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John Kelso

SXSW will be all abuzz over this flick

It's called "Growin' a Beard." It's a 30-minute documentary about the St. Patrick's Day celebration beard-growing contest up in Shamrock, population about 2,200, on Route 66 in the Texas Panhandle. It starts out by showing old boys shaving. It's been accepted into the artsy South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin in March.

And it is very, very funny. "It was always kind of like a nagging," said Mike Woolf of Beef and Pie Productions in Austin, who directed "Growin' a Beard." "It was always, 'Why can't I finish this?' It was like, 'Oh, because I have a job.'"

Six years ago, Mike filmed Shamrock's annual beard competition. Trouble was, he was working as a writer for the GSD&M ad agency. So two years ago, he quit his job to find time to finish the project. He spent \$5,000 of his savings and got a \$1,000 grant from the Austin Film Society. He got his hairy friend Scotty McAfee, who worked with him at GSD&M, to enter the beard contest.

I am not allowed to say if Scotty, a ringer from Austin in a Panhandle hair-off, won. Mike wants the element of suspense to bring people to the box office.

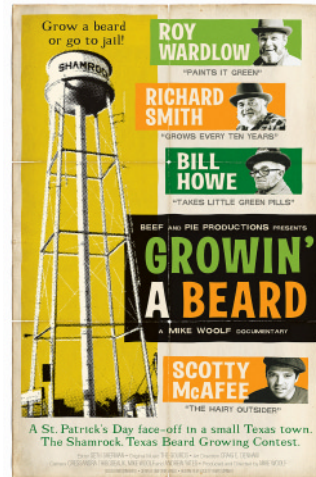
"I've always, you know, had no problem growing hair," Scotty said. In the video you see Scotty trimming his thick beard and saying, "This is like trying to cut down the Muir Woods with a Weedeater." Now, that's cocky.

Richard Smith, who runs the Route 66 Inn in Shamrock, also receives star billing on the documentary's poster. Smith enters the contest only every 10 years to "quote unquote, give everyone else a chance," Mike said.

Then there's Roy Wardlow, a Shamrock clockmaker and regular entrant who often paints his beard. "Last year, what the heck, it was green and white," he said. "And this year it's going to be red, white and blue."

"Red, white and blue," Mike said, sounding impressed. "He's good. He's sooo good."

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A big ol' hairy prediction: This documentary will be the hit of South by Southwest.

KELSO: Chief Fuzzer is man to be feared in Shamrock

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The documentary tells the story of the contest, which really begins on Jan. 1, when entrants shave clean. You see a lot of closeup shots in mirrors and plenty of nicks. After letting their beards grow for 2½ months, the contestants shave themselves into a Donegal beard for the contest.

A Donegal is one of those leprechaun-looking beards that runs along the chin line, with no mustache. Mustaches are not allowed, or as one old boy in the video explains, "You got all that stuff under your lip, and it would make it pretty hard to get gravy out of it."

Then there's the Chief Fuzzer, who has the power on contest day to throw any man caught beardless in Shamrock into the Barefaced Jail, an iron cage with a door that locks. "On St. Patrick's Day in Shamrock, you better have a beard-shaving permit," Mike said. "It's very expensive.

Usually, it's \$1. And if you're caught on the street without one, you're heading to the Barefaced Jail, man."

The Gourds, an Austin band, provide the musical score. The band composed three hairy songs for the documentary, including one about the Chief Fuzzer. "If you're long and hairy, beware of the buzzers/Don't be triflin' with the Chief of the Fuzzers," the lyrics go.

"I was really taken with the Chief of the Fuzzers," said Kevin Russell, who plays guitar and writes for the Gourds. "I thought that was really cool. I'd like to be a Chief of the Fuzzers one day."

Incidentally, this won't be Mike's last documentary. When I told him about the cow-calling contest in Miami, Texas, you could almost hear his eyes growing wider over the phone.

John Kelso's column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Contact him at 445-3606 or jkello@statesman.com.