



CONTRAPHONIC PRESENTS

LITTLE HELL

VOLUME 6

The Indian Boundary Line

Original Film by Thomas Comerford

Original Score by Tobin Summerfield



Welcome to this special DVD edition of my film, *The Indian Boundary Line*.

This film began when I went on a walk down Rogers Avenue in 2005. While walking, I became curious as to why the road had such an unusual orientation. It runs Northeast to Southwest, against the consistent grid system of Chicago, and unlike other diagonals, it does not spoke out from mouth of the Chicago River (ie, downtown). Soon after, I expanded my research from walking, looking and listening to reading at the Newberry Library. I tried to unpack the layers of histories surrounding this road, some noted and commemorated in plaques and signs, others forgotten but documented in old notebooks, speech transcripts and memoirs.

My study of this particular history of Chicagoland opened my eyes to a whole process of nation building which has resulted in our current United States -- a process involving all manner of activities ranging from land speculation and surveys to resource exploitation, from industrialization to genocide and relocation. In making the film, using a camera and a sound recorder, I tried to reflect my own process of discovery, juxtaposing the sounds and sights from these very particular locations which commemorate Chicago's history, with shifting sets of ideas and notions regarding the land, and ultimately, the construction of Chicago and the United States.

I hope the film offers you the opportunity to reflect on such histories and landscapes, whether you live here in Chicago or wherever it is you make your home.

-Thomas Comerford, 2011



Thomas Comerford's *The Indian Boundary Line* begins with un-split double-8: four frames of Rogers Avenue in the late 2000s, a vertical black line bisecting the frame and standing in for the obsolete boundary line.

It's fitting that this boundary is presented to us first as absence, a peculiarly resonant blank spot; it will remain an absence for the rest of film, which will trace the shape of its gone-ness. The four frames of un-split double-8 establish a sense of shadowed sight, a haunted kind of vision: what do we see when we try to look at something that's not there anymore?

First, we see signs; officially, the past has marked the present through street names, plaques, city parks. These are the footprints of history, but they're precarious, contingent. In being official, they are there by decree of the political order, and the political order does not just preserve the past but revises, erases—like when, say, the political order plowed through the Indian Boundary Line and into Native American territory.

The texts read in voice-over in *TIBL* are a counterbalance to the official history presented by the landmarks; written by individuals, they're personal traces of the past. Each text is paired with a specific location along the boundary line, and the tension of each section arises from the way its voiceover seems both at home in the landscape, embodied by it, and alien to it, endlessly pointing out what's been lost.

The most important scene in *TIBL* shows a child (Comerford's own) playing at Indian Boundary Park, while the soundtrack has a text (read by filmmaker Jim Trainor) about the Beaubien family, early settlers famous for their fertility. The child climbing around a playground becomes a salient, tactile metaphor for the ways that we learn to read and make sense of the boundaries around us. We are all children born into a world we didn't make, with codes we didn't write, and we navigate this world much the same way a child navigates a jungle gym: we crawl around somewhat blindly and feel our way through, all the while internalizing the rules that we don't even take the time to verbalize. The story of the Beaubien family is a reminder of the lives we lead in the midst of these shifting boundaries, the little dramas of birth and copulation and death according to which we are established, marked, and erased. Adding resonance to the theme of personal history coexisting with capital-H History is that this scene is, on a very basic level, a document of family outing to a playground.

The layers of history accrue: *TIBL* is the story of one resident's exploration of his neighborhood, the story of a particular treaty, and the story of Manifest Destiny. We all know how this story ends. Westward the course of empire takes its way. History is a litany of broken promises, but maybe not all is hopelessly lost. Perhaps by looking without naiveté at the distance and the otherness of the past, we can attempt to salvage some of it.

- Tom McCormack, 2011.

