

Research Paper:

***The Shawshank Redemption* and Hope for Mansfield, Ohio**

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The Shawshank Redemption is a timeless story of hope turning adversity into triumph. Andrew (Andy) Dufresne and Ellis Redding (Red), portrayed by Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, have become two of the most memorable and beloved characters in film history. Red is a man serving a life sentence in Shawshank Prison, being “rehabilitated” for a mistake that he will forever remorse. He pays for the foolishness of his younger self, and although an older, wiser, sympathetic man during the movie, is continuously rejected the ability to rejoin the world. However, after 30 years within the confines of Shawshank, his world has *become* the institution; he declares himself an “institutionalized” man. He declares that “Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane”.¹ Andy Dufresne, however, is an embodiment of hope. From the moment he is wrongfully convicted and forced into a prison cell, he holds hope of escaping and embracing the great world that lay beyond the walls of Shawshank Prison. Prison life brings unimaginable pain for him, but his wits and his resolve stay intact. The light of the hope he secures within him shines out into the dark prison; he brings moments of normalcy to his companions with beers and music, and builds a library for the inmates to educate themselves. Hope brought Andy doubt, hardship, and pain, but ultimately it brought him freedom. Thus, Andy emboldens Red and millions of viewers to look beyond strife and indulge in the possibilities of life with his celebrated words: “Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies”.² Ironically, this movie delivered the same kind of hope to the small, forlorn city in which it was filmed: Mansfield, Ohio.

Movies have power to touch the hearts of people; some so much so, that they are moved to visit the same place where the films are set, to experience the world in which their favorite

¹ *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont, featuring (Tim Robbins & Morgan Freeman) (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994).

² *Ibid.*

characters abide. One of the greatest examples of a place which saw a massive influx of visitors due to film is New Zealand, which served as the world of *The Lord of the Rings*' Middle Earth.³ Tourism influenced by films is an interesting phenomenon that has been increasingly researched within the past few decades. There are numerous impacts that a movie set can have on a community, both tangible and intangible. Obviously, finances and revenue from visitors at film sites and local businesses are a prominent and immediate effect. However, as Sue Beeton, a researcher of film-induced tourism articulates, "Tourism may also lead to a greater level of pride in the town and a sense of belonging, in addition to the recognition amongst residents that they possess something that others desire".⁴ At the turn of the century Mansfield, Ohio, a city falling victim to the curse of the rustbelt was certainly taking an economic downturn and losing the pride of its townspeople. *The Shawshank Redemption* possessed the power and the poignancy to bring interest, revenue, and town appreciation back to Mansfield.

One of the opening scenes of *The Shawshank Redemption* is a panorama featuring a tall, foreboding, fortress-like building: Shawshank State Prison. That image is vital to conveying a sense of hopelessness that the prisoners feel as they enter the institution. The real prison that serves as Shawshank is called the Ohio State Reformatory, and its own incredible, haunting history is what makes it "arguably the most indelible image in *The Shawshank Redemption* and its evocative impression is perhaps as menacing as Dante's inscription visible to those entering the Gates of Hell".⁵ The producers of the movie knew the perfect location had to be found in order for the prison to have a profound effect on the audience. Eve Larabolla, of the Ohio Film Commission, first vouched for the eerie magnificence of the Reformatory, and finally arranged

³ W. Glen Croy, "Film tourism: sustained economic contributions to destinations," *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes* 3, no. 2 (2011): 160.

⁴ Sue Beeton, *Film-Induced Tourism* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 14.

⁵ Maura Grady and Tony Magistrale, *The Shawshank Experience: Tracking the History of the World's Greatest Movie* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 27.

for director Frank Darabont to come visit the site. According to Lee Tasseff, president of the visitors' bureau called Destination Mansfield, although the film crew visited at least one other prison, Darabont ended up choosing the Ohio State Reformatory, even calling the old prison the "main character of his film".⁶ There were other factors that went into the decision as well. The movie was set in Maine, so a place had to be found that looked similar; the landscape of central Ohio could pass for Maine. Furthermore, Mansfield and surrounding areas offered the perfect places to film other scenes in the movie, so convenience played a role as well.⁷ Overall, with the OSR playing the main role, and other parts of central Ohio providing non-prison scenes, Mansfield proved to be the perfect place to bring the Shawshank State Prison to life.

