

Carthage residents excited about possible Sean Penn movie

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CARTHAGE - When Sean Penn, an Academy Award-winning actor turned director, stopped by Carthage to scout it for the set of a movie adaptation of Jon Krakauer's nonfiction book "Into the Wild," it caused quite a stir in the small town.

"I think he just found the book and decided to check it out," said Carthage Mayor Kathy Faber.

Interest in South Dakota as a movie location - even random interest - is not unusual, according to Nicole Nordbye, media and public relations manager for the South Dakota Office of Tourism.

"I probably receive between one and 10 calls a day," she said. "It could be anything from a full-length feature film to an ad agency looking for a specific locale for a truck commercial. You just never know."

A state Web site - www.filmsd.com - was redesigned and re-launched in January in the hopes of bringing more film-industry interest to South Dakota, Nordbye said.

"We have banner ads on film industry Web sites," she said. "I don't know what the latest numbers are, but we've had numerous people calling, which is exactly what we want. Once we have got those solid leads, we'll actually host them in the state."

South Dakota also will become more attractive to film producers and location scouts if the state Legislature is successful in getting new incentives for the film industry signed into law. HB 1206, which was approved 63-5 in the House of Representatives, would provide contractors' excise, sales and use tax refunds for the filming of certain motion pictures, documentaries, television advertisements or television films. The bill is primarily sponsored by Rep. Cooper Garnos, R-Presho.

"I think it's a good first step," he said. "This business is hyper-competitive. We're even competing

with other countries. Of course (producers) want to be treated well, but they also look at their bottom line."

Garnos said he wanted to sponsor the bill because he's always been interested in the industry and sees a lot of potential for more film industry development in South Dakota.

"I really think we have a budding creative class here in the state," he said. "There is a group here and they need a little encouragement."

HB 1206 was delivered to Gov. Mike Rounds on Friday, according to the Legislative Research Council. The governor's office said he has not yet reviewed the bill, but according to Garnos, things are looking good.

"I think he will sign it," he said.

Meanwhile, Faber says Carthage is abuzz with gossip about the possibility of shooting a portion of a major film in the town, home to 187 people. "When they come back, I'm sure our population will grow dramatically," she said. "The local interest in the situation is real high. It's kind of bragging point, I think."

"Into the Wild's" central figure, Christopher McCandless, was a recent college graduate who was spiritually ill at ease in his well-to-do East Coast home. He struck out on his own and, in the process of earning money for a trip to Alaska, McCandless stopped and worked in Carthage briefly in the early 1990s. McCandless eventually reached Alaska, only to die in the wilderness after living off the land for four months.

McCandless lived next to Faber when he stayed in Carthage, she said. He went by the name "Alex," she said.

"He wasn't there for very long," she said. "He painted the house next door."

The 1990 movie "Dances With Wolves," starring Kevin Costner as Lt. John Dunbar, was shot entirely in South Dakota in 1989. Faber said she hopes Penn's movie - if it comes to fruition and if parts of it are shot in Carthage will help promote their town like Pierre and the Black Hills area benefited from "Dances With Wolves." "It will put us on the map in a positive way, I hope," she said.

Other films and TV productions at least partially filmed in South Dakota include "Starship Troopers," "Hidalgo," "Dances With Wolves," "Thunderheart" and "Armageddon."

A Big and Rich concert in Deadwood recently was featured on Country Music Television, and the documentary "Comanche Warrior" was aired on the History Channel, which also filmed "Who Killed Crazy Horse?" in South Dakota.

Also, PBS has had documentary episodes featuring the Corn Palace, the Schmeckfest and a family homestead near Wagner, according to Nordbye.