



PROJECT MUSE®

Jackrabbit Genius: Melton Barker, Itinerant Films, and Creating Locality

Caroline Frick

The Moving Image, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 1-22 (Article)



Published by University of Minnesota Press

➔ For additional information about this article

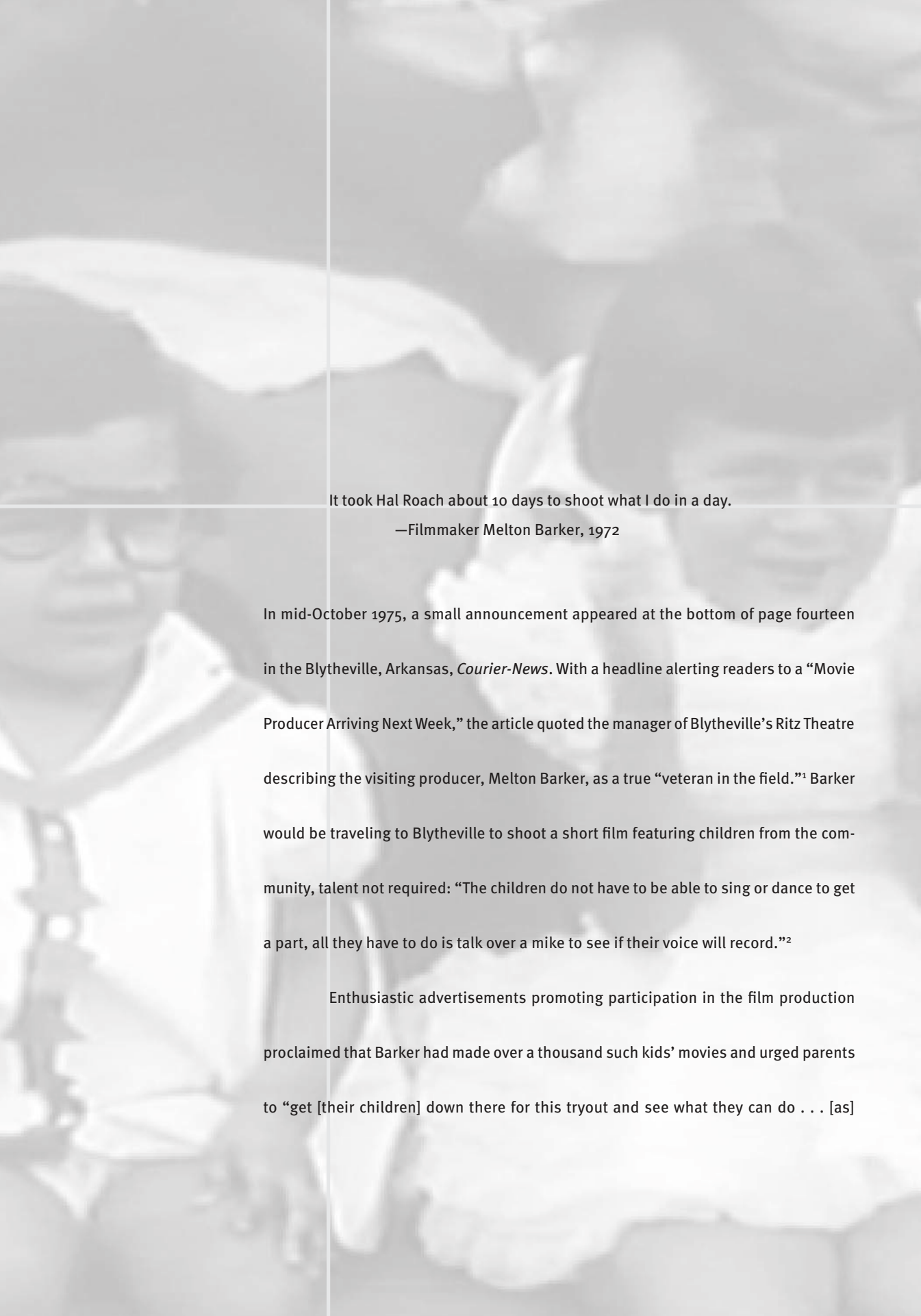
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/405389>



JACKRABBIT GENIUS

CAROLINE FRICK

Melton Barker, Itinerant Films,
and Creating Locality



It took Hal Roach about 10 days to shoot what I do in a day.

—Filmmaker Melton Barker, 1972

In mid-October 1975, a small announcement appeared at the bottom of page fourteen in the Blytheville, Arkansas, *Courier-News*. With a headline alerting readers to a “Movie Producer Arriving Next Week,” the article quoted the manager of Blytheville’s Ritz Theatre describing the visiting producer, Melton Barker, as a true “veteran in the field.”¹ Barker would be traveling to Blytheville to shoot a short film featuring children from the community, talent not required: “The children do not have to be able to sing or dance to get a part, all they have to do is talk over a mike to see if their voice will record.”²

Enthusiastic advertisements promoting participation in the film production proclaimed that Barker had made over a thousand such kids’ movies and urged parents to “get [their children] down there for this tryout and see what they can do . . . [as]

rehearsals and filming of the picture [would] not interfere with school work.”³ What the press material surrounding the 1975 film production neglected to mention, however, was that producer Melton Barker had collaborated with the Ritz Theatre several times before, journeying to Blytheville to shoot the very same children’s short subject, the *Kidnappers Foil*, utilizing the exact same method and script in 1936, 1951, and 1969. In fact, in 1951, the Ritz Theatre owners had, with great fanfare, screened the most recent production alongside the 1936 version.

From the inception of cinema, so-called itinerant filmmakers like Melton Barker traveled throughout North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—quite possibly the entire world. Motion picture exhibitors would enter into contracts with traveling producers to create community-based short subjects, then would market and promote the films’ premieres, screening them alongside theatrical features. A large percentage of the material produced by traveling filmmakers did not utilize a narrative structure; rather the camera panned groups of schoolchildren, factory workers, and others in a style not altogether different from the early Lumière *actualités*. Other itinerant films either concocted some sort of limited narrative or mimicked popular Hollywood films and genres as a method to encourage community participation and amuse audiences. Itinerant films can be seen as a subgenre of what has become known within media history as the *local film*—movies with targeted geographical appeal featuring community landmarks, businesses, and most important, local men, women, and children.

