



Jackson County - Movies

*Melton Barker
and
"The Kidnappers Foil"*

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In mid-May 1938, Hollywood came calling on Jackson County. A fancy limousine with California license plates pulled off Highway 67 at Swifton into Buster Cheek's service station. Out of the car came a round-faced little boy who, when asked his name, replied, "My name's 'Spanky,' and I'm a movie actor." No further information was required of him because everyone at that time knew who "Spanky" was. He was the famous George "Spanky" McFarland. He appeared in nearly one hundred "Our Gang" films from 1932-1942, and he performed in more than a dozen other shows during his career. During the 15 minutes his car was being serviced, "Spanky" visited with Mrs. Cheek. She commented that he "appeared to be a perfectly normal boy, and used no trace of braggadocio in announcing that 'he was a movie star.'" He was a typical boy, curious about things that little boys would find interesting around a service station in the 1930s.

"Spanky" might have been surprised to know that less than 20 miles down that same highway, at Newport, there were 100 child movie stars (see listing on page 23). Although obviously they were not in the same league with "Spanky," some may have thought they were. A movie they starred in had just played several weeks earlier at the Strand Theatre on Walnut Street. They were made stars by Melton Barker. Or so they and their parents might have dreamed.

In the 1930s, itinerant filmmakers traveled throughout the United States and other countries practicing their craft. Other than the obvious goal of making money, their missions were as different as their filming styles. Some of these men filmed the local landmarks, businesses, churches, factories and crowd scenes. There was no sound to many of these types of movies, because there was no dialog to record. These were often called "town booster films," and the filmmakers were merely making a visual record. It was

perhaps financed by the chamber of commerce or local businesses. There were at least two of these types of films made in Jackson County. The first was shot in October 1941, and in 1950 there was the promotional film, "My Home Town." They were shot in Newport and elsewhere in the county. There was another group of filmmakers, though, which had the ability to record sound and develop scripts and plots for fictional works. They wanted to get actors involved, actors who would pay money for the privilege. Such was the style of Melton Barker.

Melton Barker's professional career apparently started in Dallas, where he was a cast member in a play in late 1931. Part of this production included making a motion picture, and he is shown in a photograph as a cameraman. In late March 1932, he premiered his first movie for juveniles, "Secrets of a Co-ed." The film, which was shot at least partially at Southern Methodist University, included 50 people from Dallas. His second film was "Carnival Days." In each of his first two movies, the audience voted for the best cast member who won \$100 and a round trip ticket to Hollywood. Soon, Barker established himself as a professional filmmaker, owning Melton Barker Juvenile Productions by 1936, if not earlier. That's about the time he began the "Kidnappers Foil" series (and there is no apostrophe in "Kidnappers" according to the title shown at the opening of his movie).

While little is known of the professional life of Barker, even less is known of his personal life. The Texas native was born around 1903. He was married and divorced twice, the second marriage apparently lasting longer than the first. It is believed he had no children of his own.

It is not known how or why he picked certain towns. While he did film in larger cities like Little Rock, most of the time he was in smaller towns like Camden, Blytheville and Newport. He probably picked towns which he considered prosperous enough to have people with money to spend. Farming families generally had money in those days, so that might have been why he frequently picked agricultural communities.

Barker promoted himself through prepared news releases that were likely used at most locations. He boasted that he discovered "Spanky" McFarland, who visited at the Cheek Service Station in Swifton in May 1938. This claim was made early in his career – March 1932 – at which time it was written that Barker "was original mentor of Spanky McFarland, new find of Hal Roach in 'Our Gang' comedies." McFarland was about three and a half years old at that time. Some are skeptical about this connection, but there must have been some truth to the story. Other than his

reputed claim to “Spanky” McFarland, it is unknown if Barker ever discovered any other professional actor or actress. Also unknown is if he ever indicated he would try to do more to get these children discovered in Hollywood. He may have told all the parents up front that this was a one-time deal. His job was strictly for their entertainment.

His method of production was likely the same everywhere he went.

