it. What Delsa will say is, “Every day, as I go about my chores, I feel as if I’m saving this house.” Anyone would agree if they saw the loving care with which the early prints and posters are displayed in their home, along with paintings placed on every available wall space. A weaving loom, echoing the work of the Harmonists and used by Joe, takes up a large space in the living room. The comfortable kitchen calls you to sit down at the round table and scratch the ears of Sophie, the old dog who sleeps wherever she pleases.

The Harmonists, who built this house along with several others, were a pacifist communal group, one of hundreds of utopian communities existing in the first half of the 19th century. The town’s Harmonist-era population peaked at about 819 in 1812 and they built more than 100 buildings in the area. Today, 18 surviving buildings have been determined with high absolute certainty to be Harmonist, said

Joe, a retired history professor. He sees these communities as an overlooked part of history. “There were more of these communities in the United States than in the rest of the world put together.” One of the reasons the group left the area was its wish not to join in the War of 1812, going on in nearby Erie, Pa. The Harmonists did, however, return to Western Pennsylvania and founded Economy (now Old Economy), its third and final community, on the banks of the Ohio. It is now a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission site.

When the *American Pastoral* filmmakers were looking for a small town setting, not a suburb and not an urban setting, Harmony fit the bill. “It’s as American as apple pie,” Joe said. “Just what they needed.” Delsa recounts:

When Ewan McGregor, the director and lead actor, came to town in the last week of September, he and his group

Extras, local and imported, waiting patiently in the town square. The Whites’ 200-year-old brick house is in the background.

Photo by Joe White.



Joe and Delsa White.
Photo by Bette McDevitt.





This looks old, but in fact was constructed for the shoot and taken down afterwards.
 Photo by Joe White.

approached our local government and asked for various things. They needed the streets closed for a period of time, and asked for agreements with adjoining properties where they were filming. They painted out the yellow lines on the streets, and took down the modern street signs to make it look like the late 1960s. They took out our mailboxes but they replaced everything just as it was when they were finished filming.

“Those guys are big time,” said Joe, “and they know exactly what they need, and when they descend upon a town, they know their priorities and get them taken care of.” Delsa added, “I was impressed with these guys, using their imaginations right on the site, blending what they created with what existed.”

Jason Calabro, who served as the local contact, went door to door to tell each of the residents what to expect, and offered contracts to those whose property would be affected. “We would have done it for nothing, but they did offer compensation to us,” said Delsa. “All the people in the town were pleased with the attention to Harmony, and there was a lot of cooperation.”

The Whites were asked to hang drapes, provided by the filmmakers, in their front windows that suited the time period of the

film. One scene was shot many times over in front of the Whites’ house, and Delsa did have to call for a time out. “I needed access to my house to look after our old dog. They paused shooting while I let the dog out.”

The film, as others made in the area, may have given a slight nudge to the local economy. Many extras were hired in Harmony, as well as in Pittsburgh, where the major portion of the film was shot. Hollywood actors, skilled workers, and local participants added a little history to Harmony, and they did so in the

cooperative tradition of the founders. You could say it was done in harmony. ✪

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.

It takes a lot of people and equipment to make a movie as the crew prepares for a shoot in the town square. On the left with blonde hair and a leather jacket is Ewan McGregor, the film’s director and lead actor.
 Photo by Joe White.

