

WELCOME TO LEITH

A feature documentary by Michael Beach Nichols & Christopher K. Walker

2015 / USA / English / Documentary
86 Min / HD / 1.78 / 5.1



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Welcome to Leith is a feature documentary chronicling the attempted takeover of a small town in North Dakota by notorious white supremacist Craig Cobb. As his behavior becomes more threatening, tensions soar, and the residents desperately look for ways to expel their unwanted neighbor. With incredible access to both long time residents of Leith and white supremacists, the film examines a small community in the plains struggling for sovereignty against an extremist vision.

LONG SYNOPSIS:

Leith, North Dakota is a registered ghost town of 24 people. Its inhabitants are mostly farmers or ranchers, with land passed down generation to generation. The town has an apocalyptic beauty set against a prairie backdrop of wide-open sky and fields of wheat.

In 2012, an outsider named Craig Cobb moved in and started buying up property. He accumulated twelve plots of land, some empty, some with houses in various states of disrepair. People assumed he'd moved in to be close to the Bakken oil fields some 70 miles north. Turns out he was also a notorious white supremacist who was plotting a takeover of the city government. Shortly after his plans were unveiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a family of fellow white supremacists moved in to start fixing up his properties.

Welcome to Leith is a feature film offering a glimpse into a town struggling for sovereignty against one man's extremist vision. Filmed in the days leading up to Cobb's arrest for terrorizing the townspeople on an armed patrol and his subsequent release from jail six months later, *Welcome to Leith* is an eerie document of American DIY ideals played out in one of the most under-populated states in the nation. That it takes place in the shadow of the biggest oil boom in North Dakota's history makes the film a complex document exploring unforeseen causes and effects.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

When I first read about Leith and Craig Cobb's plans in *The New York Times* in August 2013, I was intrigued. But his plan seemed so far-fetched that I figured it'd fizzle out once the national spotlight was on him and the town. I forwarded the article to my filmmaking partner Christopher K. Walker with the subject line "let's go to ND," not really thinking it would happen. But then a month went by, and I read about Cobb holding a town hall meeting co-hosted by the head of the NSM (the largest neo-Nazi organization in the country), and the mostly Native American protest that ensued. The story was moving forward, and Cobb wasn't going away. A couple weeks after that a family of white supremacists moved to Leith and vowed to help Cobb succeed in his takeover plan. At that point we decided we needed to go to North Dakota to start filming - something really strange was happening. A story about race, extremism and civil liberties was playing out as a direct effect of the massive state oil boom in ghost town miles from civilization.

We called Mayor Ryan Schock first to see if he'd be open to a documentary crew of two following him around for a few days. He was fired up on the phone - Cobb had pushed him to his limit and disrupted his life for the past two months - and quickly agreed to give us access to his family and promised to reach out to other people in the town on our behalf. We bought our plane tickets and waited until the day before we left to call Cobb - we were nervous he wouldn't want to participate if he had time to look up our previous film, *Flex is Kings*, about street dancers in Brooklyn. But when we called he was eager to participate, though he revealed that he'd be out of town the days we were scheduled to be there because he was going to appear on a talk show. We arranged to meet with him on a future trip - neither of us realized that that meeting would take place in jail.

Leith's isolation struck us immediately. After driving two hours from Bismarck and passing maybe 10 cars on a two-lane highway, we turned onto a dirt road and drove another three miles. Our GPS didn't work, and we ended up driving into a small crick on some farmland, getting stuck. We had to call the Mayor and hike up a hill so he could find us and pull us out. It was a rough start, but we like to think we endeared ourselves to the town once that story got out.

In town, the houses are clustered fairly close together given the empty prairie enveloping it on all sides. This layout meant that we'd be filming with the family of white supremacists during the first part of a day, and then go literally across the street and film with their neighbors for the second part of the day. We were open with both sides about wanting to tell the whole story, but it still felt surreal to keep going back and forth. Part of what was so fascinating about the story was that what Cobb and his followers were attempting was completely legal. Chris and I were captivated by Cobb's motivations and the implications of his plan for Leith and what that could mean for other small towns in America if people started following in his footsteps.

We approached the project in many ways as a documentary version of a psychological thriller - everyone was scared and confused and felt as if one wrong move could end in violence. The tension was palpable. We aimed to capture the sense of fear and isolation that residents living in a town of 24 people 70 miles from anything experienced when Cobb made his takeover intentions public. And we tried to get inside

Cobb's head, too - really, to objectively capture a very strange and scary moment in time. Ultimately, we captured a story that is both quintessentially American and stranger than fiction.

--**Michael Beach Nichols & Christopher K. Walker**

CREW BIOGRAPHIES:

Michael Beach Nichols (Director/Producer/Cinematographer) is an award-winning Brooklyn-based filmmaker and recipient of a Jerome Foundation Grant. His critically acclaimed second feature film, "Welcome to Leith," debuted at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, before going on to screen at SXSW, Hot Docs, AFI Docs, and many others. It will air on PBS' Independent Lens in the spring of 2016. His 2013 feature debut "Flex is Kings" premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and was hailed as an "awesome documentary" by rapper Pusha T. Previously, he directed the viral short documentary "Delivery," as well as directed the web series "BKLYN FLEX" for Ashton Kutcher's Thrash Lab and was part of the Peabody award-winning producing team behind Sundance's 11-hour docuseries "Brick City."