Melton Barker Productions would contact a local movie theater and a local newspaper to sponsor the production of the film. A casting call for local children would go out and parents would be encouraged to fill out applications that were printed in the newspaper or picked up in the theater. After paying a small fee (usually a few dollars), the children would go through a brief audition process with a representative of Melton Barker’s company. The crews were apparently very small, perhaps just including Melton Barker himself, a cameraman, a sound man and an assistant. After some brief rehearsals, the filming would begin. The locations were generally a local park and the home of a prominent local person.

Barker’s cookie-cutter, two-reel movies were consistently the same. The plot of the movie and the main character’s name (Betty Davis) never changed. A person sitting in a movie theater in Texas would see basically the same storyline as the one that had been presented in Newport, Arkansas. The *Newport Weekly Independent* printed a story about the movie, probably as written by Barker. The only responsibility the newspaper might have had was publicity and spelling the children’s names correctly.

Several of the Newport child stars were contacted for this story, but most had few memories, if any. After all, they were between the ages of 3-14 years at the time, which was late March 1938. Metta Lynn Castleberry, who won the main role, was interviewed for this story and had numerous recollections.

Some say he was paid up to \$10 for each child to be in the movie. Other sources indicate he charged for “training,” and did not charge to be in the movie. Even though money was tight at that time, Castleberry stated that families in those days would have made sure their children were in the film, even if they had to borrow the money or raid the sugar jar. If \$10 was received for each child, then Barker’s company realized about \$1,000 before expenses from the Newport film. It is not known if those with starring roles had to pay more. Castleberry, who had the lead role of Betty Davis in the movie, had to audition for that part and is not aware of her parents

paying more. She does remember quite well that both of her parents pushed her to land the lead role. When it came time for her to audition, her father, Dr. C.C. Castleberry, told her, “When they pick you up to kidnap you, I want you to scream and cry just like you were really being kidnapped. It doesn’t hurt if you kick them, and hurt them or scratch them, I want you to just really do it.’ So I did whatever my daddy told me to. In fact, the man stopped. I can’t remember who it was, whether it was the director or one of the other people that were in there, that was supposed to be the kidnapper. He stopped and asked me and said, ‘Are you really all right or are you really afraid?’ ” Castleberry calmly replied, “ ‘Oh, no, I’m fine,’ and I think



**Metta Lynn Castleberry
about the time of the filming
of “The Kidnappers Foil,” 1938**

that had something to do with it [getting the lead part], but the rumor did go around that daddy paid a sum of money to help out, to make me a star, I don’t have any idea about that.”

Castleberry had other concerns when it was announced she got the part. “I was in bed with the measles when they found out, and mother got me up immediately and told me I didn’t have the measles anymore. But I still had a fever and I was itching, oh, terribly so. If you ever see that movie and you see this little kid that is twitching all the time, that is what I was doing. She told me absolutely not to scratch.”

In the movie, the kidnapped girl’s father offered \$1,000 for her safe return. Various groups of children planned not only how to save the girl, but also how to spend the reward money. The groups eventually united as one and liberated the girl from her dozing captors. A grand party followed at the kidnapped girl’s house. Several other girls are featured through solo dancing and singing.

There would have been three adults in the movie. A man would have played the girl’s father, and there were two kidnappers. It appears that Barker was always the lead kidnapper. It is unknown who played the father, but there is some identity to the other kidnapper: “There was a guy that worked at the movie theater [the Strand]. He was not the janitor, he was a handy

man. He could build anything. And I think he played the part of one of the kidnapers. And boy it went to his head. He'd really like to go to Hollywood. . . . So people started calling him 'Hollywood.' And that got to be his name." Hollywood the handyman actually did make it to the movie capital of the United States about a year later. Someone from the county visited in California several years later and found him living in a home



**"Betty Davis" with her two kidnapers.
Photo made from the movie.**

with a swimming pool with lots of movie stars nearby. He had not become an actor, though, but had used his construction skills to become a respected set builder. "We always knew he was talented."