Over the last thirty years, significant research on film exhibition and movie-going practice has proliferated within North American and European media studies, successfully challenging earlier academic emphasis on textual analysis or assumptions surrounding audience reception. The itinerant or traveling showman has played an important role in the histories of film exhibition, particularly those concerning the first half of the twentieth century. The work of itinerant film producers, including Melton Barker, among many others, adds much to locally oriented media research and historiography by exemplifying an understudied but intriguing and widely prolific mode of production and exhibition. Barker’s long career, spanning the 1930s through the latter part of the 1970s, additionally challenges traditional film histories that often associate the traveling filmmaker with the pre–World War II period.

In 1906, a short *Billboard* article detailed the difficulty in compiling accurate statistical data for the burgeoning trade of film exhibition. The article noted that the entrepreneurial (and relatively undocumented) nature of early cinematic presentation could aptly be known as the “jack-rabbit . . . of the business of public entertaining. No one is in a position to even estimate the number . . . [of organizations] now in operation;

for an estimate covering today would be worthless tomorrow.”⁴ Unwittingly, *Billboard’s* frustration in tracking cinema industry growth in the early 1900s foreshadowed the difficulties faced by those researching the closely related phenomenon of itinerant film production in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Jackrabbits—jumping or hopping from one place on a vast prairie to the next, leaving little to no evidence of their trail—provide an excellent metaphor for the traveling film producer. Substantive research into Barker’s career, or that of any itinerant filmmaker, for that matter, proves difficult because of the ephemeral nature of local films themselves. In as early as 1909, the motion picture trade press noted that films with local appeal, whether produced by itinerant filmmakers or regionally based cameramen, bore a close resemblance to short-term “topical subjects” that would “put to sleep an audience fifteen or twenty miles away.”⁵

Very few of these local films still survive, and access to the extant materials remains hampered by the materials’ disparate locations in abandoned warehouses, crowded domestic closets, or even on shelves in local or regional archival repositories around the globe. Indeed, film historian Stephen Bottomore’s research on the topic sadly indicates that the early decades of the film industry viewed local films “like newspapers . . . looked over and then thrown upon the scrap heap.”⁶ Itinerant-produced films provide an exciting challenge and opportunity to both archivists and scholars for discovery, preservation, and study.

DEFINITIONAL CHALLENGES

Over the last several years, film historians have begun grappling with the value and sociocultural implications of local films, including those created by itinerant producers. Such interest has been driven in part by ongoing discoveries of key archival material; the growing validity of, and attention paid to, so-called orphan films; and significantly, the steady increase in availability of regional and local newspapers via archival collections on the Web. A number of articles have been published related to the itinerant film phenomenon, largely in reference to traveling film exhibition, that elucidate the significant potential for future research on local films. Such work also illustrates the frustrations inherent in attempting to study and create preliminary hypotheses for historical ephemera about which reliable information fluctuates daily, depending on what new material has been discovered and made accessible.

As one example, online searches about Melton Barker’s production company and/or filming locations constantly change, whether via scholarly or more general search

engines. Like other historical research, contradictory data emerge from a variety of sources, including newsprint, archival collections, and the films themselves. In the twenty-first century, researching Barker and the itinerant phenomenon involves a constant barrage of new, equally complicated reference material via the dozens on dozens of Kidnappers Foil participants who send e-mails with questions and reminiscences to the researcher in their own pursuit of knowledge. Without exception, all those who played a role in Barker's films (or those who knew that relatives and loved ones had) desperately hope to find the copy of the movie in which they appeared and wonder how to describe this kind of film to others.

The itinerant or traveling filmmaking phenomenon spanned from the inception of cinema to the 1980s. The modes of practice employed by, and motivations behind, such endeavor by individuals associated with itinerant production fell into a variety of broad categories. In some cases, professional newsreel cameramen began producing local films as side projects for additional money, while others served as truly independent filmmaking entrepreneurs. The well-documented work of H. Lee Waters, the owner and operator of a North Carolina photography studio, exemplifies those who, out of Depression-era necessity and/or interest, branched out into a new form of familiar commercial practice.⁷

Many traveling filmmakers, particularly in North America during the 1920s through the 1940s, claimed some professional experience with "Hollywood," including feature and/or newsreel production. Some of the movies produced by itinerant filmmakers showcased communities and citizens in what can be seen as buy-local campaigns paid for by individual businesses or chambers of commerce. Other films created by traveling producers depicted as many men, women, and children in the film as possible to increase the likely number of future audience members willing to pay to "see themselves on the screen." Itinerant producers who created films featuring a quasinarative structure—in the United States, for example, the Kidnappers Foil, Movie Queen, or Man Haters series of films—commonly held some form of audition or competition to obtain their local casts and generate additional press and community interest.

Both narrative and nonnarrative itinerant films were promoted in community newspapers, advertised around town, and of course, publicly screened. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, traveling showmen often exhibited the films. Beginning in the 1910s and into the 1920s, local theater owners screened the films alongside Hollywood movies or other industry-produced feature films. One aspect common to the traveling film phenomenon, as opposed to a one-off local or amateur production, was the repetitive, methodical nature of the production process. More specifically, traveling

producers would journey to a variety of locations—rural and urban, small, medium, and large cities—and make the same film over and over, differentiated only by geography, population, and location. Melton Barker’s career, a fascinating example of this itinerant mode of production, featured hundreds of Kidnappers Foil titles produced in different locations across the United States according to the same script for over forty years.

