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**The enigmatic auteur;
Part Hal Roach, part P.T. Barnum, **Melton Barker** hopped from town to town,
making short comedies with local children. But who was he? An Austin film
archivist aims to find out**

BYLINE: Chris Garcia, AMERICAN-STATESMAN FILM WRITER

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Caroline Frick is chasing a man who will not be found, who has eluded sleuths and the sticky grasp of Google, who has left behind a stack of films but scarcely a biographical whisper. A man who has seemingly, and utterly, disappeared.

The evidence of his real name is strong, and so this fact seems certain: The man is **Melton Barker**. He made many movies, two-reelers featuring small-town children that mimicked popular Hollywood fare of the time. This was way back, when life was in black and white, kids looked like goofy urchins out of "Little Rascals" and men wore their pants up to their chest. It was a time bearing conflicting labels: the Depression and the Golden Age.

That's the Golden Age of Hollywood. The Great Depression produced great films during a bleak stretch of history that ached for distraction. Whether **Barker's** on-the-fly films meet that description is up for debate.

When she talks about her quarry, Frick, a film archivist and historian who lectures at the University of Texas, lights up with a tangy fusion of fevered fascination and lip-pinching frustration. Since 2001, **Melton Barker** has wrapped his ghost around Frick's head, haunting her dreams, work, life.

Barker made so-called itinerant films, a genre comprising many things, from documentaries to lightly veiled ads for local stores. Specializing in short comedies, he pinballed the nation's towns and lassoed scores of local children who paid \$10 each to perform in the 25-minute films. He shot and screened the movies for an invariably delighted community, and likely made a comfy living.

Frick says **Barker** did this for about 20 years, filming in several states from the 1930s to 1950s. He shot short comedies in at least eight Texas towns: Austin, Waco, Childress, Munday, Keller, San Marcos, Huntsville and Quanah.

"I know there are more," Frick says.

Yet Frick's confidence, her imperishable commitment to the case, has a big fat hole in it. She cannot discover who the man was, or where he went. No birth certificate. No obituary. Just a name, some movies and a lot of air.

According to a yellowed 1936 marriage certificate, **Barker** came from Dallas. Helpful, this. But not really. Frick has torn through every Dallas telephone book in search of relatives ("**Barker**: very popular name in the state of Texas," she sighs). She has exhausted Internet resources, libraries and newspaper archives. Genealogists have taken the case; so has a private investigator.

Melton Barker, wherever he might be, is having none of it.

"Four years I've been searching for this man," Frick says. "The quest. My lifelong mission. I would sell my first-born child. We are getting to the point of ridiculousness. A private investigator couldn't help us."

This is Frick's self-described **Melton** Mania. Some search for Bigfoot, others Jimmy Hoffa and lost socks gulped by the dryer. Frick's Holy Grail, which is indeed holey: a peripatetic Texas moviemaker from way back who did not fear working with scores of squirming children all at once.

"There have been times when it's all-consuming," she says. "My father came to visit and I brought it up and he said, 'Seriously. Is this all you talk about? This is really scary.'"

Watching Frick say this provides mild amusement. Frick is an animated woman, funny, articulate, with facial flickers that amplify a point or punctuate a thought. It is a face awash in wit, putting on a fireworks display of expressions as she speaks, which she does with snap. She squints her eyes, arches an eyebrow, tightens her lips, talks out of the side of her mouth -- screwball tics perhaps influenced by the Hollywood comedies she most adores.

Frick will have reason to get fired up Thursday when she joins fellow experts in film preservation for a panel on **Barker's** films during the Association of Moving Image Archivists' Conference, an annual congregation being thrown in Austin for the first time, Wednesday through Dec. 3. The association boasts about 800 members, including 14 in Austin, representing UT, the LBJ Library and the Ransom Center.

Weaned on classics

When she was 13 and living in Kansas, Frick asked her mother: Is there such thing as a librarian for old movies? Classic Hollywood was the kid's thing, an offbeat enthusiasm sparked and fed by video and cable. Her hipper peers could keep "Terminator" and "The Breakfast Club." Frick's favorite films were 1938's "Bringing Up Baby" and 1947's "The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer."

Nerdy doesn't begin to describe it.

Inside her high school locker she taped up pictures of Fred Astaire and Cary Grant. When her family moved to Washington, D.C., the teenaged Frick volunteered at the American Film Institute. Her university years would be a deep immersion in film history and film preservation. This academic journey -- culminating with a doctorate in film history from UT last summer and the founding of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, a nonprofit Internet resource -- led to an interest in itinerant filmmaking, which led to **Barker**, one of the most prolific itinerants of them all.

"As soon as I saw one of his movies, my **Melton** Mania started," Frick recalls. "It **became**: Who is this guy who traveled from town to town? What was he thinking? Where has he not gone? Then I found out he was a Texan, and that solidified it."

