

FilmTexas

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WHAT'S COOKIN'

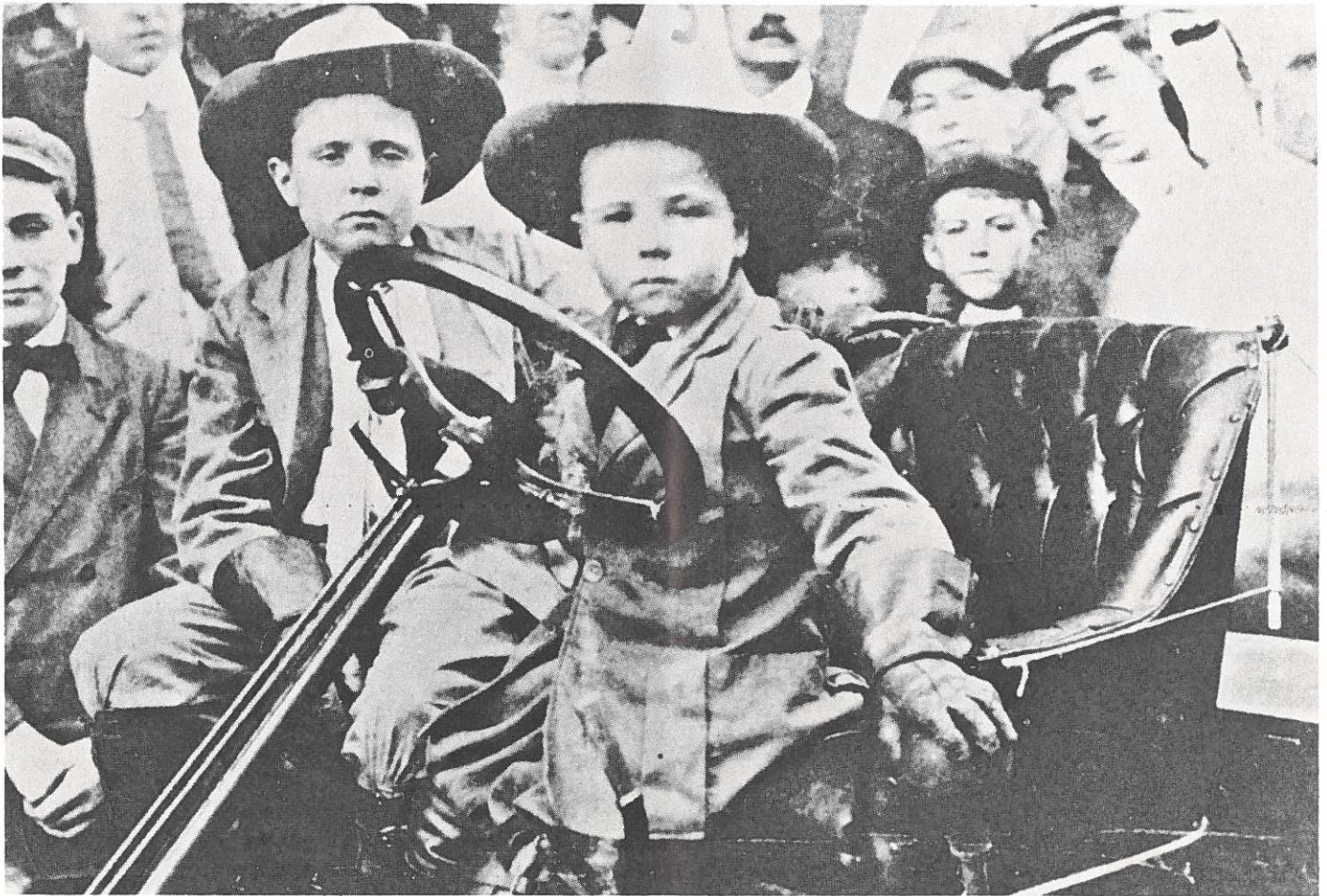
In our last issue we ran a story on the success at the US Film Festival of *THE WHOLE SHOOTIN' MATCH*, a film directed, co-produced and co-written by Eagle Pennell, and Lin Sutherland of Austin. The film was originally screened at USA Film Festival in Dallas, as a critic's choice of Arthur Knight, who subsequently had some nice things to say about it in a column for *The Hollywood Reporter* (see *FilmTexas* June 1978). As a result of all this, Pennell now has a

development deal with Universal Studios to write a feature length film, for production next year in Texas.

Pennell and Henkel, another Texan who has been living in Los Angeles for the last few years, have been working on the first drafts of the script here in Texas. They got the go-ahead from Thom Mount, executive vice president in charge of production at Universal, and Verna Fields, one of the judges at the US Fest, and an executive at Universal. Pennell,

who talked to other major studios before committing to Universal, credits Field's personal commitment to the project as the main reason for going with Universal. Pennell and Henkel will co-produce, with Pennell directing.

Industry observers feel that the arrangement is unusual by Hollywood standards, giving as it does considerable freedom to a pair of "newcomers" to do the kind of project they want, with no initial "suggestions" by the studio. Other



The Abernathy Boys (see next page)

deals with other studios might have been more lucrative, but would have involved greater restrictions. On the other hand, Pennell emphasizes that the deal is step-by-step, with both sides having the option to back out at any point before actual production. He and Henkel are counting no chickens, and know that they must turn out a product with commercial as well as creative potential. But based on their conversations with Universal, the commitment of Fields, and the general atmosphere surrounding the arrangement, they feel that they will be able to produce a solid film, set in Texas, with more meat and less garbage than is commonly found in Hollywood versions of this state. Content of the property is not for publication now, but it will be an "urban" rather than rustic piece, set in a large Texas city, and will have little resemblance to either *SHOOTIN' MATCH*, the earlier *HELL OF A NOTE* (*FilmTexas* April 1977), or Henkel's earlier writing credit (with Tobe Hooper) *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE*.