Today, many who hear about itinerant filmmaking find the phenomenon quaint and nostalgic. For others, however, the work of itinerant film producers embodies a different kind of romanticized past: one more malevolent, with the filmmaker appearing as more of a Professor Harold Hill type of character—a conniving city slicker who waltzes into small towns to swindle and steal. This injurious view, aptly described by Dan Streible as seeing itinerant filmmakers as “bamboozlers, small-time producers trying to outfox small-town exhibitors by trying to claim Hollywood credentials,” has proven popular, particularly with twenty-first-century news reporters and documentary filmmakers interested in the historical trend.⁸

This pejorative conceptualization can be seen as linguistically connected to the use of the word *itinerant*, a term that has undergone an historical transition throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Negative connotations surround so-called itinerant people, particularly in certain regions around the globe, such as the United Kingdom and North America, for whom nomadic cultures tended to have been seen as more primitive than domesticated, agricultural societies. Gypsies, hobos, and carnies convey the core ambivalence and distrust with which particular social hierarchies have viewed the rootless or homeless. Within the United States, as just one example among many, the federal government treated the more domesticated or settled Native American tribes, such as the Hopis, Zunis, or Rio Grande Pueblos, with less force than those even just partly nomadic in the nineteenth century.⁹

The academic use of the term *itinerant*—seen in articles referencing early film exhibition from Kentucky and rural Arizona to Belgium, Luxembourg, and Québec—appears to have grown organically from research done by film historians using exhibitor trade press from the early twentieth century. Jackrabbit movie exhibitors received harsh criticism by local theater owners who felt frustrated that the traveling showmen were taking money from local pockets.¹⁰ According to *National Geographic*, the term *jackrabbit* derived from the breed’s long ears, reminding many of the proverbial jackass, now perhaps better known as an American colloquial insult.¹¹ The industry trade press utilized *jackrabbit* to describe and imbue the work of the traveling or itinerant showman with equally pejorative connotations. According to scholar Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, the term *itinerant* has evolved to be used, if somewhat casually, by film historians to “refer . . .

to anybody back in the day who traveled with a projector and/or film . . . [and] who was not tied to a local theater fulltime.”¹²

Stephen Bottomore’s essay “From the Factory Gate to the ‘Home Talent’ Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era,” however, focuses less on the local within the context of film exhibition and more on the value of local films, some of which were produced by motion picture exhibitors themselves. In attempting to define the local film, Bottomore notes that this material’s import lies less in the production context and more in the films’ economic and cultural value to specific communities. Though many films can be seen as produced within local communities (i.e., on location), for Bottomore, local films specifically connote “considerable overlap between the people appearing in the film and those who watch it or are intended to watch it.”¹³ Bottomore’s work significantly shifts the value of the film text—or the film’s generic classification—from how it was produced and by whom to the more significant status of the spectator as active participant and active consumer. The itinerant film, therefore, occupies a unique subgenre beneath that of the local film, that is, local films made by traveling producers for consumption within very specific communities.

Literature investigating the history of moviegoing practice utilizes the term *local* in different ways and, as mentioned previously, has proven influential in the early interpretations of itinerant film production. Rarely, however, does conventional film or media history look outside its own area to interrogate the commonly held assumptions surrounding *who* participates *when* in determining *what* constitutes and/or defines the local. Contemporary globalization theory, arguably an outgrowth of critical debate surrounding claims of cultural, and more specifically, media imperialism in the 1970s and 1980s, provides relevant language and insight to assist with better understanding the value and importance of the itinerant-produced local film.

Kathryn Fuller-Seeley’s introduction to her recent edited work, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, acknowledges that recent studies of global media distribution and reception point to important trends in how the local continues to be reinvented and adapted. Global identities, whether rural or urban, remain interconnected with the local and, for Fuller-Seeley and writing partner George Potamianos, underscore the importance of local “moviegoing histories . . . [in better understanding] the intersections, conflicts, refashionings, and adoption of the mass, the national, the modern, and the urban.”¹⁴ Many film historians have investigated relationships between the advent of the motion picture and societal changes wrought by the modern era. Such research, grounded within an historical prism, often approaches cinema as a so-called modernizing force that affected both urban and rural

communities.¹⁵ Globalization theory, too, focuses on the role of the media industries as a modernizing force, but within a more contemporary context, and offers assistance to the film historian grappling with similar questions and concerns.

Local films, particularly those imbued with the romance of the nomadic producer behind them, are too often nostalgically viewed as a more organic or real artifact of community positioned against Hollywood's corporate product, providing cultural opposition to the homogenizing force of transnational corporations. Indeed, when local films incorporate aspects of Hollywood, whether through imitation of stars or generic forms, they are often seen as capitulation. Dan Streible's analysis of a 1926 itinerant film from rural South Carolina notes that "in the end, what makes *Anderson on Parade* and similar films disappointingly conventional is their surrender to Hollywood, their abandoning the potential for a distinct alternative."¹⁶ Such "disappointment" echoes globalization theory's concern over the tendency to view modern culture as that of "local assertions against globalizing trends . . . in which the assertion of 'locality' or *Gemeinschaft* is seen as the pitting of subaltern 'universals' against the 'hegemonic universal' of dominant cultures and/or classes."¹⁷

With its emphasis on cultural hybridity and complex media interdependence, globalization scholarship challenges the tendency to position local films in a binary opposition with transnational corporate product. Professor Roland Robertson's work in contextualizing the historical trajectory of global theory offers an important intervention for media historians and archivists interested in better understanding local films and their value for contemporary audiences:

Much of the talk about globalization has tended to assume that it is a process which overrides locality. . . . This interpretation neglects . . . the extent to which what is called local is in large degree constructed on a trans- or super-local basis. In other words, much of the promotion of locality is in fact done from above or outside. Much of what is often declared to be local is in fact the local expressed in terms of generalized recipes of locality.¹⁸

Robertson, among other globalization theorists, looks closely at the evolution of so-called *glocalization* as a corporate approach. Though the derivation of the term stems from the efforts of Japanese farmers to adapt macrofarming techniques to more local conditions, Japanese businesses in the 1980s increasingly utilized the term to describe tailoring global strategies to local environs. Glocalization, seen by some as pure "micromarketing," importantly and transparently articulates the calculated

manufacturing of what is seen (and sold) as community as well as the individuals and cultures that embody this particular form of local.¹⁹ Anthropologists, sociologists, and others join globalization scholars in looking at tourism, an increasingly vital component to the world economy, as the epitome of how marketing the local equates to profit.

Throughout the twentieth century, itinerant filmmakers shrewdly made a business by championing the value of seeing local communities on the big screen, even decades before globalization theorists debated the relative merits and impacts of such endeavors. By partnering with chambers of commerce or theater owners, itinerant filmmakers actively participated in, and capitalized on, the construction of the local.

