

# CALGARY HEARLD

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## **How a freak hail storm helped Alberta win Fargo**

### **Epic floods and bitter cold also played a part in the province luring one of TV's hottest properties**

By Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald April 1, 2014



**Billy Bob Thornton as Lorne Malvo Photograph by: Chris Large , Chris Large**

It was a steamy weekend last July when Hollywood producers and executives behind the FX series Fargo began a tour through Alberta in an old RV.

At the time Alberta was neck-and-neck in Manitoba in the race to lure the high-profile TV production, a highly-anticipated reimagining of the classic 1996 dark comedy from the Coen Brothers that will air in Canada on FXX. But the province's elements were not co-operating. At least not at first.

For one, the scouting trip had already been postponed. It was scheduled for a few weeks earlier and was to include High River, which was being pitched as a suitable stand-in for the town of Bemidji, Minnesota.

But Mother Nature intervened. The massive summer flooding hit on the day that Hollywood producers were to visit, virtually wiping out the town.

When the out-of-town guests did arrive, Calgary producer Chad Oakes of Nomadic Pictures had to improvise. Since so many people had been displaced by the flood, rental RVs were scarce. He had to borrow a late-1980s model with a dodgy clutch from “a friend of a friend of a friend” for the journey, resulting in a less-than-luxurious ride.

But as the “Diplomat” rumbled out of Strathmore towards Drumheller, they faced another problem. How do you convince someone that Alberta is the perfect spot to shoot a jet-black comedy set in a bleak winter wasteland while driving past field after field of lush green and canola yellow?

“It was a challenge,” says Oakes with a laugh, sitting on Fargo’s interior sets in Bridgeland in mid-March. “When we were going on our location scout, we kept saying as we got off the bus: ‘Just imagine freezing your ass off and standing in a foot of snow ...’ That was my constant: ‘Just imagine ...’”

But north of Strathmore, Mother Nature intervened again. In the distance, the visiting producers were treated to spectacular show as a violent hailstorm hammered down on the prairies.

“It was a mile wide and five-miles long,” Oakes says. “It dumped six inches of hail on both sides of the highway.”

Nobody is saying that this was the moment that Alberta beat Manitoba for Fargo. But eight months later, Fargo’s L.A.-based producer, Warren Littlefield, still delights in telling the tale.

### [View a gallery of the Fargo cast](#)

“We thought Chad Oakes produced that,” says Littlefield, the one-time president of NBC who Bob Balaban based his character on for Seinfeld. “We’re way outside the city. We’re seeing acre after acre of these vibrant, lush canola fields; a green base and an explosion of yellow. We happened to be in a conversation of winter climate and how that would support us and what we were dealing with. The next thing we know Chad said ‘Turn your head to the right ...’ It seemed as though we were transformed onto a set and this was some sort of special effect. It was ‘Stop the Diplomat!’”

Cold was good. A frozen landscape was even better. After all, when talking about the original film, Joel Coen once described Minnesota and North Dakota as “Siberia with family restaurants.”

Still, those who flew in from milder climes for the November to April shoot may not have been entirely prepared for Alberta's coldest winter in 20 years. It got so bitter in December, in fact, that shooting was cancelled on the final day of the first block as temperatures dipped below -30 C.

For Colin Hanks, who plays sad-sack Duluth police officer Gus Grimly, the icy feel, while perhaps unpleasant, helped set the mood.

"I think if you talk with the majority of people about Fargo, the things they remember is the snow, the accents and the woodchipper," Hanks says. "I can't comment if we have the woodchipper in this or not, but we definitely have the snow and the accents. It's part of it. You can't have one without the other. You can't have Fargo without them. The snow has been a challenge to work with for sure. I don't necessarily recommend shooting a television series in -30 degrees in the middle of the night in the dead of winter. But it seeps into everything the show is. It seeps into everything we do."

Of course, freezing temperatures were far from the only reason that Alberta became the locale. While the high-profile cast — which also includes Billy Bob Thornton, Martin Freeman, Bob Odenkirk, Oliver Platt and Keith Carradine — might suggest the series had a sky-high budget, the reality of television is that it has to shoot quickly and efficiently.

So producers were impressed that Alberta not only had a recent history shooting high-quality television drama but doing it all in less-than-ideal conditions.

"Nomadic Pictures is based here and have done four years of outstanding work in premium cable for AMC with Hell on Wheels," says Littlefield. "We needed to blink our eyes, get a crew that was up to speed, ready to go and has a shorthand of working together. Those are all critical elements because we do have a finite period where we have to deliver episodes. In films, if you go a few weeks beyond in a film schedule, that usually is not a crisis. In television we are scheduled right to the minute.

"What we found is a very experienced crew, many of whom resided in Calgary, who could deliver the quality and excellence that we demand but also work at the speed of light."

To play Bemidji, Duluth, Minneapolis-Saint Paul and the town of Fargo, various parts of southern Alberta were used. In Calgary, that included store fronts in Inglewood and Bowness, Broasters Smokehouse on Ogden Road and the abandoned CareWest facility in Bridgeland (which, incidentally, did not have any running water). Areas of High River, Strathmore, Balzac, Drumheller, Bragg Creek and "many a farmer's field in between" were used. Puzzlingly, even the mountains near Canmore will find their way into the series, although no one from the spoiler-paranoid set wanted to elaborate on how exactly.

"It's about piecing that stuff together," said Noah Hawley, Fargo's showrunner and writer. "You've just got to know where to look. And I think everyone here was excited about the challenge of not making another Western."

There were other considerations. Alberta's incentives and funding for film productions was a draw, as was the fact that flights from the city to New York or Los Angeles are frequent.

"We were trying to attract a calibre of actor who is not really going to be interested in the two or three flights it's going to take them to get to Winnipeg," Hawley says.

And, by all reports, the stars seemed to enjoy their lengthy stays in the city. Granted, the cold took some getting used to.

"The cold is interesting," jokes British actor Martin Freeman, who plays henpecked insurance salesman Lester Nygaard. "I've never been in -37 before. That was something I wanted to experience. And I have. But I'm glad it's thawed out."

As with other cast members, Freeman became a common sight at local bars and restaurants, particularly along 17th Avenue.

Billy Bob Thornton, who plays manipulative drifter Lorne Malvo, goes so far as to call Calgary his favourite city in Canada.

"The people here are so nice," he says. "It's a big city with a small-town feel. I run into people I've met before all the time. I was just in a record store the other day and here's the guy I saw at the hat store at the mall."

Thornton said he wasn't scared of the cold either, pointing out that the conditions were actually even colder for the Wisconsin shoot of the 1998 film *A Simple Plan*.

"But I didn't factor in the fact that I was 17 years younger when we did *Simple Plan*," he says with a laugh "That was the one thing I didn't think about."

*The first episode of Fargo will air April 15 on FX Canada. Subsequent episodes will air on FXX. As of now, only Rogers subscribers can get FXX, but negotiations are underway with Telus and Shaw in Alberta.*

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