There is nothing quixotic about Frick's pursuit, say colleagues. "There's great value in this. There are huge gaps in our understanding of the history of film," says Dan Streible, director of the Orphan Film Symposium. He calls Frick "quite a leader" in the newish discipline of melding film archiving and film history. And with her tenacious sleuthing, she is helping to "uncover a lot of regional and social history."

Calling old, sometimes cranky performers from the films and scouring archives, Frick and her volunteers have located 42 **Barker** films. It's a number Frick is certain will grow. She owns copies of about seven **Barker** movies, the latest hailing from 1953, and she is slowly having them preserved with the help of grants.

Fabulously bad film

Here's how **Barker** worked: Under the banner of **Melton Barker** Juvenile Productions, the roving filmmaker would place an ad in the local paper offering to put children ages 3 to 12 in the movies for \$10 a child -- an opulent sum in the Depression paid by parents giddy to watch their children play-act on screen. Lead roles were auditioned. The up to 125 other children just paid the fee and showed up.

"He tried to pack as many kids in a movie as he could," says Frick. **Barker** was a wise businessman.

Such business savvy could demand occasional truth-stuffing, like the assertion that he ran a production company in

Hollywood. "I think every (itinerant filmmaker) claimed they were from Hollywood," Frick says. "I was on the phone for like three hours with the Los Angeles Public Library trying to find any reference of **Barker**. Nothing. It's more likely he was a guy from Dallas who claimed to be from Hollywood. He claimed in one newspaper to have discovered Spanky from 'Our Gang' (a fellow Dallas native). I don't remotely believe it. It's a great story though."

For the kids in the films, it was all about the brush with showbiz. A 1939 newspaper in Fremont, Neb., wrote that **Barker's** object was to "give local children an opportunity to see and hear themselves on the screen and to compare themselves with Shirley Temple, Freddie Bartholomew, Spanky McFarland and other celebrities of the screen."

Barker's movies repeated a single hoary plot and were modeled on "Our Gang" shorts, with generous steals from the Bowery Boys and Perils of Pauline movies. Always titled "The Kidnapper's Foil," they used familiar Hollywood genre cliches to tell the story of a girl named "Bette Davis" who is abducted by scamps demanding a ransom. Gaggles of children rescue Bette and save the day. (Yay.) Drama resolved, **Barker** abruptly switches to a woodenly staged talent show as a dragged-out coda. The kids take turns singing or dancing or exhibiting a lamentable absence of God-given performing talent. The movies would play before theatrical features at the local movie house.

As a filmmaker, **Barker** had a genius for jangly messes. Though bursting with Ritalin-ready kids who keep looking at the camera, the films are cinematic cadavers -- stiff, flat-footed, visually chaotic exercises designed to regale only its participants and their kin. The inadvertent hilarity of the movies grazes the morbid.

"They're fabulous. They're fantastic," gushes Frick. "They're so bad that they're so good. Sure, they can feel long. I'm not going to lie to you."

Ask her if she thinks they signify any skill, she retorts with Rosalind Russell zip, "Let's put it this way: In cinematic talent? No. In corraling children? Very impressive."

Some of the movies' still-living child stars have talked to Frick about the experience. "They all have pretty much the same story," she says. "They don't remember **Barker** much. To the kids, he was just this tall, older guy."

Her fascination extends past the films' entertainment value to something culturally larger. "A lot of them say it was the biggest thing in their life. Being on film was a big deal," she says. "I'm interested in how these films play into American myths, this Horatio Alger, everyone-can-be-a-star idea, which continues today in reality TV."

'He has disappeared'

With just a couple of photos and some biographical sawdust, Frick can only dream what **Barker** was like. She conjures a benign, soft-focus portrait of a fella just making his way. She likes to believe he was a "dashing Cary Grant type," at least to the locals. "Here's this glamorous guy who swoops into town, claims he's going to make you a star. He's not a con man, but when you scratch the surface he's probably just a guy from Texas trying to make a buck during the Depression."

And so Frick digs and pokes, makes phone calls, scrolls archives and considers her next move. It has been arduous work, requiring the sweat of an archeologist swinging a pick in a Middle Eastern desert.

"And still," she says, "no **Melton Barker**."

If alive, **Barker** would be well into his 90s, Frick estimates. But alive is not likely this late in the quest.

Resigned to a simple notion -- "He has disappeared" -- Frick tells how **Barker's** former sister-in-law seems to be the last acquaintance to have seen the rambling movie man, sometime in the '50s. **Barker's** marriage was brief and his legacy among his in-laws quickly forgotten. Before her recent death, the woman told Frick she spotted **Melton Barker** on a bus in Houston. That's it. We picture his abstracted face through a smudgy window, bus engine groaning, huge black tires rolling over hot asphalt.

"Which I think is a beautiful ending for this story," Frick says. "And yet, I must know."

cgarcia@statesman.com; 445-3649

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GRAPHIC: Film archivist Caroline Frick has made it her mission to find out all she can about **Melton Barker**. Not much is known about **Melton Barker**, who made a living as a traveling filmmaker. Caroline Frick: The UT lecturer founded the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, a nonprofit Internet resource.

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