ITINERANT CASE STUDY: MELTON BARKER

In the early 1930s, Melton Barker launched his career as a traveling filmmaker, marketing himself as “Producer and Originator of the Local Gang Comedy idea.”²⁰ In his publicity material, Barker utilized the term *local* repeatedly, reinforcing the unique opportunity offered through his service—giving children a chance to appear on the silver screen right there at home. Whether consciously or not, Barker’s sales pitch echoed the discourse espoused by early folklorists, intellectuals, and artists involved with the American regionalist movement of the early twentieth century, who strove to help keep and indeed create distinct differences in local communities across the country.²¹

Despite such comparisons, however, Barker’s work, like that of other itinerant filmmakers, inspires more curiosity, amusement, and outright derision than awe. Although Barker did not spend his entire professional career on the road, he spent a great deal of his life traveling from town to town, encouraging locals to become a community, if only temporarily via the medium of celluloid. A good portion of e-mails received in response to news stories about Barker, or via the Texas Archive of the Moving Image Web site, which streams a number of Kidnappers Foil versions, convey amusement over Barker’s enterprise and request information on how to obtain copies of his films. Other correspondence registers disbelief that the traveling Texas filmmaker could have been anything other than a charlatan, evoking wariness toward more peripatetic, nomadic lifestyles. Exacerbating the tendency to suspect Barker’s true intent remains the frustrating fact that outside the most basic and often cryptic information sources (census records, newspaper clippings, or fading memories), data surrounding Melton (aka Mel) Barker’s career remain elusive. For twenty-first-century researchers, tracking the Texan filmmaker’s trajectory is not unlike that of tracking the path of his fellow prairie dweller, the jackrabbit.

Born Ennis Melton Barker in 1903 and raised in a number of communities across the Lone Star State, Barker claimed to have begun his professional life by working with a number of major Hollywood studios in Los Angeles during the 1920s.²² No corroborative evidence has emerged thus far either to prove or disprove Barker's claim of Hollywood affiliations. In early 1931, however, the *Dallas Morning News* covered a variety of local theater productions in which a young Melton Barker appeared as a bit player. By the end of that year, the paper reported that a "talking motion picture" would be incorporated as a critical component to the play, *Spread Eagle*, opening at the Dallas Little Theater.²³ Originally



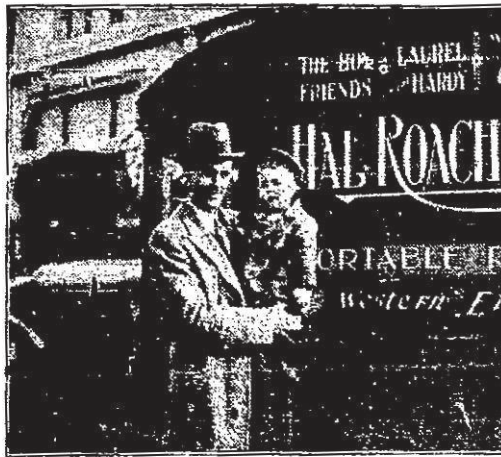
Melton Barker, circa 1930s.
Author's collection.

staged on Broadway and described as a "melodrama of the flag-waving type . . . at once a comedy and an expose of jingoism," *Spread Eagle* told the story of a wealthy man who sponsors a revolution in Mexico to see a greater return on his mining properties there.²⁴ The short sound film portion purportedly depicted the characters embroiled in heated battle in Mexico.

Although no one has discovered any information to tie Barker to the production of the film used in the play, the *Dallas Morning News* only a few months later referred to a local "All-Dallas Talky" directed by Melton Barker, which supports the hypothesis that Barker had already begun working not only with film but with sound-on-film technologies as part of that theatrical production.²⁵ Most important, the newspaper reported that Barker's work making local Dallas films in 1932 was particularly noteworthy because of his reputed discovery of Spanky McFarland, one of the most popular child stars of Hal Roach's *Our Gang* series, who had begun working with Roach that same year.

Throughout his decadeslong film career, Barker claimed to have been the one responsible for Spanky's stardom, having worked with the child in Dallas advertising campaigns for local bread and ice cream companies in early 1930. Although the veracity of Barker's assertion might never be proven definitively, publicity photographs circulated to the press by the filmmaker of himself with Spanky in front of a Hal Roach production truck support the Texan's claimed celebrity connection.

KID MOVIE TO BE MADE IN GALVESTON



Melton Barker of Hollywood who will come to Galveston soon to screen a local two-reel kid comedy with a cast of 100 Galveston boys and girls, is shown here with Spanky McFarland, one of his child discoveries who is now starring in Hal Roach comedies in the city. The local movie is being sponsored by the Martin Theater.

Melton Barker and Spanky
McFarland. *Galveston Daily
News*, September 16, 1937.

Barker, throughout his career, referred to his work with Spanky McFarland as sparking his idea to create local gang comedies. However, many entrepreneurial filmmakers in the late 1920s shared Barker's shrewd assessment that producing community short subjects with local children mimicking Hal Roach's popular films would prove successful. Newspaper records and motion pictures deposited in regional collections indicate that numerous local Our Gang films were produced all over North America during this period, from Manitoba to South Carolina, from Massachusetts to New Mexico.²⁶

The proliferation of these kinds of local narratives should be unsurprising. The mid-1920s through the mid-1930s has often been called the child star era because of the unquestionable power and popularity of performers like Shirley Temple, Jackie Coogan, and Mickey Rooney, alongside the sheer numbers of child star vehicles produced at this time. Moreover, the majority of these child actors started their careers in short subjects before moving into features. For those involved in motion picture production, as well as for movie patrons, the "kiddie comedy short" was closely associated with Hal Roach and his enormously popular Our Gang series, but Roach was only one of many to capitalize on the market for short films featuring children as lead players.