Christopher K. Walker (Director/Producer/Editor) is an award-winning filmmaker whose directorial debut "Welcome to Leith" premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, going on to screen at SXSW, Hot Docs, AFI Docs, and many others. He also edited and produced "Flex is Kings," edited the Columbia duPont award-winning film "Triangle: Remembering the Fire," and edited the Emmy-nominated "Hard Times: Lost on Long Island" for HBO. He recently edited and co-produced "Freeway: Crack in the System" for acclaimed filmmaker Marc Levin, which aired on Al-Jazeera America in 2015. He is the recipient of a 2015 Jerome Foundation Grant and the Karen Schmeer Award for Documentary Editing from the 2015 Independent Film Festival Boston.

Jenner Furst (Producer) was on the ground floor of "Brick City," crafting the acclaimed 11-hour docuseries for Sundance Channel and winning a Peabody Award as lead editor and creative producer. He then produced "Chicagoland," an 8-hour docuseries for CNN presented by Robert Redford. Furst joined "Welcome to Leith" in February of 2014, offering pivotal support and strategic partnerships, and hosting the film at his Brooklyn-based shop, The Cinemart.

Joey Carey (Producer) is a producer/director and founding partner of Sundial Pictures. He co-produced Gillian Robespierre's "Obvious Child" (A24) and executive produced Dee Rees' "Pariah" (Focus Features) and David Gelb's "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" (Magnolia Pictures). Other theatrical releases include Elgin James' "Little Birds" (Millennium Entertainment) and Matt Ross' "28 Hotel Rooms" (Oscilloscope Labs). Joey produced "Web" (The Orchard), a documentary about digital connectivity and the One Laptop per Child Program, the feature length thriller "Liars All" (eOne), and the suspense horror film "Dark Was The Night." He is currently in post-production on the feature film "Jack of the Red Hearts" and documentaries "The Seventh Fire," "The Organizer," and "Welcome to Leith." He lives and works in New York City.

Joshua Woltermann (Producer) is a documentary producer and director who has worked with some of the best known and respected contributors in documentary film, including Bill Moyers, Barak Goodman, John Maggio, Errol Morris, and Ric Burns. He has worked on films for PBS's American Experience and most recently served as producer of Ric Burns's "Enquiring Minds: The Untold Story of the Man Behind The National Enquirer" and on Michael Beach Nichols and Christopher K. Walker's "Welcome to Leith." Born in Kentucky, Woltermann received his bachelor's degree from New York University and his master's degree from the University of Florida's Documentary Institute. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Julia Willoughby Nason (Executive Producer) is an independent filmmaker from New York City. Nason found her voice behind the camera as a fine art photographer, then began to shoot and produce films; starting with "Dirty Old Town" and "Here Comes The Neighborhood" and most recently "Houses," starring Nick Sandow and Michael Imperioli. Nason joined "Welcome to Leith" in February of 2014 as an executive producer, hosting the production at her Brooklyn-based shop, The Cinemart. In addition to "Welcome to Leith," Nason is currently executive producing "As is, As Was," a surrealist autobiography of Warhol star and 20th century muse, Ivy Nicholson.

PRAISE FOR *WELCOME TO LEITH*:

“Entrancing... weaves a bizarre and enthralling tale.”- Sound on Sight

“The strongest documentary I’ve seen in the last few years”- AMFM Magazine

“Haunting... creepily even-handed... a stunning portrait of First Amendment rights pushed to their extremes.”- Indiewire

“A gripping you-are-there portrait of a community under siege... as engrossing as a fictional thriller.”- Variety

“One of the most viscerally terrifying documentaries in recent memory...”- POV Magazine

AWARDS:

Independent Film Festival Boston:

- Documentary Grand Jury Prize
- Karen Schmeer Award for Documentary Editing

Hot Docs:

- Filmmaker to Filmmaker Award

Florida Film Festival:

- Special Jury Award for Nonfiction Storytelling

RiverRun International Film Festival:

- Special Jury Award for Editing and Cinematography

Nashville Film Festival:

- Honorable Mention: Documentary Grand Jury Prize

Ashland Independent Film Festival:

- Honorable Mention: Documentary Editing

TECHNICAL SPECS:

Country of Production	USA
Language	English
Running Time	86 minutes
Shooting Format	HD
Aspect Ratio	1.78
Sound	5.1
Production Companies	No Weather Productions The Cinemart Sundial Pictures

CREW:

A No Weather Film, in association with The Cinemart and Sundial Pictures

Directed & Produced by	Michael Beach Nichols & Christopher K. Walker
Produced by	Jenner Furst
Producers	Joey Carey & Joshua Woltermann
Executive Producers	Julia Willoughby Nason & Stefan Nowicki
Executive Producer for ITVS	Sally Jo Fifer
Cinematographer	Michael Beach Nichols
Editor	Christopher K. Walker
Editors	Michael Beach Nichols & Joshua Woltermann
Original Music	T. Griffin
Contributing Composers	Matt Bauder Brendan Canty Tim Hecker
Additional Camera	Christopher K. Walker Gregory Bruce David Diebe Carson Nordgaard Dylan Jacobsen
Still Photographer	Joshua Simpson
Co-Producer	David Nichols
Associate Producers	Sarah McDowall Allen David Douberly Damien Mazza
Assistant Editor	Meagan Rodriguez
Field Soundmixer	Christopher K. Walker
Sound Effects Editor/ Re-recording Mixer	Evan Benjamin
Dialogue Editor	Greg Smith
HD Online/Colorist	Ken Sirulnick / Glue Editing & Design
Graphics	Jared Rosenthal
Titles	Justin Sirizzotti
Legal Services	Neil Burstein