Once the decision for location was made, the cameras could start rolling. Filming took place in mid-1993.⁸ Of course, there were immediate financial effects on the local businesses of Mansfield, with the many crew members and actors who had to take up temporary residence in the city. For them it was cheap to buy locally: food, gas, services, and anything else they needed. Many rented or even bought houses because of the low prices. Lee Tasseff reports that an estimated \$9,000,000 to \$11,000,000 was spent in and around Mansfield during the few months of filming.⁹ This financial influence was only the beginning of how much good fortune *Shawshank* would bring the community.

The film quickly affected not only the town as a whole, but specifically the efforts to preserve the Ohio State Reformatory. Just prior to *Shawshank* producers coming to scout the historic building, the state of Ohio was in the process of making plans to tear down the nearly

⁶ President of Destination Mansfield Lee Tasseff, interview by Brianna Winemiller, Mansfield, OH, April 4, 2017.

⁷ Museum store manager Gina Jessee at Ohio State Reformatory, interview by Brianna Winemiller, Mansfield, OH, April 7, 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lee Tasseff, interview.

100-year-old prison¹⁰, which ceased all operations only three years before filming began.¹¹ The city of Mansfield saw the beauty and the value of OSR's compelling past and fought against attempts of demolition. Eventually a lack of funding slowed efforts,¹² and the state realized that taking down the Reformatory would be a bigger job than they expected.¹³ During this time of uncertainty regarding the fate of the Ohio State Reformatory, *The Shawshank Redemption* producers took advantage of the empty building; while they were filming, the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society (which did not officially form until 1995 but already existed as a group)¹⁴ took the time to prepare their request for the state of Ohio.¹⁵ After the movie was shot the state continued to demolish the Reformatory's outbuildings and surrounding wall, despite the spirited efforts by the Preservation Society.¹⁶ However, MRPS finally convinced the state that the demolition was not worth the expense, and the City of Mansfield bought the property for only \$1.¹⁷ The great, mysterious, historic building still stands today because of the timely shooting of *The Shawshank Redemption* and the endeavors of the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society.

Shawshank was not always the acclaimed classic that it is today. The movie was not an immediate box-office hit. In fact, it only brought in a meager \$18 million. *Shawshank* garnered some attention at the 1995 Academy Awards, where it received 7 nominations, but did not end up winning an award.¹⁸ Perhaps the movie-goers of America and the rest of the world were too

¹⁰ Nancy K. Darbey, *The Ohio State Reformatory* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2016), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 126.

¹³ Lee Tasseff, interview.

¹⁴ Darbey, *Ohio State Reformatory*, 126.

¹⁵ Lee Tasseff, interview.

¹⁶ Darbey, *Ohio State Reformatory*, 126.

¹⁷ Trevor Quinn, "Jail featured in the Shawshank Redemption to be transformed into a tourist attraction after plans to demolish it fall through," *DailyMail*, Sep 4, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-2740827/Ohio-State-Reformatory-featured-The-Shawshank-Redemption-transformed-tourist-attraction.html

¹⁸ Aly Weisman, "The Actors From 'Shawshank Redemption' Still Make A 'Steady' Income Off