In as early as the mid-teens, Twentieth-Century-Fox had produced and dis-

tributed one of the earliest children-oriented featurette series, the Sunshine Kiddies. Similar series by companies and filmmakers, such as Mack Sennett, with his Hollywood Kid shorts; Educational Pictures, with the Baby Burlesks and Juvenile Comedies series; and Larry Darmour's Mickey McGuire series, further illustrate the proliferation of the child gang comedy genre that dominated screens during the 1920s and 1930s.²⁷ In Mexico, independent filmmaker Adela Sequeyro produced her own iteration, albeit one more dramatic than most gang comedies of the period. *Diablillos de arrabal* (*Suburban Devils*) was released in 1938 with a title more titillating than its earlier working designation, *Los héroes del barrio* (*The Heroes of the Neighborhood*).²⁸

But Hal Roach's success with the Our Gang series proved the most enduring and popular, even outside North America. In the 1920s, British Screen Productions created a series titled Hoo-Ray Kids that was a blatant copy of Roach's film troupe starring an overweight kid, a black child, and even a freckled youth modeled after the most popular Our Gang actor of the silent era, Mickey Daniels.²⁹ Barker's link to Spanky and thus to the quintessential rags-to-riches Hollywood star narrative played a key role in his success as an itinerant—or at the very least, independent—filmmaker. His purported experience with Hollywood films, producers, and celebrity unquestionably lent greater credence to his local endeavors in north central Texas, particularly in the earliest stages of his career.³⁰ By the end of 1932, Barker had completed two local productions in the Dallas area, one in particular called *Carnival Days*, which starred fifty "Dallas Rascals" selected and trained by Barker himself.³¹ Newspaper coverage of the films' production schedules and premieres at the local theaters noted that the audiences would have the opportunity to vote regarding who appeared to be the "best performer" in the films. The winner would receive one hundred dollars and a trip to Hollywood's "film colony."³²

Americans across the country were well aware of the celebrity and wealth of Roach's child stars. The child star era, arguably ushered in by Roach and his peers, witnessed thousands of stage parents pouring into Los Angeles to find fame and fortune through their children, again echoing the contemporary publicity surrounding the effortless rise from obscurity by the Hollywood film star. The reality of overnight movie celebrity, however, remained more elusive: "Of the 140,000 children to interview for parts in the Our Gang series over a period of seventeen years, only 176 appeared on the screen, and a scant forty-one were put under contract; that put the chances for any remuneration at all at 3,400 to one."³³

Thus, though the lure of Hollywood success and potential stardom certainly played a key role for many participants in Barker's films, most parents would have realized that the odds of such success remained quite low. Instead, what appears to be

a more common trait shared by the child (and the few adult) actors who participated in Barker's films is that which Barker himself felt: passion for Hollywood movies and film culture generally. Interviews with Barker's family members as well as viewings of Barker's own home movies indicate that the Dallas native entertained a lifelong love of Hollywood.³⁴ He often traveled to Los Angeles, and he owned and operated a number of movie theaters in different regions of Texas throughout the forty years he spent in the film business. Despite that the hardworking entrepreneur's life on the road included a lifelong struggle with alcoholism and contributed to three divorces, Barker strove to blend his love of Hollywood product with a shrewd ability to market and create his own local version of filmed entertainment. Barker's Kidnappers Foil films present an excellent example of American moviemaking, a truly hybrid form that acknowledged both the popularity of Hollywood features and its attendant consumer culture in tandem with the entrepreneurial opportunities and sheer enjoyment afforded by making movies.

Barker's own marketing materials bear out this complicated negotiation. His promotional brochure (ca. late 1940s to early 1950s) titled "The Kid Movie: The Inside Story by Melton Barker Productions" begins with a sobering take on the reality of the average American's chance at stardom: "Most every one [*sic*], young and old alike, have at one time or another, felt that they would like to be a famous movie star, and to have a career in the movies. But it is only a dream—that very few ever realize, because as the old proverb says, 'Many are called but few are chosen.'"³⁵ Barker's brochure continues by promoting the value of Barker's work in allowing children's dreams to come true by appearing on the big screen locally. Furthermore, Barker's stated "pride and satisfaction" as well as his niche micromarketing approach stemmed from giving children the "opportunity to see themselves in the movies without the necessity of having to go to Hollywood."³⁶ Barker's work, alongside that of other itinerant filmmakers, must be seen as a unique component of efforts by individuals, businesses, and community leaders (including theater owners) to define and cultivate an active local culture and economic base.

From his earliest kid films in Dallas in 1932, Barker initiated an itinerant filmmaking career that continued until his death in a Mississippi hotel room in 1977, only two years following his fourth and last trip to Blytheville, Arkansas. Although the itinerant filmmaking phenomenon appears to have peaked during the 1930s and 1940s and is certainly most identified with the Depression era, Barker not only worked successfully throughout the latter part of the twentieth century but also continued to experiment with new technologies. A 1975 advertisement for his film work in Paris, Texas, depicts Barker with a large camera displaying the phrase "Mel Barker TV Shows" painted on its side,



possibly indicating Barker's attempt to launch his own version of kids programs to complement, or even compete with, the popular global franchise *Romper Room*.

From Melton Barker's 1950s brochure. Courtesy of Jack Duncan, McKinney, Texas.

Like other independent filmmakers even today, Barker appeared to have worked on a variety of media projects, not just children's short subjects. Other genres included early advertising films, like those he shot with young Spanky McFarland, and chamber of commerce or buy-local campaign titles like *The Cape Girardeau Story*, filmed in Missouri. Undoubtedly, however, Barker's real success was his work with children, specifically in two different series: *Last Straw* and *Kidnappers Foil*. With a nod to Hal Roach as well as to the many producers of early serial narratives familiar to moviegoers across the United States, both of Barker's series featured local gangs of children battling either kidnappers (in the case of *Kidnappers Foil*) or bank robbers (in the case of *Last Straw*).³⁷

The most successful film series for Barker was the *Kidnappers Foil*, which he shot in over 150 locations found thus far. Barker sometimes filmed three versions with three different cinemas during one visit (as he did in San Antonio in the early 1930s) and returned to a number of cities three or four times throughout his career. With a large portion of his work in Texas and across the Southwest, Barker advertised in both English- and Spanish-language newspapers to encourage as much participation (and profit) as possible. Featuring a basic plot of kidnapping, rescue, and a celebratory talent show, each *Kidnappers Foil* film shares virtually the exact same dialogue, camera shots, and characters. The talent show material, even from such disparate locations as

McAllen, Texas, on the U.S.–Mexico border, to Brainerd, Minnesota, features similar acts and routines, albeit with different accents and performance styles. Importantly, both the Kidnappers Foil and Last Straw series showcased characters with names like “Betty Davis” and impersonations of other notable Hollywood film stars.

