

Fred's Last Stand

On Monday, the 4th of April, 2011, Fred was unplugging and packing it up from the third floor of the lab where it had resided for so many years. His beloved Rank-Cintel Mark III Telecine. Not many film colorists own their own telecine, but Fred does. It's always been a head scratcher for some people, why someone would go to such expense, but for Fred it had been a survival tool of sorts. A way to make money on his own without having to depend on full time employment from a post production facility. But things didn't quite work out that way. You could only use the Rank to transfer from film to standard definition tape, and since Fred didn't see the HD revolution around the corner when he purchased it in the early 2000's, he was never really able to drum up business on his own. Without the right gear, or the contacts, or the administrative or technical support, as independent as Fred might have proclaimed to be, the man was still chained to the resources of a large lab.

With the help of two stocky guys from the moving company, the three of them were able to shift the eight hundred pound beast onto a dolly and load it into a van to take back to his house up in Dobbs Ferry. Maybe he could sell it. The Cathode Ray Tube would have to be fixed. A \$30,000 repair according to the estimation of some video engineers. There were some post houses in India that might be interested. It would have

to be someplace where standard definition video was still acceptable and used. He thought about emailing some places to see if they would buy it as-is. But that whole hustle is so much work. Plus there's the hassle of having it to move it again and ship it by crate halfway around the world. Not an easy thought. Best to keep it local. Perhaps the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria would want to take it off his hands. With the proper lighting, it could look like an interesting exhibition piece. But maybe they already have one. He could strip down the parts and sell those individually on ebay or some such website. Maybe there was a film school that would have an interest.

All the while, his mind kept going back to the men's room. Fred doesn't know how he could have done things any differently. Maybe other people would have taken Tom's remarks in stride, and moved on with their lives. But Fred viewed that attitude as precisely part of the problem. Ground had to be stood. Despite all the worsening economic conditions in a lab all ready shaken by numerous layoffs, a diminishing roster of clients, and a rapid advance in digital technology making so many photochemical and videographic services redundant and unnecessary, Fred Walter wasted no time speaking out on his post bathroom interaction. It's unsettling to think that a less-than-three minute trip to the toilet can put the brakes on a thirty plus year career, but there you have it.

“Man, you're lucky we even still have a few commercial clients left shooting film that even keeps coming in here once in a while, and you want to waste time on this ? What he said about you when you got out of the bathroom ?”

That was Simon Wexler's reaction, the night shift manager.

"It's not what he said Simon. It's about how he said it. It really erodes the culture of this place."

"He said that you smelled ?"

"He insulted me."

"By saying that the bathroom smelled after you used it ?"

"Tom said, what's that smell ? Smells like someone took a big nasty shit, and then he saw me, and made eye contact, direct eye contact with me, and he said, oh, no wonder, it's Fred Walter. Implying that I'm a piece of shit !"

The whole anecdote seems absurd, not really something to go on and on about, and maybe even slightly embarrassing. But Fred's not the kind of guy to let things go. Even on a slow night (and there's been a lot of those), there are other things to do, actual work related matters to be concerned about. Even looking at random message boards on the internet might be more constructive. Simon doesn't want to encourage the conversation any further, he goes back to what he was doing before, printing out work orders in his small alcove of an office. Simon starts to ignore Fred, trying to tune him out in the hope that the man will go back to color correcting Olive Garden commercial

dailies like he's supposed to. But Fred isn't done. The more he's shunned, the more he wants to be heard. He expounds on his story, inching closer and closer as he does so. That smell of stale coffee on his breath infects all the breathable oxygen in the tiny office. As he tries to make his way towards the printer, Fred blocks it. That sandy grey mustache of his becomes much larger in Simon's field of vision than he would prefer. And all the little particles of doughnuts in the corners of his facial hair are increasingly apparent.

“He gets away with this all the time, Simon. You know he does. Tom's the big gun around here because he does D.I. and finishing. He looks down on me because I'm just a dailies guy. Well, let me tell you - dailies isn't simple pimple. Not these days. Clients are demanding as hell, all throughout the shoot ! You know what a high pressure situation it is to run the room when you got DP's coming in and looking over your shoulder ?? It's a goddamn urban legend that everything I do in dailies is neutral. Sometimes my corrections help decide the final look of the show, and a lot of that is from my suggestions to the guys on set. People trust me, and you know why, because I have a track record, because I have experience !! I've been at this game a lot longer than Tom has, he may not acknowledge it, but I have a big influence on what he does in D.I.”

“Yeah, well, what am I supposed to do ?”