The Indian Boundary Line

We aren't much in the business of putting up historical markers anymore. The civic-mindedness necessary for that sort of thing seems a relic of a previous age—some event our grandmothers would have attended, possibly in white gloves. We seem mostly content with forgetting that history happened in the places we inhabit everyday. We build over the remnants, intellectualize a few different versions of the hows and whys, and allow the past to float tethered above us, removed from the corporeal world. Thomas Comerford's film *The Indian Boundary Line* offers a small corrective by resurrecting forgotten markers of the past and illustrates that the erosion of history is often a purposeful and sustained practice. Both quiet and compelling, Comerford collages together documentary fragments surrounding the 1816 Treaty of Saint Louis, the contract that established the boundary between Native American land and settler territory in the Rogers Park neighborhood.

An extension of the visual vocabulary developed in Comerford's earlier pinhole camera work, *The Indian Boundary Line* builds site-specific histories of local places, inviting the viewer to sit in these locations and contemplate them. He fills the frame with the tensions between the conditions of the two worlds—present and past, manicured and unconquered, developed and free. The camera often lingers in liminal spaces in the urban environment: street crossings, walking paths, the overgrown edges of parks and golf courses, all once ancestral lands to thousands of native inhabitants. Comerford emphasizes the watering down of a brutal history by focusing attention on the nearly invisible decorative traces—bare echoes—that remain: the bust of a brave carved into the front of a building or the rustic settler-themed children's playground structures in Indian Boundary Park.

A graceful score composed by Tobin Summerfield complements Comerford's cinematic essay on historical erasure. Frank Rosaly's quiet and inventive percussion keeps the music delicately attenuated. Comerford builds a strong conceptual backbone to the film by embedding recorded readings of different historical documents into the quiet environmental sounds of the onscreen locales, creating a fascinating tension between sound and image. In this easy marriage of minimalist melody and found sound, the ambient noise of the locales seem to lead the music, leaving abundant sonic room for Comerford's skillful use of voiceover.

While the film's elements appear unassuming, the observations they provoke are strongly resonant, bringing many complex ideas to the fore. Comerford allows the historical documents to speak for themselves and favors first person accounts of the era, particularly letters and diaries. In revealing history as a matter more personal than civic, he eschews the usual textbook history for a more complete picture, drawing the accepted account into question. In tracing how Pottawatomie-land-became-Indian-Boundary-Road-became-Rogers-Avenue, Comerford exposes the idea of land ownership as a fragile conceptual tenet, a nearly revolutionary assertion in our current existence.

The Indian Boundary Line infuses suppressed history back into the spaces captured by the camera lens. As Chicagoans, we recognize some of the featured spaces as part of our daily routines, making us culpable participants in the history that has slowly stripped away almost every reference to the area's original inhabitants. While the film is a regionally-specific work, it can be easily transposed onto many other American neighborhoods. Each scene provides meditative space for us to consider how the land of our various cities and towns looked before we were born, and the decisions made—political and personal—that paved the way for us to live here now, to stare out our own windows and wonder. What erased lives lay beneath our feet, beneath our floors, beneath our foundations?

- **Christy LeMaster, 2011**, Director, *The Nightingale*, Chicago



Thomas Comerford's film essay *The Indian Boundary Line* takes us on an eccentric trip down Rogers Avenue - the former Indian Boundary Road - in a juxtaposition of various texts and images intended to make the viewer think; not only just about the history of the Indian Boundary, but also the entire scope of the U.S. government's relations with Native Americans. The film is about the loss of a particular episode of history, but also about how we choose to commemorate places and events.

It's full of my favorite kinds of surprises, where I find myself actively disliking parts but retrospectively realize - often hours after viewing - why and how they fit in. One such scene takes place in a park, with a voiceover reading off what sound like GPS coordinates over still shots of park buildings and foliage. It seems strangely obsessive, the narration at odds with the otherwise historical sources of the other readings. The degrees, the minutes the seconds, all seem arbitrary and meaningless when repeated. What good is it, in a practical sense, to know your exact latitude and longitude?