Barker’s reference and appeal to familiar cinematic narratives and stars underscore the value and success of putting local citizens in “the movies”—certainly a step beyond the turn-of-the-twentieth-century novelty of “seeing oneself on the screen” to the pleasure and fun of playing “Hollywood.”

Barker’s mode of production, including substantive preplanning and rehearsal, served pragmatic purposes (i.e., so that the children’s voices could be audible on the microphones operated by Barker himself or one of his two-man crew) and, at the same time, capitalized on the Hollywood “dream factory” myth of rags-to-riches fame. Barker required auditions for his local talent or stars as well as three to four days of training before one to two days of shooting. Although interviews with Kidnappers Foil participants suggest that the vast majority of parents saw the filming as a bit of fun, several bemusedly reference the success of Barker’s claim that his narratives would showcase whether local children could really make it as Hollywood stars.³⁸ Noting in the press that filmmaking was an expensive undertaking, and not one that allowed him to become wealthy, Barker charged fees for the special training necessitated to be in the film—fees that appeared to vary from town to town, from four dollars to rumors of twenty dollars.³⁹

A Chattanooga, Tennessee, local theater owner received strong feedback in 1949 from patrons who felt “embarrassed” that they needed to pay a fee for children to participate after the kids had auditioned with over a thousand others in the community.⁴⁰ In a rare interview about his production process with the Greenville, Mississippi, *Delta Democrat-Times*, Barker expressed frustration when he was asked about critics who castigated him for his work being a “money-making gimmick.”⁴¹ Barker said that he grew tired of such complaints from “ignorant” people, hoping instead that community members would continue to support his work so that they would “see it’s legitimate. The kids get a big kick out of being in a movie, and besides, I work too hard for this to be a fake.”⁴²

CONTEMPORARY VALUE

Barker’s irritation with being called a fake indicates his acute awareness of the many criticisms leveled at his work, his identity as a seemingly rootless itinerant filmmaker. However, as Dwight Swanson points out in his contribution in the Forum section of this

issue, the vast majority of individuals who participated in Barker's films remembered the experience with little animosity and even reminisced with some fondness. The images of people smiling, laughing, or even ducking from the camera in itinerant films testify to general human curiosity about, interest in, and/or discomfort with seeing oneself or one's family and community on the big screen.

A variety of hypotheses can be formulated to attempt to explain the significance of the itinerant film experience and, perhaps more important for the archival and academic communities, the value of the local film artifact today. Moving image archives, often pressured by bureaucratic demands and assumptions, largely tout their collections' worth to university communities. However, itinerant or local films, along with other orphan works, may present more profound data and appeal to less professional but far more numerous organizations, including genealogical and historical societies, chambers of commerce, civic interest groups, and even K–12 educational levels.

From the inception of cinema, the lure of "seeing yourself on film" proved an effective promotional strategy for recreational entertainment, as in the case of the turn-of-the-century Mitchell and Kenyon films as well as in an array of other contexts.⁴³ For example, in his article "'Watch the Picture Carefully, and See If You Can Identify Anyone': Recognition in Factual Film of the First World War," the Imperial War Museum's Roger Smither details how many British citizens were interested in and encouraged to look for friends and family filmed on European battlefields. Furthermore, U.K. troops' acknowledgment of being filmed by waving or smiling at the camera complemented diary entries and letters indicating their hopes of perhaps being recognized by people at home.⁴⁴ Tracking the history of pleasure through cinematic recognition in all kinds of media—from the earliest days of movies to contemporary reality television—provides clues that lead us toward a better understanding of the enduring popularity of the image as well as media's role in the creation of imagined communities from the local to the national and global.

Perhaps the most important contemporary use for itinerant-produced films is to enable one's relations, whether by blood or simply from the community, to see their past in moving images, thus evoking Stephen Bottomore's assessment that the most significant audience for these films is the local community itself. Citing the early trade press from 1912, Bottomore's assertion confirms that human interest in locally produced media remains the same, even in the first decades of the twenty-first century: "There can be no two opinions as to the value of the local topical film. . . . Everyone loves to see himself, or herself, or friends or children . . . and the local topical is the best means of gratifying this desire."⁴⁵

Indeed, many individuals who had participated in itinerant films have searched for years for copies, which indicates the value of these films as quasifamily and community records. When faced with the reality that the Tupelo version of the Kidnappers Foil appeared to have been lost, one Mississippi resident wrote up everything she could remember about her experience with the Barker production and gave the memoir to her brother as a gift in 2005 because he, too, had performed in the film and desired a copy.⁴⁶ Clearly personal nostalgia for times past—particularly memories from childhood—contributes to the desire to see and thus preserve local films. Nostalgia, derived from the Greek words *nostos*, meaning “return home,” and *algia*, meaning “a painful condition,” implies, in its most basic sense, a “painful yearning to return home.”⁴⁷ Although the term has developed to become most commonly identified with a general longing for the past, nostalgia has always included a sense of homesickness—of locality.

The historical relationship between nostalgia and home/community merits attention, particularly in reference to the itinerant filmmaking phenomenon: an independent, entrepreneurial mode of production capitalizing on, and indeed creating, a unique, shared community experience. In the town of Childress, a small community in the Texas Panhandle visited twice by Melton Barker in the 1930s and 1940s, the discovery of two extant prints of Kidnappers Foil galvanized local civic leaders who had been striving to obtain historical landmark status for their abandoned movie theater downtown.⁴⁸ Barker’s films, and their subsequent preservation, created new pathways to communicate with those who had moved away and those who remained committed to reversing the difficult economic trends facing them.⁴⁹

The ongoing fascination with the production background of Barker’s films and the tale of local rediscovery, combined with the sheer entertainment factor provided by the Childress versions of Kidnappers Foil for all members of the community today, young and old, continues to rally community support for local preservation efforts. Copies now proliferate within the community, across the state, and across the country, which are used by many to identify family and friends.

