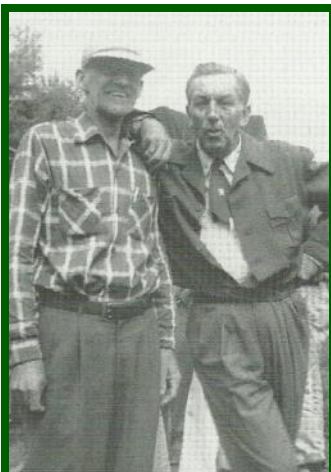


# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## Frank Rickman: “Red-Clay Michelangelo”

### Inside this issue

#### Great Locomotive Chase Extras

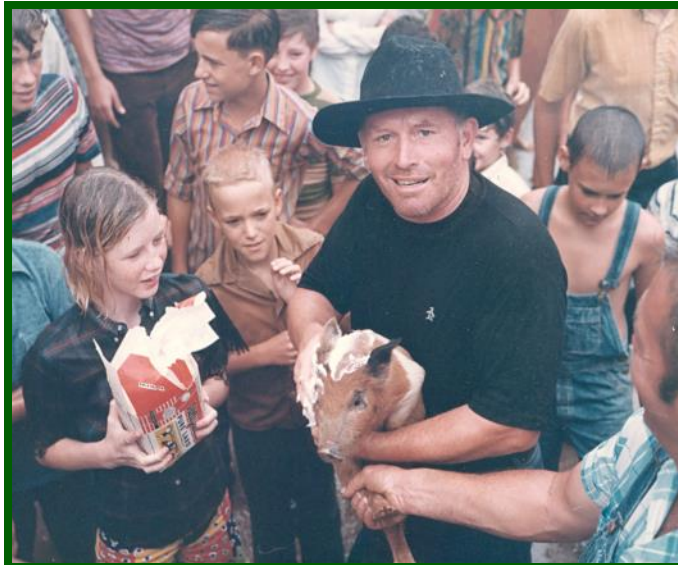


Clayton Mayor W.S. Bearden and Walt Disney in October of 1955

- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment

Frank Rickman (1924 - 2004) was, in many ways, a modern Davy Crockett. Some will recall his adventures manhandling moonshiners, wild bears and boars. Others will remember him for carving the Kingwood and Sky Valley Resorts from mountainous terrain. He also will be remembered as the wagon master for a wagon train which travelled across the state as part of a campaign to re-gild the State Capitol's dome. Arguably less well appreciated is how Rickman used his mountain-man skills to make Rabun County a popular destination for the movie industry.

Rabun County and Frank Rickman were first introduced to Hollywood during the filming of *The Great Locomotive Chase*, a 1956 Walt Disney movie. The movie recreated an 1862 event in which Union soldiers stole a Confederate locomotive with plans to race it up the Western and Atlantic Railroad, destroying vital infrastructure along the way. Their goal was to prevent southern reinforcements from reaching Chattanooga, thereby making it easier for the approaching Union Army to take the city. The plot failed after



Confederate forces gave chase, captured the soldiers, and hanged them as spies.

Unfortunately, even before filming could begin, the production crew faced a challenge. The large ship cranes used in California to load two “stout” locomotives onto railroad flatcars for transport were, of course, not available in Rabun County. Rickman overcame this challenge by building a sidetrack with an earthen ramp, backing the flatcars up to the ramp, and off-loading the locomotives onto the new rails. He also built sets, scouted filming locations, and served as a “go between” for the Disney film crew and local citizens.

Disney was so impressed with Rickman's ability to solve production challenges that he offered him a job with his California studio. Although Mr. Rickman declined the job offer, a little over a decade later he once again would come to Hollywood's rescue.

While *The Great Locomotive Chase* was a successful movie, it was *Deliverance* (1972) that represented the turning point for Frank Rickman, Rabun County and Georgia as players in the movie industry. For those needing a refresher, *Deliverance* told the story of four suburban dwellers who travel to the

North Georgia mountains to whitewater canoe down a wild river. Filmed along the Chattooga River, the movie is best remembered for its spectacular scenery, a banjo duel, and a violent rape scene. It was nominated for three Academy Awards and has been a topic of analysis in numerous publications and a source of controversy among some Rabun citizens.

Frank Rickman's contribution to the success of *Deliverance* is undisputed, leading Georgia's first Film Commissioner to describe him as a “red-clay Michelangelo.” Not only did Rickman scout idyllic locations for filming, he built sets, served as a technical adviser for filming along the Chattooga, recruited local talent, and had his voice dubbed in for one actor who failed to master a “hillbilly” accent. It was also Rickman who

*continued on page 2*

## Frank Rickman: “Red-Clay Michelangelo”

suggested the notorious “squeal like a pig” line to highlight the brutality of the rape scene. As he later explained, the director asked him “What do mountain people think is the lowest critter ... (he responded) the hog.”

Despite misgivings by some about the movie, Rickman defended it noting, “Deliverance has done more for this county than anything else. People ... thought that Georgia was just cotton fields until that movie.” Time has validated his point.