“You're the shift manager Simon, you're the only administrator here at this hour, it's your show and it's up to you to take responsibility. Tell Tom he can't get away with

harassing employees, or freelancers, or independent contractors like me. That's what my wife would have done. Nuala would have laid down the law. If you want to be sitting in her seat one day Simon, and I know you have the potential, you're a smart guy, you're going to have to start drawing the line on horseplay. There were other people sitting around when Tom said that stuff, and they laughed and smiled. They look up to Tom, all these tech assists have ambition and if they want to make it in this business, they know how important it is to get on his good side. The culture of bullying has been going on way too long in this place, and it's only going to stop if guys like you make a stand."

Horseplay. Interesting choice of words Simon thought. Isn't that a Fred Walter trademark speciality? It's true that Fred's wife had been the Director of Operations back in the day. Nuala. That's how his Rank was able to maintain it's rent-free existence in the overpriced world of Manhattan. The way Simon sees it, Fred was always able to hide behind Nuala's apron strings. When the tapes he was supposed to have transferred weren't ready, he'd be blaming everyone in sight. Either the tech assistants were at fault for not helping out, or it was the loose, tangled wiring that engineers couldn't/wouldn't help him with. This was back in the glory days of 2007 and 2008, when things were busy and most productions were still being shot on 35mm film.

Things were often backed up and behind schedule in that era. Most operators call it 'hovering', they hate to be tracked and followed around by management, but doing the rounds and checking to make sure Fred was pushing film through the telecine was part of Simon's job. Frustratingly, he would often find his room empty. No film threaded up.

Nobody was sitting at the console. Just a pile of film cans sitting on a cart. Either he was on an extended lunch break, or Fred could be found holding, or attempting to hold court in the machine room telling tape operators anecdotes about Jerry Blavat, the legendary Philadelphia disc jockey that hardly anybody under the age of 50 would get that excited about. The 'Geetor with the Heater', that was Blavat's nickname, had been the DJ of his high school prom back in Allentown, PA back in the 1960's. You kids don't have a sense of community these days, your music is all crap, this stuff had a beat and was easier to dance to, and it helped me get a blow job in the parking lot, and so forth. The more Fred blathered, the more he fell behind schedule.

Messengers from production routinely came to pick up tapes early in the morning. For films still shooting, directors are eager to see if he/she got the performances they wanted, editors want to start cutting, producers and production managers are anxious as to whether film wasn't damaged so they could strike the sets and not have a fight about insurance, and move on. Though he was just a small cog in a large machine, Simon felt the weight of the world keeping up his tiny end of it, pumping out the volume of tapes and drives he was responsible for. And when he came up short, he was to blame. Not the operators. Nuala always saw to that. It was never Fred's fault.

"Well, Tom's gone home, Fred. I guess it'll have to be dealt with tomorrow," Simon said, trying not to think anymore about the past.

“As long as it gets dealt with, don’t wait too long on this one” Fred said, finally walking away.

Fred was satisfied with that answer for now. He wasn’t blown off like he was initially; he was able to make an impression. What Simon would do next was out of his hands, but he was feeling as though he’d inspired him. Though he was in management now, Fred viewed Simon as a protégé of sorts. He’d known the guy since he was a college intern, saw him become a tape operator, a diligent and cautious one. Simon was on the ball. He knew his way around drop and non-drop frame time code, always double and triple checking the job specs. This was an honest, reputable guy still not yet corrupted by Tom’s system of snickering and snippy one-liners. Fred saw a little bit of Nuala in him, the pragmatist who didn’t want to work with rock star colorists. Nuala was a fallen soldier, she was let go because she couldn’t play the games the way you were expected, but maybe Simon could.

Because he worked at night, Fred hibernated by day. He was awoken some hours later after he’d gotten home, by a phone call from the lab. Usually that meant he was being asked to come in early, but the voice on the other end wasn’t Simon. Nor was it anyone from the scheduling department. It was Leopoldo, the vice president of something or other at the lab, nobody could remember his exact job title, but he was the big boss man these days.

“Listen Fred, I hate to be the bearer of bad news here, but I don’t think things are working out. We’re not going to be needing your services any longer, there’s a lot of changes going on, and we’re going to be going in another direction here at the lab. And we’re also going to need that room back, the Rank as you know, it’s only standard def, and that’s not really useful to most any, actually all of our clientele anymore, and this isn’t a storage facility.”

“But what about the work I’ve been doing ? I’m just supposed to drop it ? The clients are really happy with my work.”

“What job are you doing for us, the Olive Garden spots ?”

“Yeah, and it’s going really well too !”

“The never ending pasta bowl spots ?”

“Yeah that’s it. Have you seen the way I’ve been saturating the chroma ? Nobody around here knows how to bring out some of those mid-tones the way I am.”

“Well, there you have it. Working on that job will give you explosive diarrhea.”