An additional example of the community value of the local film lies in the work of another Texas itinerant filmmaker by the name of Shad Graham. A former studio newsreel cameraman during the 1930s, Graham launched a “Texas Newsreel” company in the post–World War II period that shot buy-local campaign films commissioned largely by chambers of commerce across the country. One film from a popular Graham series, *Our Home Town: San Marcos*, became a viral video of sorts for the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI) in spring 2009. A news reporter for the *San Marcos Record*, on hearing how residents in the community had been telling one another about the film streaming online



Frame from *The Kidnapper's Foil*, San Marcos, Texas (circa 1930s). Texas Archive of the Moving Image.

via the TAMI video library, wrote a small piece for the paper about the number of emotional reactions to seeing the 1949 Graham film. The article, quoting one of the members of the San Marcos Heritage Association, articulates the value of itinerant film productions to contemporary audiences, stating that whereas “photographs [were] one thing . . . seeing live videos of . . . meetings and . . . buildings, it’s simply amazing. . . . It increases your sense of community.”⁵⁰ By the end of the weekend following the article’s publication, the film had been viewed over six thousand times and continues to climb toward being one of the most watched films in the TAMI collection. As of summer 2010, the film had been viewed nearly twelve thousand times.

Like many orphan film genres, local films and the accompanying subgenre of the itinerant film prove an important addition to the traditional motion picture canon, but only if adequately contextualized and questioned—and not just merely presented as an oppositional form to the Hollywood corporate product. Local films reflect film historian Gregory Waller’s description of “small-town theatres as discursive construct, managerial strategy, motion picture industry component, and orphaned ‘little fellow’; further, they [provide a] site of social interaction.”⁵¹

New modes of access to archival film provided by the Web are, in turn, increasing the value of local films as sites of such social interaction or exchange. Web 2.0 technologies further enlivened the viral appeal of *Our Home Town: San Marcos* by offering tagging opportunities by members of the community. For example, the film depicts a

bank building in downtown San Marcos about which little was noted in the film's audio track. The TAMI library's tagging capability allowed members of the public to note that "the State Bank and Trust Building was robbed by the Newton Gang in 1924, and probably by Machine Gun Kelly in 1933. The building was featured in the 1972 film *The Getaway* starring Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw."⁵²

Synched to the point in the film that features the footage of the bank, the information then moves to another tag added by a different member of the public and perhaps of interest to another community or family group: the name of the "longtime bank teller," Will Goforth.⁵³ Thus the public actively participates in offering information heretofore unknown and valuable to an already understaffed heritage organization and provides concrete benefits to archive, participant, collection, and community. A genealogist might be interested in tracking descendents of Will Goforth, but the local San Marcos Chamber of Commerce might want to capitalize on the bank's notoriety in Hollywood history to increase regional tourism. Itinerant films, with a new life online, have encouraged local communities to "see themselves" on a multiplicity of screens—both large and small—and are once again taking part in the ever-changing conception of local identity.

CONCLUSION

Heretofore lost and neglected itinerant films produced in varying countries around the globe reveal new perspectives that should be included in media histories of twentieth-century production, distribution, and exhibition practice—a particularly acute addition in the context of the United States, where Hollywood continues to cast the longest shadow. A contemporary scholar interested in researching film-related history in Blytheville, Arkansas, would discover quickly that the small city was once home to Hollywood actor George Hamilton, aka the "Tanned One," during his youth but would be far less likely to find mention of the four Kidnappers Foil films produced there over the last century.

Whether called local views, itinerant films, community films, or local films, the information available about such films remains sparse and disparate, causing them frequently to be perceived as one-off titles rather than archival materials worthy of substantive research. In the case of Melton Barker, separate Kidnappers Foil film prints have been donated or collected in historical societies, regional archives, and national repositories across the United States over the last several decades. Connections between a print at the Nebraska State Historical Society, two prints at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and a couple of prints in a personal collection in

the Texas Panhandle remained unknown and certainly unconnected until fairly recently. Itinerant-produced material evidences the ongoing need for and value of a more substantive subnational network of media collections—not just national repositories devoted to varying genres but a true federal system of media archives and preservation consortia. In fact, the Imperial War Museum’s Roger Smither pointedly acknowledges the vital role of the United Kingdom’s “highly developed network of national and regional film archives” to the research undertaken thus far on the local film genre generally.⁵⁴

With their regional and locally specific content, itinerant films provide archivists and scholars intriguing and certainly entertaining artifacts with which to examine communities traditionally underrepresented in images produced by national or transnational production companies. Melton Barker, with his long-lasting career that spanned from the heyday of the Hollywood studio era well into the broadcasting age, might serve as a harbinger of future research to come that will further challenge traditional notions of the relationship between all areas of media production. Itinerant producers like Barker complicate easy assumptions related to our current twenty-first-century era of media convergence, copyright challenges, and the role of the amateur in social media sites.

Globalization theory’s interrogation of the local complements and enhances traditional film history practice to caution the contemporary viewer against oversimplifying—or aggrandizing—the intent of community participants as well as those of the itinerant producer in the creation of local films. The media produced by itinerant filmmakers help complicate binary oppositions constructed between amateur and professional, corporate and independent. Furthermore, local communities, armed with copies of such material, can again utilize the films to create opportunities to re-create their local identities. But this can only happen if the films survive, are discovered, and access to them is created and cultivated.

Melton Barker’s marketing materials indicated his own belief in the long-term value of his films: “The picture will be made here in the city, using the parks or other scenic spots for location, and upon it’s [*sic*] completion, becomes the property of the theatre. They can, of course, show it, whenever and as often as they desire. The picture is a permanent record of the children, and will remain a memento of their childhood in the years to come.”⁵⁵ As nomadic as he was, even at times inspiring distrust on the part of parents suspect of his motives, Barker had real foresight in envisioning the value of preservation and access to the films he produced for the benefit of the communities involved.

As remembered by former relatives as well as many of his films’ participants, Melton Barker’s often gruff manner—which included threatening competitors with jail,

barking orders at the hundreds (if not thousands) of children with whom he worked (and purportedly detested), and a penchant for too much drink—makes for a wonderful analogy with the fast-moving, independent prairie hares historically associated with the itinerant cinema showmen, a breed commonly spotted boxing at one another on those same Texas plains driven time and again by Melton Barker Productions. Like other itinerant filmmakers, Melton Barker's hard work, clever entrepreneurial efforts, and, indeed, reputation deserve to be resurrected. But somehow, I like to think that Mel Barker would shrug off academic accolades of artistic auteur and prefer instead to be associated with the peripatetic and decidedly scrappy nature of the Texas jackrabbit.