The movie was filmed in Rimmel Park, with the 1934

Legion Hut serving as the home of the girl. The park, with its numerous trees and wild undergrowth, was the perfect place in town to make a film such as this. From auditions to rehearsal to filming, the entire project took about a week. The filming was made out of sequence; for instance, all of the house scenes were shot at the same time. The children could not understand the plot of the movie or follow the storyline while it was being made. Some scenes were shot only once or twice, but scenes with multiple children were rehearsed and shot several times. Barker apparently did not try to get the children to act in a certain way. He told them how the scene was supposed to be and then he let them simply be themselves. Parents were likely kept away from the filming. "I know mother wouldn't stray far from me, so she must have been lurking around there someplace. They must have made the parents stay off the set, or mother would have been out there telling me to sing better or louder, or something. And other mothers would be, too." Barker probably had plenty of experience in dealing with parents, and he knew how to avoid interference from mothers and fathers.

Castleberry's aunt, Vivian Davis, and two of her high school friends were filmed by the camera man who said he would take the film to Hollywood to get them discovered. That was probably just an empty promise he used to get them interested in him. He filmed while the girls sang, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree With Anyone But Me." He then asked the girls out on a date, but their high school boyfriends would not allow it.



**Children on the move to find "Betty Davis,"
in front of Newport High School.
Photo made from the movie.**

Castleberry noted that Barker was a nice man who got along well with the children. She described the scene as the filming wrapped up. "Kids were climbing all over him" on that final day. "After the show was over, we were all supposed to go up and say 'good bye' to Mr. Barker. And I wouldn't do it, I don't know why. I know one thing is I was so sick. I was scratching so much with that [measles] and I don't know whether I was just sick and didn't want to get out of the car, or, I just didn't want to do it. I wanted to get home after it was over." There may have been some excitement at school after filming was completed, but not for Castleberry. She was sick for several weeks, so she did not enjoy any excitement at school.

Just before the movie had its mid-April release, it received eye-catching publicity from the *Newport Weekly Independent*. The headline shouted out the distressing news, while the story gave the fictional details:

**"LITTLE CASTLEBERRY GIRL
IS 'KIDNAPPED;' RELEASED
WHEN HIDEOUT DISCOVERED"**

When several of Castleberry's relatives from out of state read the above headline, they thought the story was true. "In fact, some of my relatives – it was in all the papers – as far as Missouri would see the headlines, 'Little Castleberry Girl Kidnapped,' and then in the smaller print it would say



The children discover “Betty” and her kidnappers.

Photo made from the movie.

‘just like a real Hollywood movie,’ but they wouldn’t read that far, and they would call, and the phone rang all the time, people wanting to know if I was o.k.” Her relatives were reassured all was fine. The article began:

Just like a thriller filmed in Hollywood, little Meta Lynn Castleberry is kidnapped in the first scene of Newport’s own local juvenile comedy, two reeler, which will be shown at the Strand Theatre Tuesday and Wednesday.

The comedy was filmed in Newport by Melton Barker of Hollywood and the characters are children from surrounding towns. The film begins with Miss Castleberry being kidnapped and carried off to a shack. Miss Jane Pratt, her sister, reports the kidnapping and the gang gets busy at once. One little boy is told that he is too small to go on the hunt and he organizes a gang of his own – but you should see the picture yourself and get the details of how the gang found the kidnapped girl and dealt justly with the kidnappers. A few specialty numbers are included.

The completed film was shown in the two-year-old Strand Theatre on Walnut Street. The film was played for a number of years, probably until



**“Betty Davis” with her father and sister (Jane Pratt), right.
Photo made from the movie.**

viewers lost interest. It is not known who the film actually belonged to after it was made and delivered. Since it was left at the Strand movie theater, it was probably theirs as much as anyone else’s. No one would have had their own personal copy.

Barker returned to Newport and Jackson County in 1968 to recreate his work. His project was only mentioned in the *Tuckerman Record*; apparently the *Newport Independent* didn’t promote it that second time. Tryouts and shooting were to begin in May. The result of that effort is unknown.

Barker produced these movies all over the country, mostly in the southwest. There are at least nine towns in Arkansas in which he made these movies. Other than Newport (1938, 1968), he also made them in Blytheville (1937, 1969), Camden (1937), Fayetteville (1969), Fort Smith (1940s), Hope (1937), Little Rock, Pine Bluff (1952, 1969), Texarkana, and possibly Hot Springs. Melton Barker did make several other movies that were not of the “Kidnappers Foil” series, including one called “The Last Straw,” about children foiling a bank robber. He also had other occupations at various times, including operating a drive-in restaurant and movie theater.

