

F I L M

Longing for an Island Without Any Malls

By JULIA C. MEAD

SINCE early this year, a coalition of small-business owners, civic groups and community advocates on the East End has campaigned against a proposed Barnes & Noble superstore in Bridgehampton. This month, the self-named Box-Busters are co-sponsoring two screenings of a documentary about another community's precedent-setting victory against one of the biggest box retailers of all, Wal-Mart.

The local organizers said they hoped that the film, "Talking to the Wall: The Story of an American Bargain," will inspire South Fork residents who oppose the opening of big-box stores in their area, and be a cautionary tale for consumers who welcome chain retailers.

The documentary, which was made by a native Long Islander, Steve Alves, will be shown at 7 p.m. on April 28 at the Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor. Mr. Alves will speak at the screening.

For years, national chains have been setting up shop in village centers along the South Fork. East Hampton storefronts once occupied by local businesses are now leased to Starbucks, Tiffany and Polo. Bridgehampton has a Kmart, a Victoria's Secret and its own Starbucks. Water Mill has a Blockbuster.

"It's true we have lost some ground here, no question about it," said Kathryn Szoka, a founding Box-Busters member and co-owner of Canio's, a small bookstore in Sag Harbor. "The idea is to not lose any more."

So the group asked Southampton Town to ban retail chains that use the same design and accounting practices in several stores, a so-called cookie-cutter approach. The town has not adopted such a ban, but since 2000, has had a 15,000-square-foot cap on new retail construction, adopted with Barnes & Noble in mind. Barnes & Noble executives are still talking to town officials, hoping to open in the area.

In the documentary, which he wrote, directed, produced, edited and narrated, Mr. Alves explores the debate over the economic, social and environmental effects of big-box stores by following events over five years in Greenfield, a western Massachusetts town where he now lives, and in Orange, a town about 20 miles away. But in Orange is also a personal chronicle of Mr. Alves' quest for a place to put down roots.

The film opens with him describing his childhood in Amityville, and noting that sev-

en movies have been made about the so-called Amityville Horror house, where Ronald DeFeo Jr. murdered six members of his family in 1974. The real horror, Mr. Alves asserts in the film, is not the house that subsequent owners claimed was haunted, but "development run amok."

The core of the documentary is about the two Massachusetts towns. Greenfield, according to the 2000 census, has about 18,000 residents, while Orange has about 7,500.

In 1993, Greenfield residents who were opposed to construction of a Wal-Mart made the community the first in the nation to stop the retailer by forcing a binding referendum. Two years later, Orange welcomed Wal-Mart, believing it could revitalize the



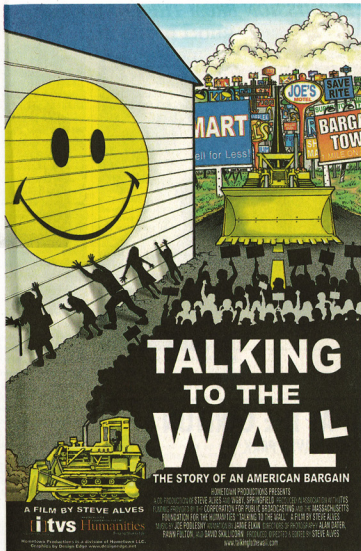
downtown. By 2000, though, the film shows, any hope of a comeback for downtown had been abandoned.

Interviewed by telephone last week, Mr. Alves, 52, said the vote in Greenfield, which was hotly contested, continues to divide the community.

As Mr. Alves sees the issue, consumers who welcome a chain retailer's lower prices (one meaning of "bargain" in the film's title) are making a deal with the devil (the other meaning). Along with the "every-day low prices" and tax revenue that Wal-Mart profilers, the film says, come low-wage jobs, the disappearance of small businesses and an overall economic downturn as money that once circulated in a community is redirected to a faraway national headquarters.

The film has been reviewed mostly in small newspapers in New England; one reviewer said that Mr. Alves cut a stylistic cue from the deadpan humor that Michael Moore used in his documentaries "Roger and Me," "Bowling for Columbine" and "Fahrenheit 9/11."

Take, for example, the documentary's treatment of the Wal-Mart opening celebra-



tion in Orange. As crowds of would-be shoppers watch, a man in a blue vest, the shopper's uniform, sings an earnestly schmaltzy ode to the retail giant — "You're looking swell, Wal-Mart/I can tell, Wal-Mart/You're still growing, you're still showing, you can sell for less." Cut to a preacher intoning a blessing on the new store and all who enter. The soundtrack plays "Amazing Grace" as the doors swing open and shoppers begin cruising the aisles.

Any similarity to Mr. Moore's style is simply a function of how documentaries are

edited, Mr. Alves said in the interview.

"You shoot a moment that is simply a mirror of our American culture but then in the editing room, when it's framed in a certain way, the painfulness of that moment somehow translates into humor," he said.

Commenting on the opening of the store in Orange, he said that 50 years ago, such a crowd might have appeared for the dedication of a World War II monument. Instead, the United States has become a place where shopping is salvation, he said.

Mr. Alves said he was planning to leave



Peeter MacDonald for The New York Times

Steve Alves, left, and Rawn Fulton, a cameraman, while making "Talking to the Wall" in Greenfield, Mass., in 2000. Mr. Alves, who wrote and narrates the documentary, is in Amityville, N.Y. At left is a publicity poster and a film still.

Long Island in the early 1970's, when construction began on the nearby Sunrise Mall. That mall now has 160 stores, including a Wal-Mart. Other malls, of the big-box and strip kinds, are nearby.

"It's shocking for me to see it now," said Mr. Alves, whose relatives still live in Amityville, Merrick and Bellmore. "I feel an incredible attachment, a sense of belonging that seems encoded in me, but I try to see through the clutter."

Mr. Alves has strong feelings about the development of Long Island. In the film, he talks of "the horror of uncontrolled development, like Long Island on steroids" and the "Kafka meets Looney Tunes" atmosphere that he discovered in Los Angeles, where he directed a short, silent film about a man so overcome with despair at his surroundings that he throws himself off a train trestle.

"Talking to the Wall" does not mention that Mr. Alves graduated from the University of Southern California's film school and worked in Hollywood as a film editor. The documentary was completed before he was elected, in 2003, to a one-year term as a Greenfield councilman.

Although Greenfield has no Wal-Mart, there are at least 10 Wal-Marts within 35 miles, while all the other regional chain-department stores have pulled out. Mr. Alves said in the interview.

With their healthy tourism-fueled economy, the South Fork's Main Streets seem unlikely to turn into ghost towns even if Barnes & Noble opens its superstore in Bridgehampton, but Mr. Alves said in the interview that the effect on the region's 11 independent booksellers would be noticeable.

"Barnes & Noble is Wal-Mart with cappuccino," he said.