Markle a pioneer in the colour film industry

By Mark Pavilons

Wilson Markle changed the way we look at the world.

The inventor of colourization, Markle not only forever changed the film entertainment industry, he helped improve everything from airline safety to space exploration. In the process, he's added a little colour to our lives.

Awards and accolades aside, Markle, through a steady progression of successful career moves, simply did what had to be done.

Few people, though, get to see their life's work go from creation to demise, but that's exactly what happened. It's only been roughly 60 years since the world has gone from cost-effective colour film to digital, ending an era in our evolutionary story. Today, as we munch on our buttered popcorn in a local movie theatre, there is no person manning a movie projector. It's all automated, streamed via the Internet. Movies could be shown 24/7 with nary a human being present.

But Markle isn't bothered one bit. Back in the day, he was on the cutting edge of technology, working during a time when it was intimidating and challenging to say the least.

Trained as an electrical engineer at Montana State University, Markle went back to his native Vancouver in 1962 to work on the iconic Canadian TV series ?The Littlest Hobo,? working in post-production sound editing. He said this series was a wonderfully collaborative effort, working with many outstanding, talented people.

Markle headed off to Nassau,?Bahamas to film a small, independent project, and fell into something much bigger. A U.S. film industry strike threatened work on the 1965 James Bond film Thunderball, starring Sean Connery. Thankfully, Canadians like Markle and his crew were on hand to carry on. With a budget of $9 million, Thunderball went on to earn $63.6 million at the box office.

Markle moved to Toronto in 1964, working as a sound engineer at Film House. He worked on commercials for General?Motors; flight simulators for Boeing 747s, and stablized camera platforms for Westinghouse.

He founded Image Transform Inc. in Los Angeles in 1970 and it became the world leader in TV standards conversion technology.

He became vice-president of sales for Film House in 1972, taking the company into video tape and developing it into the second largest film and sound laboratory in the world.

Technology continued to literally explode overnight into the early 1980s. In 1981, he founded Mobile Image, which provided mobile television services for the Toronto Blue Jays, and computer graphic production for Olympic host TV broadcasters such as CTV and NBC.

Markle sat on the board of Glenex Industries, which happened to own the Laurel and?Hardy library, all in black and white.

Company brass wanted to market it again, but black and white didn't sell. Markle decided it needed some colour, so the process of colourization was born. Basically, the process involves taking black and white motion picture images and reproducing them in full colour video. It sort of takes shades of grey and translates them into primary colours (red, blue and green). This was a milestone to say the least and Markle's invention earned him an Emmy Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1987. It sits, a little tarnished, on the mantel in his living room.

He said he learned a lot of lessons the hard way and mostly what not to do. In the entertainment business, actual colour is subjective, so movie producers punched up the colours, in a way, cheating reality.

A little more lofty, Markle did some groundbreaking video work for NASA's jet propulsion laboratory, but unfortunately, he's not allowed to get into the details.

He ?retired??at age 53 in the late 1980s, after little colourization work remained to be done.

But his story, and accomplishments, just got better.

He was asked to assist at Telesat in 1991, a company that specialized in high-definition satellite and mobile TV. He helped bring Telesat to the forefront of mobile communications during his seven-year tenure. He was thrilled to spend seven years providing a great product in a virtual monopoly, finally retiring at the top of his game at age 60.

Today, Telesat is a leading global satellite operator, providing communications solutions worldwide to broadcast, telecom, corporate and government customers. Headquartered in Ottawa, it has offices and facilities around the world. The company's state-of-the-art fleet consists of 15 satellites plus the Canadian payload on ViaSat-1 with two new satellites under construction. Telesat also manages the operations of additional satellites for third parties.

Markle changed careers every decade or so because he often became frustrated with a lack of progress.

?If I could get my hands on it, I?could make it better,? he said.

While modest, Markle has many honours on his resume. He's a Fellow of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers; honourary member of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers; Fellow of the British Kinematograph Sound and Television Society, and past-chairman of the Canadian Film and Television Production Association.

He has also given much of his time to Variety Club, a cause near and dear to his heart.

He's thrilled to have played a part in colourization, film, video and telecommunications. He was never in it for the proverbial fame and fortune, but admitted he has everything he needs.

He and his wife moved to King roughly 13 years, totally renovating a fixer-upper in Kingscross. They couldn't be happier.

From writing code on?Lotus 1-2-3 Spreadsheet, to fiddling around with Adobe Photoshop and 3D graphics, Markle has seen some very remarkable advances. In many ways, he's responsible for shaping our present, and our future.

Laurel and Hardy would be proud.

We are, too.