NOTES

1. "Movie Producer Arriving Next Week," *Courier-News*, October 15, 1975, 14.
2. "Tryouts for Movie Set for Wednesday," *Courier-News*, October 21, 1975, 7.
3. Ibid.
4. "The Jack-Rabbits of the Movie Business," originally published in *Billboard*, October 1906, and quoted in George Pratt, "Images," *Image: The Bulletin of the George Eastman House of Photography* 10, no. 3 (1961): 10.
5. Stephen Bottomore, "From the Factory Gate to the 'Home Talent' Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era," in *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*, ed. Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple, and Patrick Russell (London: BFI, 2004), 37.
6. Ibid.
7. In addition to articles on his work by Martin Johnson and Stephanie Stewart, H. Lee Waters has served as the subject of a 1989 documentary by Tom Whiteside, *The Cameraman Has Visited Our Town*, and in 2005, Waters's film of Kannapolis, North Carolina, was named to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.
8. Dan Streible, "Itinerant Filmmakers and Amateur Casts: A Homemade 'Our Gang,' 1926," *Film History: An International Journal* 15, no. 2 (2003): 179.
9. Many books and articles have been written referencing this subject, but see, e.g., Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 10–11.
10. See Calvin Pryluck's "Bibliography on Traveling Exhibition" in his article "The Itinerant Movie Show and the Development of the Film Industry," in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 37–52.
11. "Jackrabbit," <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/jackrabbit.html>.

12. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 27, 2009.
13. Bottomore, "From the Factory Gate," 32.
14. Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, 9.
15. *Ibid.*, 5.
16. Streible, "Itinerant Filmmakers," 189.
17. Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1995), 29.
18. *Ibid.*, 26.
19. See *ibid.* as well as John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for a more in-depth analysis of glocalization theory and its relevance for globalization critique.
20. Melton Barker Productions brochure, courtesy of Jack Duncan, McKinney, Texas.
21. For more information, see Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
22. Conflicting data, including census information, report that Barker was born in either Mississippi or Texas. Numerous newspaper articles as well as Barker's own marketing materials attest to his Hollywood connections.
23. "Stage Actors Making Talky on Location," *Dallas Morning News*, November 15, 1931, 6.
24. "Spread Eagle Opens Monday on Maple Ave.," *Dallas Morning News*, November 22, 1931.
25. *Ibid.*
26. See the filmography published in the appendix to this issue for examples.
27. Leonard Maltin and Richard W. Bann, *Our Gang: The Life and Times of the Little Rascals* (New York: Crown, 1977), 15–16.
28. Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro and Patricia Torres San Martín, *Adela Sequeyro* (Harlingen, Tex.: Archivo Filmico Agrasánchez, 2000), 86–87. Special thanks to Mr. Rogelio Agrasánchez for alerting me to this particular version.
29. Maltin and Bann, *Our Gang*, 15.
30. *Box Office* trade press from November 1938 documents a plan by retired cowboy star Jack Hoxie to shoot westerns near Hot Springs, Arkansas. Melton Barker was listed as one of the directors involved, although no other report of this endeavor exists. See "Jack Hoxie to Make Western Films on Location Near Hot Springs, Ark.," *Box Office*, November 5, 1938, 82.
31. "Scene from Children's Dallas-Made Picture," *Dallas Morning News*, May 2, 1932, 4.
32. "All-Dallas Talky to Be Produced," *Dallas Morning News*, February 16, 1932, 8.
33. Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Images of Children in American Film: A Sociocultural Analysis* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 57–58.
34. A copy of Barker's home movies has been donated to the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI).
35. Melton Barker Productions brochure, courtesy of Jack Duncan, McKinney, Texas.

36. Ibid.

37. Only one copy of a Last Straw title has been found as of the publication of this article, so determining the differences between this series and the Kidnappers Foil series proves impossible. This is particularly the case because the extant Last Straw film reels, part of the Minnesota Historical Society film collection in Minneapolis, may in fact be reel 1 of a Last Straw and reel 2 of a Kidnappers Foil.

38. In particular, numerous Childress, Texas, residents have shared with the author local lore of a movie-struck mother from neighboring Quanah, Texas, who took her young son to Los Angeles following his appearance in a Kidnappers Foil production. Although efforts to prove the veracity of this tale have failed, rumor has it that the mother and child returned to Quanah fairly quickly.

39. The money charged by Barker appeared to vary from community to community, as reported by hundreds of newspaper stories as well as anecdotal accounts.

40. "No Money for Theatres in Chattanooga Film," *Box Office*, September 3, 1949, 92.

41. Owen Taylor, "Cleveland's Movie: Quiet on the Set!" *Delta Democrat-Times*, May 15, 1972, 2.

42. Ibid.

43. See Toulmin et al., *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, 32–48.

44. Roger Smither, "'Watch the Picture Carefully, and See If You Can Identify Anyone': Recognition in Factual Film of the First World War Period," *Film History: An International Journal* 14 (2002): 396.

45. Bottomore, "From the Factory Gate," 34.

46. "Melton Barker and the Kidnappers Foil," <http://www.meltonbarker.com/>.

47. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 1.

48. The two prints have been preserved thanks to the National Film Preservation Foundation and have been donated to TAMI in Austin.

49. For more information and to see the Childress films, see http://www.texasarchive.org/library/index.php?title=Collection_-_Melton_Barker_Juvenile_Productions.

50. "Our Home Town: Online Documentary Shows a Thriving San Marcos in 1949," *San Marcos Daily Record*, March 22, 2009, <http://www.sanmarcosrecord.com/features/x1169232272/Our-Home-Town/>.

51. Gregory Waller, "Imagining the Small-Town Theater," in Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, 181.

52. "Our Home Town," TAMI, http://www.texasarchive.org/library/index.php/Our_Home_Town/.

53. Ibid.

54. Smither, "Watch the Picture Carefully," 393.

55. Melton Barker Productions brochure, courtesy of Jack Duncan, McKinney, Texas.