At least once, Barker's company produced seven of the comedies at one time with seven different casts of children. This he did in New Orleans in the summer of 1949. It appears he might have made at least one film in Spanish, or, at the minimum, may have used English-speaking Hispanics. In October 1951, a promotional article appeared in the Spanish newspaper *Notas de Kingsville* of Kingsville, Texas.

Barker created for himself a niche and made it his own for many years. He apparently established for himself a credible reputation for his productions. He lived his later years in Mississippi, and reportedly died in March 1977, where else, but on the road. Once again he was single, about 74 years old, and was perhaps traveling to a distant town to make yet another version of "The Kidnappers Foil."

Newport's "Kidnappers Foil" is unique in that it survives. When Wayne Beard, Jr., bought the Strand Movie Theatre in the mid-1970s, the film was stored there. He recognized the importance of it and the other locally-made movies. Before the Strand was destroyed by fire in May 1976, he removed the films. He had them professionally preserved and copied. Because of his actions, Newport's "Kidnappers Foil" is one of the few extant samples of Melton Barker's film career.

List of child actors and actresses on following page

Sources

"Spanky McFarland Visits Swifton, Jackson County." (Newport Weekly Independent, May 20, 1938)

"Little Castleberry Girl is 'Kidnapped;' Released When Hideout Discovered." (Newport Weekly Independent, April 15, 1938)

Telephone interview with Metta Lynn Castleberry Crank, May 23, 2011, by Robert Craig.

Melton Barker website, <http://www.meltonbarker.com>, (accessed May 1, 2011).

**Kidnappers Foil:
100 Child Actors and Actresses
as identified by the
Newport Weekly Independent
(April 15, 1938)**

Betty Jo Albert	Mildred Ann Gaddy	LaVerne Morgan
Jimmy Allen	Alice Ruth Gilliam	Marie Murphy
Dorothea Jean Ashley	Marisue Graham	Regenia Nicholson
Carroll Ball	Carolyn Grant	Joan Parrott
Huey Ball	Austin Grimes	Mary Ann [Marianne] Penix
James Harry Ball	Opal Jane Guin	Bowan Perrin
Jerry Barger	Jackie Hall	Jane Pratt
Gretta Ann Barrett	Jimmie Hall	Dickie Pratt
Cortez Bell [Ball?]	Martha Ann Hare	Betty Lou Radau
Billy Bennett	Julia Mae Henneberger	T.H. Reaves
Harrison Bennett	Joseph Hill	Bobby Runyan
Geraldine Best	Henry Hillenbrand	Jerry Runyan
Betty Biggadike	Basil Hodges, Jr.	Mary Morris Schratz
Bobby Biggadike	Walter Lee Hodges	Billy Dean Shipp
James Evered Boggs	N.A. Holbrook	Mary Dean Shipp
Edwin L. Boyce III	Bryant Holloway	Betty Jo Simmons
Ramona Lee Brooks	Elizabeth Holt	Buddy Sink
Beverly Sue Byrns	Ina Lee Jackson	Ralph Ford Sink
Milous Campbell	B.W. Jones	Charles Edgar Smith
Metta Lynn Castleberry	Billie Jones	Georgena Smith
Mary Alice Coe	Edith Marie Jordon	Jeffie Lee Spencer
Billy Conklin	Doris Jowers	Kathryn Stephens
Billie Cox	Everett Lee Kell	Bobby Marion Taylor
Jimmy Farmer	Byron LaVoy	Dorothy Taylor
Betty Faulkner	Elizabeth Jane Lockard	Ann Terrell
Bill Jean Floyd	Phillip Lockard	Dorothy Lou Turner
Tommy Joe Floyd	Betty Longnecker	Billy Jean Vandiner [Vandiver?]
Johnnie Fortenberry	Mary Ann Longnecker	Dorothy Varner
Dorothy Lou Fortner	Joseph Massey, Jr.	Mary Ella Varner
Billy Norman Fortune	Mary Ellen May	Doryce Wayland
Boyce Allen Fortune	Jennie Sue Mayes	Elbert Gray Winborn
Colleen Fortune	Jerry McLain	Mattie Lou Williamson
Buddy Foushee	Emogene Miller	
Nancy Fox	Alcorn Minor, Jr.	