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Itinerant filmmaker had kids seeing stars

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SHAWNEE - Sixty years ago, Linda Carol Staal performed on the big screen. The 8-year-old was a big star in her hometown, if only for a week.

Staal was one of about 100 children from the Shawnee area who achieved local stardom in the **Melton Barker** production of "The Kidnappers Foil."

The script goes like this: The curly-top daughter of the town's wealthiest man is kidnapped and held for ransom by two thugs. The town's children join forces, find the missing girl and run over her kidnappers like a stampede of pigmy goats to capture a \$1,000 reward.

If the storyline doesn't stir memories, it's because the black-and-white film was shown only about a half-dozen times in a Shawnee theater. If it seems vaguely familiar, there's a good chance you were in a Barker production.

Film historians have evidence Barker remade "The Kidnappers Foil" in at least 100 cities and towns across the Midwest from the 1930s until the early 1970s, said Bill Moore, film archivist with the Oklahoma Historical Society.

While Shawnee's film is the only one to surface in this state, Moore said there are Oklahomans who say Barker made the same film in Ada, Guthrie and Oklahoma City. It was likely made elsewhere, too, Moore said.

Shawnee's version of "The Kidnappers Foil" was discovered in an old cabinet during the renovation of a projection room at the Hornbeck Theatre.

The 20-minute feature was shown in 1946 at the long-gone Bison Theatre. Its local cast got top billing over real Hollywood stars Pat O'Brien and Ruth Warwick in "Perilous Holiday."

Theater owner Ronny Jones turned the feature over to the Oklahoma Historical Society's film preservation department, where it was restored through a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation.

The restored version was shown in public for the first time at the Hornbeck Theatre's 60th anniversary in May. More recently, it was the center of attention at a 55th class reunion of Shawnee High School students.

"It was a joy to see myself as a child again," said Staal, 69, of Moore. "To hear me talking in a little girl's voice was just neat."

Traveling filmmaker

"The Kidnappers Foil" movies aren't cinematic masterpieces, but the films are not without historical importance.

They are explicit of a business model used by itinerant filmmakers of Barker's generation. Like his counterparts, Barker appeared to have traveled major roads and interstates, stopping in towns and cities with theaters, said Caroline Frick, a Houston film archivist who lectures at the University of Texas.

Frick said it was likely Barker made advance arrangements with movie theater owners to show the films.

The casting call would go out in the newspapers before he arrived, so parents were primed to bring their children to audition. He claimed to know movie producer Hal Roach and took credit for discovering George "Spanky" McFarland from the "Our Gang" short films.

"While he didn't promise to make children Hollywood stars, it was implied," Frick said. "Every parent probably thought their child could be the next Shirley Temple."

Quick audition, then cash

There wasn't much to the audition, said Harold Nix, 73, of Shawnee. He said children lined up at the Shawnee Municipal Auditorium, walked across a hot, lighted stage and were asked to repeat a few lines.

"It didn't last long," Nix said. "Someone took a picture of us, and then we paid money."

From the 1930s to the 1950s, parents shelled out \$1 to \$10 to get their children on screen, Frick said.

Barker used local spots for the filming and hired a small crew to oversee the young cast.

In Shawnee, a spacious park around an old elementary school served as Barker's only set. Any costumes were made by the actors' mothers.

"As a child, I understood that this was a chance to be a movie star like Elizabeth Taylor in 'National Velvet,'" said Ruella Yates, 72, of Jones. "It was a surreal experience, because I was a country girl and had never been around so many children my age."

Who was filmmaker?

Most of what is known about the filmmaker was gathered by Frick, who has been on Barker's trail since she discovered a few of "The Kidnappers Foil" films.

She said Barker was married and divorced twice; he never had children. There were periods where he tried other professions, including running a diner and a movie theater. When business went south, it seemed Barker always returned to the sure money - making films with children, Frick said.

While it may have been nothing more than a money-making venture to Barker, the films that have survived have meant a lot to the stars. Unlike today, very few of the children of that generation are captured in home movies because so few families could afford the equipment.

"The first time I saw it, I really wasn't sure that was me in it," said Joe Bussey, 72, of Shawnee. "I was about 10 or 11, and looked young and innocent."

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GRAPHIC: Photo 1: Linda Carol Staal, 8, of Moore

Photo 2: Harold Nix of Shawnee

Photo 3: Children in "The Kidnappers Foil" made around 1946 by **Melton Barker**. - PHOTO PROVIDED

Photo 4: Linda Carol Staal, 69, of Moore played the kidnapped girl. - PHOTO PROVIDED

Photo 5: Harold Nix of Shawnee appeared in the **Melton Barker** production. - PHOTO PROVIDED

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