Another Big Deal we know about involves Fred Miller of Austin, who, in conjunction with Film Writers, Inc. of New York, has inked a development deal with Columbia, for a fat budget, feature length film, presently known as *TEMP 'N BUD*.

The property is based on a true story about two brothers, Temple and Bud Abernathy, who are now in their seventies, and live in Texas. The fact that they made it to ten, much less seventy, is pretty amazing, considering their experiences as weets. Those experiences are so remarkable, someone needs to do a movie about them, and that is precisely what Fred Miller plans to do.

The Abernathys were born in Oklahoma. They lived on a ranch with their father. According to one of them, he believed in raising "independent sons." His method was convincing. In 1909, he sent them on the first of several cross-country horseback trips, alone. They were aged five and nine. Their travels took them as far as New York, and



Bill Wittliff (l.) with Diane Ladd & Johnny Cash

they once made a trip from there to San Francisco in sixty-two days, never sleeping indoors, never accepting help from others. They took other journeys, usually for promoters, on motorcycles, automobiles, elephants, donkeys, and various other mobile objects. They met the likes of Presidents Taft and Teddy Roosevelt.

Over the years various producers have approached the Abernathys with the idea turning their travels into a motion picture, but they refused offers, until Miller came along, made the right offer, convinced them he would "do it right" and bought the story. He had learned of them from a student intern in his company, whose roommate is a great nephew of the Abernathys.

After an aborted arrangement with one of the television networks to develop the story as a pilot and series, Miller and his co-producer settled with Columbia. Miller, who has produced several award-winning documentaries, is now well on his way to fulfilling a long-held fantasy: producing a feature film. Production will take place (we think) in Texas, or at least some of it.

Bill Wittliff, a writer in Austin, who has scripted the yet-unproduced *RAGGEDY MAN*, the CBS television movie *THADDEUS ROSE & EDDIE*, Coppola's screen adaptation of *THE BLACK STALLION*, and who is currently working on a screenplay based on Willie Nelson's "Red-

Headed Stranger" for Universal, has also come to a development deal of his own, with Warner Brothers.

He and the studio have agreed to a two-picture affair, both pictures written and co-produced (with the studio) by him. The arrangement suits Wittliff very well, giving him more control over the outcome of projects he originates.

Usually, writers have no control over how their efforts end up on the screen. In some cases, a writer is consulted by the director early in pre-production. But quite often an original screenplay is re-written by others before it goes into production, and the writer's creative expectations in the original work are further subjected to the liberal interpretations of the director, editor, and others. By being able to produce what he writes, Wittliff hopes to have not only more control, but more freedom to present an intelligent view of his native state. His first project, details of which cannot be revealed yet, will be filmed in Texas.

As an aside, the *RED-HEADED STRANGER* project mentioned above is the baby of Nelson, Jan Michael Vincent, and Gary Busey. The last two acted in *BIG WEDNESDAY* together, and Busey of course was the lead in *THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY*. Busey, in the guise of Teddy Jack Eddy, has been known to sit in as drummer with Nelson now and then; Vincent likewise. Whether or not any of the trio will act in the film is undecided.

ANOTHER ROADSIDE ATTRACTION

America's favorite cocky, tough-guy cop, Robert Blake, has just recently turned in his badge to become a comical, likeable, but not-too-bright car wash employee in a Lorimar production, *THE HAMSTER OF HAPPINESS*.

According to sources in El Paso, the *HAMSTER* was shot there this past summer and might be released some time next year. But that's about all the information that they could provide. Apparently, the director did not want the local newspaper people (or any outsiders, for that matter) on the set. But I have been able to scrape together a bit of information about the production from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *American Film* magazine.

Blake and Barbara Harris star in this production directed by Hal Ashby (of *SHAMPOO*, *COMING HOME*, *THE LAST DETAIL* fame). Blake plays a car wash attendant, Loyal Muke, and Harris a half-baked country singer named Dinette. One night, Loyal, in a state of inebriation, and Dinette enter into the state of Holy Matrimony. Dinette is opposed to divorce, and convinces Loyal that family life is the best life (she comes fully equipped with three children). Together, they leave for California where she hopes to resume her acting career that began in high school with a part in "The Bluebird of Happiness." As they cross the border into California, Loyal presents Dinette with a hamster that he had picked up at a roadside zoo — they were clean out of bluebirds. Hence, the title.

The screen play for *HAMSTER* was written by Charles Eastman in 1969. Apparently, it's been tossed around Hollywood ever since then, winning praise from everyone who read it. *HAMSTER* is classified as a "romantic road comedy." According to Blake, the script demonstrates the value of the family and, as far as he's concerned, "The family unit is the most important thing in the world." "Here's two sick, sad wrecks of people," Blake says, "But they're gonna survive because God gives 'em a break and lets 'em become a family."

As a postscript, Austin's own Willis Alan Ramsey will be writing nine songs for the sound track of *HAMSTER*. He's recording at Hound Sound Studios here in Austin, and work on the score will probably begin in summer of 1979.—A.K.



Barbara Harris and Robert Blake (Photo: Dianne Schroeder American Film)