

BIG WHEEL IN HOLLYWOOD

Fostoria man provides vehicles for hit films

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Sometimes the road to Hollywood has to go through Fostoria — specifically the pink, 150-year-old home of Stuart Shiff.

For more than 30 years, the resident of this small town has kept blockbuster movie productions rolling by providing vehicles and transportation services. Along the way, he taught Brad Pitt to drive a 1922 Dodge and appeared as a waiter in Robert Redford's film *Ordinary People*.

Not bad for a 60-year-old who grew up hauling scrap iron.

Shiff's resume is impressive. It includes work on *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, *Knocked Up*, and *The Dark Knight*. His best stories, though, come from his work with Redford, who threw him a surprise 30th birthday party and used him in *The Natural*, *A River Runs Through It*, and *The Horse Whisperer*.

It all started in 1979 when Shiff owned a small trucking business and an old friend who was part of the former Ohio Film Bureau asked him to come help with a new movie it had landed. That movie was *Brubaker*, and Shiff's job was to drive Redford the 59 miles he took each day to and from the set.

"He kind of took a liking to me," Shiff said. "He told me a lot about himself. ... I think he was a lot more comfortable in the car than he was on the set."

Notorious for running late, Redford was party to a bet in which he owed a dollar for every minute he was late. That left Shiff speeding through the countryside and racking up a couple of tickets until one day Redford offered to switch places.

"He said, 'I'll drive,'" Shiff remembers. "Bam! He got pulled over and they gave him a ticket."

(Don't think the actor forgot. When Shiff's son, Caleb, was born in 1985, Redford sent a note that said, "Teach him to respect authority and to be nice to cops.")

Shiff's career has involved much more than just driving celebrities. His eye for automotive detail, evident even as a boy when he brought three car-related errors to the attention of *World Book* encyclopedia, made him perfect for being a picture car coordinator. He's sought out specific models of vehicles required in films, transported them to the set, and cared for them once they arrived.

In an industry where everything is high tech, Shiff is decidedly old school. He hates product placement — like the Fords used in *The Horse Whisperer* — and art designers who want to mess around with the vehicles he so lovingly and accurately provides for the era depicted.

"I'm sort of an anachronism anymore in the business," the father of two said.

When possible, he tries to stick with the familiar, like the charter bus company in Fostoria that supplied buses for *The Dark Knight*.

That brings up one of the most interesting things about his career: He's done it from his hometown, 40 miles south of Toledo. This is where he grew up working for his father's scrap iron company and developed a lifelong love of all things automotive. Shiff owns about a dozen vehicles, including a police car used in *The Dark Knight*.



Stuart Shiff with a police car that appeared in the film 'The Dark Knight.' (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

"I know they're quite boring to most people, but I find most of them have a story to tell," he said.

Part of Teamsters Local 399 in North Hollywood, Calif., Shiff spends between four and six months on the road, although one year he was away for 256 days. Randall Peterson, business agent for the union, said the Ohio man's reputation is a good one.

"I know that he's a man that's in demand," he said. "He can drive any piece of equipment and is familiar with it from his years of experience."

Shiff has met all sorts during that time. He's seen Johnny Depp interact kindly with fans and Heath Ledger come to work on a skateboard and give him a wink.

"I've worked in very close proximity to a lot of major stars who will never know what I did or who I am," he said.

Shiff's repertoire is broad. In addition to caring for vehicles on the set, the travel-lover who taught Redford's kids to drive a Porsche 911S also can be responsible for moving trailers around or even hauling set materials across the country, as he did for Depp's movie *Public Enemies*.

He managed to appear on screen a few times too, enough to get into the Screen Actors Guild. His restaurant scene in *Ordinary People* — a brief one in which he says only, "What can I get you guys?" — earned him enough to buy two pairs of cowboy boots. (Incidentally, he appears to have been typecast over the years, also being recruited to be a waiter in *Brubaker* and *The Natural*, though his work in the latter was cut.)

Once in a while his driving skills get him on screen too. If you ever watch the horror movie *Joy Ride*, don't be fooled. That's not the sadistic villain "Rusty Nail" behind the wheel of a semi chasing kids in some scenes; it's the good-natured Shiff. And while he was able to teach Pitt to drive an antique car for *A River Runs Through It*, sometimes it's easier for him to do it himself.

Over the years, showbiz has become a family affair. Shiff's son, then 6, appeared in *The River Runs Through It*, and his wife, Barbara, has used her skills as a seamstress to get involved with costumes, starting with *The Natural*.

"They needed somebody in wardrobe, and I told the boss man I could sew and everything," she said. "They were so excited that I could sew."

She has since done wardrobe work on numerous films, including *The Soloist* with Jamie Foxx and *The Specialist* and *The Quick and the Dead* with Sharon Stone.

The couple's Fostoria home is a full of snapshots recalling these amazing times. There's Redford and Pitt, Tom Skerritt, and Christopher Reeve. And behind each one is another Hollywood story waiting to be told.

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