

# N.H. die-hards have new motto: Willis go away

By Don Aucoin  
GLOBE STAFF

Matthew Newton's phone has been ringing a lot lately, with callers asking a seemingly logical question: Which New Hampshire locations were used in "Live Free or Die Hard," the new Bruce Willis movie that opened this week?

The response from Newton, film specialist in the state's Film and Television Office, is: None. All they used was the official state motto, "Live Free or Die."

"Believe me, if a 'Die Hard' movie was shooting in New Hampshire, we'd know about it," Newton said, a bit wistfully.

So how have Granite Staters, a famously feisty bunch, responded to the appropriation of their beloved motto by Hollywood? Timothy Sink, the president of the Concord (N.H.) Chamber of Commerce, opined that having a shoot-'em-up action flick grab the motto "does kind of cheapen it a little bit." Newton

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said he has received calls from "people who are not entirely happy," noting that "a lot of New Hampshire residents are very proprietary about their state motto." Others, he said, welcome the possible publicity the film's title may bring the state, however indirectly.

Newton himself admits to mixed feelings on the title. "It sounds catchy," he acknowledged. "My only fear is that movies become very popular, and I would hate to see people's first impression of 'Live Free or Die' be associated with the 'Die Hard' film rather than with the state of New Hampshire."

The box-office returns may help determine that, but there's no question that after more than 60 years as New Hampshire's

proud boast, "Live Free or Die" is suddenly in vogue in movieland.

Not only does it appear in the fourth "Die Hard" movie, but it also served as the title of an independent 2006 film about the misadventures of two former high-school buddies. "Live Free or Die," scripted and directed by two former "Seinfeld" writers, was shot in New Hampshire. (However, Andy Robin, one of the filmmakers, still couldn't resist a sharp jab at the state, telling the Associated Press last year that New Hampshire has "kind of a dumb, in-your-face attitude which is evident by the state motto. You know, 'Live Free or Die,' everything's so extreme.")

"Live Free or Die" was also the title of a 2000 documentary on PBS about abortion battles in a small New Hampshire town. Moreover, the state motto furnished the title of an episode of "The Sopranos" last year in which closeted gay mobster Vito Spatafore gazed wistfully at the words "Live Free or Die" on a license plate. Vito would eventually leave his happy idyll in New Hampshire and return to his old life in New Jersey — where he was brutally murdered.

If New Hampshire residents are not wild about the use of their motto in the title of "Live Free or Die Hard," they apparently have some unexpected company: the movie's star. "I think we chose the wrong title," Willis cracked during an appearance Tuesday night on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." He suggested that a better one might have been: "Die Hard: Just Start Blasting."

The motto derives from a toast offered in absentia in 1809 by a

Revolutionary War general named John Stark, at a reunion of the soldiers he had commanded at the Battle of Bennington. "Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils," Stark said.

Over time, "Live Free or Die" has come to symbolize the independence of the state itself. Consequently, many New Hampshire residents are as protective of the motto as they are of the state's first-in-the-nation presidential primary status. It has been the official state motto since 1945, and it has adorned license plates since 1970, when it replaced "Scenic New Hampshire." Last year, New Hampshire lawmakers approved the placement of the motto on highway welcome signs.

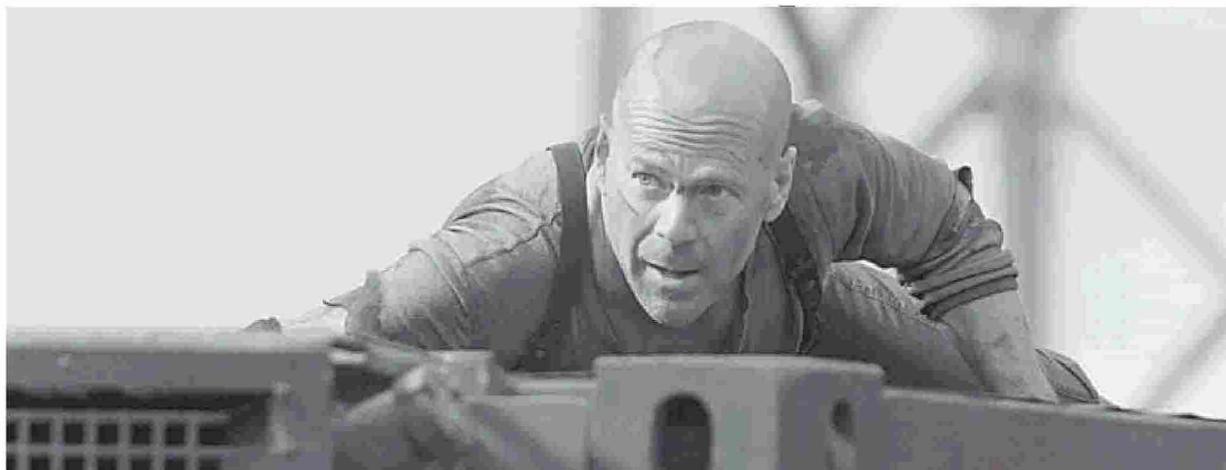
Still, not everyone is enamored of it. In the early 1990s, a state legislator, declaring the motto "unpleasant and ugly," pushed for a return to the "Scenic New Hampshire" plates. She failed.

It's probably safe to say that "Scenic New Hampshire" wouldn't make much of a movie title. What about "Live Free or Die," we asked Colin Manning, press secretary to New Hampshire Governor John Lynch?

"Honestly, I haven't given it much thought," he answered. He paused to give it some thought, then offered: "I hope it's as good as the first three."

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**Bruce Willis's new action flick, "Live Free or Die Hard," has nothing to do or in common with New Hampshire.**