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What became of Melton Barker? Now we know

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She got him.

After years of determined sleuthing, hitting walls of frustration and making friends with despair, Austin movie archivist Caroline Frick has discovered just who itinerant filmmaker **Melton Barker** was and where he went.

Who he was: an ordinary Texan juiced by entrepreneurial pluck who traversed the United States making children's movies from the 1930s to the '70s. He married twice, divorced twice and drank too much. He loved dogs but, ironically, not children so much.

Where he went: heaven.

Last month in this newspaper, I wrote a long article about Frick's "**Melton**-mania." She summed it up: "For four years I've been searching for this man. The quest. My lifelong mission. I would sell my first-born child. We are getting to the point of ridiculousness."

Not Google, genealogists, libraries, phone books, archives, nor a private investigator (yes, it came to that) produced leads about what happened to **Barker**. Frick did locate a 1936 marriage certificate that stated **Barker** came from Dallas.

Beyond that, she knew only **Barker's** films, which she came to adore, leading to her obsession. The movies are gawky black-and-white shorts in the "Our Gang"-style, starring teams of local children in various American towns. Even during the Depression, parents would fork over \$10 to have their kids appear in the quickie flicks. **Barker** would then screen the completed movies to the delight of the towns' residents. Frick, who teaches at the University of Texas, owned copies of seven **Barker** movies and a few grainy photos of the filmmaker.

That was it. Until now.

Our story cracked the case, if it didn't quite close it.

The week the article ran, Frick received a hail of e-mails at the Web site for the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (www.texasarchive.org), which she founded and runs. One was extra special, that from a Texan named Jim Ponder.

The e-mail went like this: "I just read your article on **Melton Barker**. Very surprising to know someone is interested. I'm his stepson and have quite a bit of Mel's history after he married my mother in the early '50s."

And Frick went like this: "I almost fell off my chair, and I ran up and down the hallway yelling."

Frick met with Ponder, who lives with his wife in Leander, and learned why her search has been so impossible. **Melton** is **Barker's** middle name. His first name is Ennis, which is how ancestry archives list him, says Frick.

"The most exciting thing is finding out why we couldn't find him," she says.

Barker was Ponder's stepfather for 20 years. The traveling filmmaker, who was actually born in West Texas, met Ponder's mother when she was a hostess at a Dallas diner. They married in 1954. In the '60s, the couple bought and operated a drive-in restaurant in Ennis, north of Corsicana, but closed it when a new highway sapped business traffic.

Barker, Ponder told me, would drink "and get kind of unruly and my mother couldn't handle that." They divorced and **Barker** hit the road and returned to itinerant filmmaking. Sometime in the late '70s, Ponder's mother got a phone call. **Barker** had been found dead in a motel room. He was alone. Ponder doesn't know the cause of death.

"The poor guy kind of faded away by himself," Ponder says. "It's a sad situation."

Frick always assumed **Barker** was dead, though she never found his death certificate. Ponder has lent Frick a stack of family photographs including **Barker** and Ponder's mother. In one, **Barker** holds a dog. He looks mildly happy. In another, he's holding a baby. He looks grim.

"It was a shock to see the newspaper article," Ponder says. "I hadn't heard his name in 20 years. I thought, 'Who in the world is looking for Mel **Barker**?' "

Frick is. And there's more digging to do.

From at least 100 e-mails triggered by the article -- many from people who as children performed in **Barker's** films -- Frick has learned of other towns where **Barker** made movies, including some in Georgia and New Mexico and several in Texas. Locating these films is the second leg of her ongoing quest.

"The mystery is solved. Yet! The mystery goes on," says Frick. "After talking to so many people and his stepson, there are that many more films to find. What's great is that we have several new towns to go to where we can dig around and find prints of the movies.

"It's just been so fabulous because people are writing in how they didn't even remember being in his films until they read the article. Some have said that no one believed they were in the movies, but now they have the article as proof."

How does Frick feel now that her quest is nearing its end?

"It's always bittersweet when you have a project like this," she says. "There's almost a letdown because you've gained closure in a sense. And there's a poignancy because he did pass away alone. Maybe there's a beautiful ending to his story in that we're trying to get these films to live again, and people really want to see them and value them. That to me is really, really nice."

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ON THE WEB: To learn more about the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, go to www.texasarchive.org. For more about **Melton Barker**, go to www.meltonbarker.com.

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Melton Barker, shown here in the mid-'60s with his sister Carrie and dog Tina, made a living making short films using local children as actors.

In Winnsboro, **Melton Barker** made movies with the cousins of Jim Ponder, his stepson.

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