Yet later, over shots of another area along the boundary line, another voice reads the obsessive details of the exact size and shape of the land the Native Americans were ceding. It's full of seemingly precise but fuzzy specifications: ten miles north from the mouth of the Chicago River (from which bank? does everyone agree on the terminology "Chicago River"?), ten miles due west (yet they knew how radically surveying teams could differ in their measurements; Michigan and Ohio fought a war over a couple of degrees' error), and so on. It's as precise as GPS coordinates, but practically meaningless if there's no agreed upon and mutually accessible frame of reference.

And then there's the real coup, the place where Comerford's decision to use film instead of video makes a kind of cosmic sense that's the true mark of an artist who's really thought about his or her medium. Each reel of film has a beginning and an end, like lines on a map. When you splice

film together, there's often a break, a pop on the soundtrack when the sound switches from one tone to the next, and a flash of light between the imperfectly fitted end of one piece of film and beginning of the next. It calls attention to itself, forcing you to think about the process of cutting a 400-foot reel into pieces and taping them together out of order. It's a staggeringly fitting and beautiful metaphor for the process of treaty-making, which takes an un-delineated expanse of land and cuts pieces out of it, identifying disparate landmarks and splicing them together through imaginary lines that are decreed to run "due west" without regard for the actual features of the land. (Imagine the "pop" on your internal soundtrack if you walked that line and discovered that it bisected a mountain or a lake.)

Comerford also makes extensive use of the ends of reels, which are distinguished by flashes of light that gradually take over the frame, followed by blurs of letters and then whiteness signifying the end. Treaties that the U.S. made with Indian tribes, with overwrought language such as, "*as long as the sun shines and the river flows,*" and "*as long as the land belongs to the United States government,*" are brief reels with inevitable endings that the white negotiators knew were coming. When we hear portions of treaties that refer to earlier agreements, or set the stage for later ones, the similarity hits home again. The film calls attention to its existence as film, the cuts call attention to subsequent or earlier cuts, and both of these reinforce the picture of an unbroken expanse chopped carefully into pieces.

It's not an antigovernment screed, as it has other goals in mind; besides, as Comerford told the *Chicago Reader*, "I found stories of friendship and cooperation and interracial marriages, in addition to the more expected stories of conflict: the 'massacre,' the treaty, and Manifest Destiny." Those stories are here, too, presented as small surprises in this film that's so joyously full of visual, aural, and relational wonders.

- **Michael W. Phillips Jr.**, Executive Director, South Side Projections



Little Hell Vol VI: The Indian Boundary Line is a collaboration between independent music and media company Contraphonic, Inc., filmmaker Thomas Comerford and composer Tobin Summerfield.

Thomas Comerford, a musician, punk rock professor at the Art Institute of Chicago, and filmmaker, is the mind behind *The Indian Boundary Line*. The film has been regarded as “a great experimental film ... remarkable” by Christy LeMaster and Alison Cuddy of WBEZ/Chicago Public Radio, and as “a gentle masterpiece” by Tom McCormack of Cinema Scope Magazine. *TIBL* has been screened all across the United States and in countries such as Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, and England. The essays here by LeMaster, McCormack, and Michael Phillips Jr. speak to the resonance the film carries.

Tobin Summerfield is an esteemed composer, arranger, and player on the Chicago free music scene. Summerfield has played with diverse groups from Health & Beauty, Crush Kill Destroy, Larval, Dina Maccabee, and alongside players such as Frank Rosaly, Aram Shelton, Jaimie Branch, Keefe Jackson, and Fred Lonberg-Holm. Summerfield is the leader of the 20-piece ensemble Never Enough Hope, whose Contraphonic-release *The Gift Economy* was heralded as “progressive modern classical” (LMNOP/BabySue) from a “a creative, unclassifiable musical mind.” (WNUR Chicago) Summerfield is joined on the score to *TIBL* by esteemed drummer Frank Rosaly, and the frontman for avant-garde stalwarts Pillars & Tongues, Mark Trecka.

The Indian Boundary Line marks the first film released by Contraphonic, Inc.

Original Score:

Tobin Summerfield

Musicians:

Tobin Summerfield

Frank Rosaly

Mark Trecka

Mastering:

Thomas Comerford

Layout:

Gregory Thomas

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