

Contact! Hollywood Comes to Herndon

By Barbara Glakas

Hollywood came to Herndon in the 1990's. Portions of the 1997 Warner Bros. science fiction movie "Contact" were filmed in Herndon at a historic home on Grace Street.

The movie was based on a novel by the same name, written by Carl Sagan. The basic plot line is as follows: Dr. Ellie Arroway, played by actress Jodie Foster, had an interest in astronomy since her childhood, an interest that was fostered by her father. Later in her life, as a SETI (search for extraterrestrial intelligence) scientist, she found evidence of extraterrestrial life. She was ultimately selected to make first contact. The nations of the world funded the construction of a pod which she piloted. The pod supposedly traveled through a series of wormholes. She experienced displacement and met her deceased father on a beach. She later fell unconscious. When she awoke she found herself on the floor of the pod. Arroway insisted that she was gone for 18 hours, but to the others it appeared that the pod quickly malfunctioned and simply dropped into a safety net. Although most people did not believe her descriptions of her experiences, she was later confidentially informed by the White House Chief of Staff that her recording device had indeed recorded 18 hours of static. She later received additional financial support for her SETI program.

In addition to Jodie Foster, the movie also starred Matthew McConaughey, James Woods, Tom Skerritt, John Hurt, David Morse and Angela Bassett, among others. The movie grossed approximately \$170 million and won several awards, including the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation.

The movie was shot in several locations, including New Mexico, Washington D.C., Arizona, Los Angeles and Herndon.

Early portions of the movie show a young Ellie – played by young actress Jena Malone – using a telescope to star-gaze as she stands on the upper balcony of her house. It also shows her running through the inside of her home to help her father as he collapses and passes away. Another scene shows her sitting on the front stoop of the house, speaking to a priest and watching people walk up and down the street as they arrive to the house to pay their respects to her father on the day of his funeral.

The quaint home that was selected for these scenes is located at 755 Grace Street. The filming took place in 1996 and the owners of the house at that time were Gordon and Brenda Dudley.

A January 2000 article in The Washington Post described the process by which homes are usually selected to be used in movie productions. They described one selection process as “dumb luck.” Using the “dumb luck” technique, a film location scout would cruise through an area with a script in hand, looking for a potential property. Once an appropriate property was identified, the scout would then contact the owner to inquire about getting a closer look at the home. If the owner is interested, indoor and outdoor pictures would be taken for a director or production designer to review, who would later either accept or reject the site.

Should the producers accept the home, the production company may propose changes. They would also work out with the owner when the shooting would take place, how long it would take and how much rent, if any, the owner would be paid.

In the instance of the movie "Contact," a veteran scout named Peggy Pridemore explained that the script called for a father and daughter to stargaze on the balcony of a 1950s, lower-middle-class home. The production company had been shooting scenes in Washington, D.C. Since they were already in the area, they looked for neighborhoods in the D.C. suburbs that had the age homes they were looking for. Pridemore said she found such a place in Herndon. She added that the just-renovated home she found was, "too nice. We had to beg their permission to make it look dirty. We took down their beautiful white picket fence and put up crummy chain link."

Although the producers were looking for a “1950’s home,” the Grace Street house was a two story wood home that had been built in 1925 by local resident and carpenter, Floyd M. Thompson. An addition had been put on the home in the 1980’s.

The house that the company originally chose for the movie was across the street at 756 Grace Street, which had been built in 1904. But due to the position of the large trees next to the house they determined that they did not have good positioning for the star-gazing scenes. They later changed their selection to 755 Grace Street, which had a better southern view from its balcony.

Many of the neighbors on Grace and Vine Streets watched the movie being filmed and have specific memories about it.

Grace Street was closed off several times during filming. One neighbor on Vine Street remembers that the production company used her driveway and back yard to park lighting trucks.

Much of the filming was done at night, even though the scenes were meant to be during the day time. Neighbors remember how the company lit up the block with their huge lights in order to make it look like day time during the night hours.

Two neighbors recall how the interior shots of the home were taken on a set in Los Angeles. They had built a model of the interior of the home in Los Angeles. One brief scene in the movie shows the lay out of the home reversed, presumably a production error.

Balcony scenes were taken at the Grace Street house. However, the balcony that the movie characters were standing on while they were star gazing did not have a door. Therefore, while in Los Angeles, the company edited a fake door into the balcony scene in order to show the actress walking into the house from the balcony.

The Dudleys left their home and were housed in a hotel for about a month until the filming was completed. As described by one neighbor, the production company “took over the house” during the filming. Neighbors remember that the company painted the house to make it look older, ripped out the shrubs and landscaping, and even stapled leaves onto a big sycamore tree to make it look like fall. In order to enhance the look of a fall season, the company shipped in bags of fake leaves that they spread all over the yard. Dust and dirt was sprayed all over the exterior of the house to make it look dirtier. Grace Street was lined with old cars to make it look like the 1950’s.

Another neighbor remembers that a member of the movie staff came over to his house and asked him to quiet his barking dogs so that they could shoot an outside scene. They shot the scene many times. In the end the producers decided to leave the sound of the barking dogs in the movie, as they thought it made neighborhood scene more realistic.

A neighbor who was coaching baseball at the time took one of his players – who had lost a leg to cancer a few months earlier – over to watch the filming. The boy was about 10 years old and so was the young actress, Jena Malone, who played the young Jodie Foster. The neighbor introduced the two children. He described the young actress as having “a ton of personality.” They did not have any paper for her to sign an autograph, so she signed the boy’s baseball instead. It was signed “Jennifer Maloney.”

The neighbors across the street were asked not to come out onto their front porch, since their house appeared in the back drop of many scenes. But those same neighbors were allowed to play as extras in the movie. Their young daughter, who was about the same age as actress Jena Malone, appeared in a scene where the two girls played together in a small plastic swimming pool in the yard, but that scene was later cut from the movie. Other members of the family appeared in a scene in Washington, D.C., appearing in a crowd surrounding Jodie Foster as her character came out of a Congressional hearing.

Another neighbor on Grace Street allowed kids to sit on his front porch to watch the filming. One morning the company asked him if they could use his side yard for lunch, which he allowed. He

got to eat lunch with some of the stars, including Jena Malone and the actor who played her father, David Morse. The neighbor described the lunch as being very nice with tables and chairs, as well as personal chefs who did the cooking.

The film company fixed up the house after filming was completed, by doing things such as re-planting shrubs and refinishing the hard wood floors in their house, which had gotten scratched by the cameras.

By all accounts the film crew treated the Grace Street neighbors well. The Dudleys were allowed to be extras during a party scene that appeared later in the movie. Some neighbors got invited to a production company dinner at St. Joseph's, and everyone was treated to a premier showing of the movie in a local movie theatre, just prior to its release.

The current homeowner of 755 Grace Street says she still occasionally sees people driving slowly down Grace Street, pointing at her house, the house where the young Ellie Arroway once tried to make contact.