focused on the other great movies that came out in 1994, including *Forrest Gump*, *Speed*, *The Lion King*, *The Mask*, *Dumb and Dumber*, and *Pulp Fiction*;¹⁹ or, perhaps, it simply took time for them to appreciate the magnificence of the film's characterization, symbolism, commentary on the American penal system, and themes of hope and individuality. Whatever the reasons, *The Shawshank Redemption* had to build up recognition over a few years, but once it became noticed the fan base started growing exponentially. Lee Tasseff said the movie "built its reputation and following through video rentals, being shown on TV, being critically acclaimed as the years went on. People loved the movie it and its fame and legend grew steadily".²⁰ *Shawshank* was the most rented movie on video in 1995, the year after its theatrical release.²¹ Gina Jessee, museum store manager at the Ohio State Reformatory, points out that *Shawshank* is consistently on the American Film Institute's list of top 100 films of all time;²² currently, as of 2017, it rests at the number 72 spot.²³ Although the initial box office did not reflect the eminence of the film, the video and rental sales, along with its distinguishment by AFI and many other critics, prove its renown as a celebrated classic.

Since the film took time to build its reputation, it also took time for tourists to start travelling to Mansfield in hopes of viewing the real places behind *The Shawshank Redemption*. For a while Lee Tasseff and workers at the Ohio State Reformatory and Malabar Farm, the site of the famous oak tree and cabin where the affair takes place, noticed people occasionally asking about where exactly they could see the places featured in the film. Then, in 2008, after a

TV Residual Checks," *Business Insider*, Jun 4, 2014,

<http://www.businessinsider.com/actors-from-shawshank-redemption-residual-pay-2014-6>

¹⁹ Grady and Magistrale, *The Shawshank Experience*, 24.

²⁰ President of Destination Mansfield Lee Tasseff, interview by Brianna Winemiller, Mansfield, OH, April 4, 2017.

²¹ Aly Weisman, "The Actors From 'Shawshank Redemption' Still Make A 'Steady' Income Off TV Residual Checks," *Business Insider*, Jun 4, 2014.

²² Gina Jessee, interview.

²³ American Film Institute. AFI's 100 Greatest American Films of all Time. <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies10.aspx>

publicized and successful 15 year filming reunion of the cast and crew in Upper Sandusky, where the wood shop and courthouse scenes were filmed, it became apparent that there was a large and growing group of *Shawshank* fans.²⁴ Furthermore, the city realized that the movie gifted Mansfield with the perfect opportunity to set up a market for tourism. Many movies with large fan bases have scattered locations for their iconic scenes; therefore, fans cannot easily make one “pilgrimage” to walk through and relive the moments of their beloved film. With *The Shawshank Redemption*, that is not the case. Most of the movie was filmed right in Mansfield, Ohio, with a few other locations in nearby parts of central Ohio. The close string of filming locations had the potential to become a tourist route, and the city of Mansfield quickly perceived that. The people of Destination Mansfield, with Lee Tasseff leading the way, set out to make sure the fans could easily locate and visit the sites of their beloved movie. Film-induced tourism researcher W. Glen Croy found that “As film is not a strong attractor on its own, the destination management organisation should use film interest to expose potential tourist to the range of experiences available at the destination. The hopeful consequence is that whilst film plays a role to create awareness, and induce a search for further information, it is the more holistic destination that attracts and provides the experiences to the tourists”²⁵. The relationship between *The Shawshank Redemption* and Mansfield, Ohio is a perfect example of this assertion. The poignancy of *Shawshank* gripped the hearts and minds of the fans, and the city of Mansfield set about finding a way to accommodate their endeavors to make *Shawshank* a sort of reality. Thus, the *Shawshank Trail* came into being.

The *Shawshank Trail* is marketing tool which gives directions to 15 sites where *The Shawshank Redemption* was filmed. Most of the stops are in Mansfield and surrounding areas,

²⁴ Lee Tasseff, interview.

