

Maggie and the Pirate never makes the list.

You know the list I'm talking about: the Famous Movies Filmed in Beaufort list.

This is because Maggie and the Pirate wasn't exactly a major motion picture with great production values and wide distribution.



In fact, it had a skimpy sub-\$100,000 budget and distribution to school libraries. It's just a short, sweet film based on a children's book by Ezra Jack Keats. The plot: a pirate steals Maggie's pet cricket.

The only reason I remember Maggie and the Pirate is that my sister, Tracy, was part of the crew. Recently I came across her folder with clippings and other ephemera from the film.

Nothing much there, just a few old newspaper stories and some sort of itinerary with little cartoons of what was to be filmed each day. Lots of room for notes, but there weren't many.

I was hoping for an insightful quip from the costume lady, a heart-rending haiku from the director, or notes from the art director about how beautiful the marsh is. Something interesting and meaningful.

Instead the entries were things like "low tide 10:16 am", "take dolly back to N.C." and, most grievously, "dead cricket."

So here's the gist of what the newspaper articles said: New York-based Phoenix Films shot Maggie and the Pirate in Beaufort County in November 1991. They hired a few local people for the cast and crew. They shot on three locations: the lagoon at Hunting Island, Charlie Carson's property on Warsaw Island, and the old oyster factory on the Colleton River at Victoria Bluff.

We also learn that filming a movie in the Lowcountry wasn't easy. As producer Barbara Bryson told a reporter, "I made a film in Iceland where I had to create my own earthquake, and it was easier than this has been."

As for the difficulties of filming here, this is the only story I heard with my own ears: In the Keats book, Maggie lives with her family in an old school bus. So the crew dolled up a bus, hauled it out to Hunting Island and, under protest, parked it on the shore of the lagoon.

The person in charge hadn't been around the Lowcountry long enough to know that, come high tide, the set would be under six feet of water. But the person in charge was not to be dissuaded.

So the crew bit their tongues and painstakingly set the scene. A few hours later they were wading out to rescue their gear and hustle the bus onto dry land.

The biggest visual challenge was recreating the look of the brilliant, mixed-media illustrations in Keats' book. This meant getting rid of all the earth tones at the old oyster factory site used as the location for Maggie's village.

Complementary colors came to the rescue as the crew painted the oyster factory building orange, purple and green and added fantastical signs and facades at crazy angles. Take one look at the photos of the set and you think, heavens to Betsy, those people must have been working in the dark!

Actually, that's exactly what they were doing.

They were on a tight schedule and didn't have generators to power up the lights. So after the sun went down, set construction continued, somewhat haphazardly, in the puny glare of car headlights.

Then the costume designer, whose claim to fame was dressing people in late-1980s music

videos and Eddie Murphy movies, got sick after she took a fall into a patch of prickly pear.

A pair of tweezers and a bottle of aspirin would have sufficed for the treatment of any other member of the crew, and there would be little if any disruption of the schedule.

Unfortunately the costume designer was one of those rare souls who happen to have a severe allergic reaction to cactus, and she was bedridden for two days.

Then there was a fire on the set in Bluffton. One of the crew got their sleeping bag too close to a hot flood light (this was after the generators had finally arrived) and flames erupted.

Following this incident, someone offered the crew the use of a house on Burnt Church Road. I can't imagine that, after being in a traumatic fire, they took much comfort in getting resettled on a road with the word "burnt" in its name.

Compared to other films made in here, Maggie and the Pirate is not well known. But I think it should be.

Keats' pioneering work in children's literature was a gift to the world. But his estate has been reluctant to permit the filming of his stories, with the unfortunate result that today's TV-enculturated kids suffer from a lack of exposure to Keats' ethos of compassion.

The fact that his heirs allowed the production of Maggie and the Pirate was a giant leap forward in perpetuating Keats' vision.

And the fact that the Lowcountry was selected as the location for this very special film is further confirmation that this is a very special place.