

Hollywood in Antarctica

A new movie explores the work of intrepid polar scientists

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Published 17th October 2008

The sound of the wind was disconcerting. The lights of McMurdo, the US research station in Antarctica, shone through the incessant darkness of the antipodal winter. Mammoth construction vehicles milled through a haze of swirling snow, adding the somewhat friendlier growl of their engines to the din. The opening scenes of the movie *Ice People* show McMurdo at first light, just entering "the season," a brief window when scientists descend on the base to do their research.

Anne Aghion's documentary film follows four geologists into the field as they dig – sometimes with a grapefruit spoon – into the remains of a lake that existed millions of years ago. Living in tents, an hour's helicopter flight from McMurdo, the researchers and film crew spend a lot of time melting snow for drinking water and simply keeping warm. "You had the feeling that nothing is supposed to live here," said sound man Richard Fleming in a question and answer period following the film's New York City premier last night (Oct. 16).

"Over in the geologist's tent, they had a running wager on how long the film crew would last before we called to be rescued," said Fleming. The film crew, which never appears in the film, held out for a full 7 weeks. "I gave them ten days," grinned North Dakota University geologist Allan Ashworth, when I asked him about his wager.

Aghion spent four months in Antarctica capturing the otherworldly scenery and the scientists who searched for clues of the frozen continent's greener past. I first spoke with Aghion in January, just after she had returned from Antarctica and started to piece together the stories she had collected "on the ice."

Ice People celebrates science in all its plainness: the frustration of digging for days in freezing weather, with little to show for it. In one scene, Ashworth and postdoc Adam Lewis become giddy over finding a fossil of a leaf, and a patch of freeze-dried moss – souvenirs from an Antarctica that once supported a lake ecosystem.

When first discovered, these remnants "turned everything on its head," said Ashworth. Not only did the researchers discover that Antarctica harbored an alpine lake ecosystem (they also found evidence of diatoms and fresh-water shrimp), but they posit that the conversion from lush landscape to frozen hinterland was quite rapid, occurring about 14 million years ago. A more gradual change in temperature would, for example, have allowed microorganisms to degrade the frozen moss Ashworth found. Instead, Ashworth easily reconstituted pieces of it into flexible strands by dipping them in a dish of water.

The movie also gives viewers a glimpse of a side of science that is rarely seen. Aghion focused her lens on the silent partners of the scientific enterprise – the support staff (including plumbers, IT guys, and dishwashers) who at McMurdo station outnumber scientists ten to one. Sitting in the communications hub, one staff member notes, "It's easy to forget that science is going on at all, sometimes... It feels like indirect help."

"There's a bit of a caste system on the ice," Aghion said after the screening. The scientists are nicknamed "the beakers," which is at times affectionate and at times, less so, said Ashworth after the

movie. But without the support staff "we could not operate. Without them, we could not survive," he said.

Over a glass of wine at the post-premier mixer, I asked Ashworth what it was like to go from researcher to movie star. "I don't feel like a movie star. People go to a zoo to look at a chimpanzee. I feel like the chimpanzee," he laughed.

Ashworth leaves for Antarctica again this Monday to look for more clues of Antarctica's ancient past, and when exactly it transformed into the frozen continent that Aghion so adeptly captured in *Ice People*.

More information about the movie can be found at IcePeople.com. The DVD will be available on the website starting November 1.