²⁵ W. Glen Croy, " Film tourism: sustained economic contributions to destinations," 162.

although one stop is in St. Croix, where the Mexico scene was shot.²⁶ Destination Mansfield put the tour together for the convenience of fans, who can come and drive through the stops at their leisure. Lee Tasseff was one of the leaders of this project. He said “We took it on as our responsibility to give them the information they needed to make the pilgrimage to Mansfield to visit as many of the sites as existed”.²⁷ He and his associates spent much time preparing and refining the tour, including a brochure and website. After the Trail was developed, tourism began to boost every year. In 2016, there were 80,000 people who specifically followed the trail, but collective attendance to the sites totaled about 400,000. Three of the sites—OSR, Malabar Farm, and the woodshop—bring in revenue from the visitors, while a few of the other places take donations.²⁸ While following the Shawshank Trail, one can see the immense love and support the surrounding community has for the film and its fans. Local businesses try to play a part in Shawshank tourism as well, and so benefit financially. For example, the Blueberry Patch on Route 42 just south of Mansfield carries a special blend of coffee called “Jail House Java”, the Richland Carrousel downtown sells old-fashioned “prison break” sodas, and Mansfield’s Two Cousins Pizza Co. produces their famous “Redemption Pizza Pie”.²⁹ The locals are proud to advertise their home as the home of *Shawshank*.

Naturally, the biggest attraction for fans is the Shawshank Prison itself: Ohio State Reformatory. Visitation is due not only to its ties with *Shawshank* but also its magnificent architecture, interesting history as a maximum-security prison, and alleged paranormal activity, although the growth in tourism since its opening as a museum in 1995³⁰ can be largely attributed

²⁶ Destination Mansfield, The Shawshank Trail, <http://www.shawshanktrail.com/begin-your-journey/about-the-trail>.

²⁷ Lee Tasseff, interview.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Destination Mansfield, The Shawshank Trail.

³⁰ Gina Jessee, interview.

to its coordination of events dedicated to the movie.³¹ In 2011 the Reformatory reported 51,000 total visitors; by 2016, the total almost tripled to 150,000, with 85,000 of those visitors specifically embarking on the Hollywood Tour.³² Gina Jessee, who specifically deals with the museum's gift shop, stresses the fact that Shawshank-themed apparel outsells all other apparel 5 to 1.³³ Thanks to the massive boom in income, which recently has totaled about \$1.8 million per year,³⁴ great improvements have been made in restoration to the historic building.

The OSR continues to celebrate and generate excitement for *Shawshank*; in 2014 the Reformatory hosted a celebration in honor of the film's 20th anniversary. Present was Bob Gunton, who acted the part of Shawshank's warden.³⁵ The event was a fantastic success and plans are currently underway for a 25th anniversary celebration. The Executive Director of the Reformatory recently traveled to Los Angeles and spoke with Tim Robbins, and although his attendance is not completely certain yet, other exciting plans are being put in the agenda.³⁶ Furthermore, the OSR hosts the annual Shawshank Hustle, a 7K run/walk that includes several Shawshank Trail locations on the route.³⁷ These celebratory festivities, along with the phenomenal marketing strategies of Destination Mansfield, continue to garner excitement from *Shawshank* fans and the communities of north central Ohio.

The Shawshank Redemption is a beloved tale of the power of hope. This power reached far beyond the movie screen; *Shawshank* brought hope to the town in which it was filmed. The city of Mansfield, Ohio gave life to *Shawshank*, and in return *Shawshank* brought life to

³¹ Grady and Magistrale, *The Shawshank Experience*, 171.

³² Gina Jessee, interview.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Grady and Magistrale, *The Shawshank Experience*, 172.

³⁶ Gina Jessee, interview.

³⁷ Destination Mansfield, The Shawshank Trail.

Mansfield. At the turn of the century, north central Ohio had become another desolate rustbelt region with people who yearned for the glory of their town in years past. However, in 1993 the producers of *The Shawshank Redemption* recognized the unique beauty of Mansfield and its historic Reformatory, and knew that it provided a perfect setting in which to bring reality to a captivating story. Over time the story gathered more and more fans, eager to see the real places behind the movie for themselves. These fans fuel a growing tourism industry, that brings not only a financial boost, but a boost in town pride, given at a time when it was desperately needed. Mansfield and its people are proud to be the home of *The Shawshank Redemption*—home to a place which knows well that “hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies”.³⁸

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³⁸ *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont, featuring (Tim Robbins & Morgan Freeman) (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994).

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