Following the success of *Deliverance*, in 1973 the Georgia Film Commission (now the Georgia Film, Music and Digital Entertainment Office) was created to promote movie projects in the state. As a member of the commission, Rickman became what the *Clayton Tribune* called “the most wanted man in the North Georgia film industry,” serving as a liaison for film crews in search of picturesque camera-ready locations. It is in large part due to Rickman’s early work with the movie industry, upon which others built, that Georgia today ranks among the top five states for film and television production. For Rabun County, the economic boost that film crews bring to the area during filming is multiplied when moviegoers, impressed with the scenery presented on screen, also visit and contribute to the county’s tourism and hospitality industries. The same can be said for Rabun County’s popularity with retirees and second-home owners.

*Deliverance* also was responsible for the emergence of whitewater rafting in North Georgia, as well as the Chattooga’s designation as a Wild and Scenic River. This designation, which placed the river under the protection and management of the U.S. Forest Service, has made the Chattooga “... the crown jewel of the southern whitewater rivers,” as noted in one travel guide. Such praise seems a fitting tribute to Frank Rickman’s role in promoting Rabun County’s wild beauty on the big and small screen.



Frank Rickman and his wife Sarah as part of a 1976 Bicentennial wagon train



Rickman with the Ford Bronco that was used in *Deliverance*



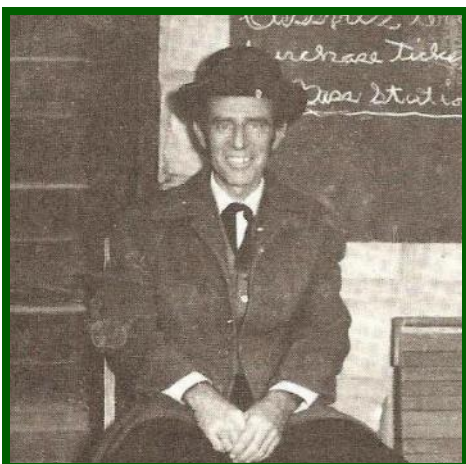
*Deliverance* actors from the left:  
Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds, Ned Beatty, and Ronny Cox





## The Great Locomotive Chase: A Look behind the Camera

The *Great Locomotive Chase* offered the citizens of Rabun County their first opportunity to experience a bit of movie making. The photos that follow depict some of the locals who, according to the director of the movie, had "...good faces for extra and bit parts." A lucky few were assigned speaking roles with two individuals, Doug Bleckley and W. S. Bearden, receiving screen credit.



**Pastor J. E. Dillard** – In addition to his real-life position as pastor of the First Baptist Church (1953 – 1967), in *The Great Locomotive Chase* Mr. Dillard also played the role of a preacher. Although Pastor Dillard spoke only 49 words in the movie, he was at first hesitant to accept the role. After reading the script and consulting with another pastor, Mr. Dillard reached a decision. At the top of a piece of paper he wrote, "It's perfectly alright for my pastor to be in the (movie)." The deacons of the First Baptist Church signed their names to the paper.

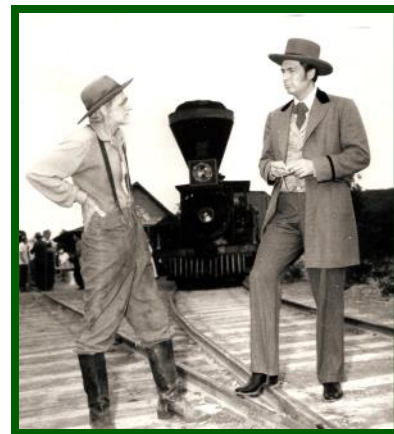
**Johnnie Eller** – In a 1996 *Foxfire* interview, Mr. Eller recalled his speaking role as an onlooker at a train depot. Standing beside Mr. Eller was Fess Parker who played the role of Union spy leader James J. Andrews. Mr. Parker was directed to look at the sky before saying, "It's a cloudin' over. You think it'll rain?" Mr. Eller was directed to respond, "Might could. Rains one minute and shines the next." For this scene, Mr. Eller received seventy dollars.

**Doug Bleckley** – Of all the local extras to appear in *The Great Locomotive Chase*, teenager Doug Bleckley landed the most prominent role. He was discovered while working at the local Pic-Ric Café. In the movie, Bleckley assumed the role of a young fireman who stoked the burners of the locomotive



"Texas." This role called for "... a young boy who had a bright face and sharp clear eyes ... too young to be a soldier, but wanted desperately to help catch (the Yankees) ..." Following filming in Clayton, Bleckley travelled to Hollywood for post-filming production and then a second time to appear on the Mickey Mouse Club television show. Walt Disney also offered to put Bleckley under contract, if his family would move to California. The invitation was rejected by Bleckley's mother.

**W. S. Bearden** – Mr. Bearden, who served as Mayor of Clayton during filming, was assigned the role of a switchman. Following the premiere of the movie in Atlanta in 1956, a local columnist took special note of Mr. Bearden's performance by writing, "He gave the appearance of a professional and seasoned actor."



Extras preparing for their scene (front from left): Buff Green, Martha Sue Long and Mrs. Weatherly Vaughan. At the rear (l to r): Mrs. Florence Powell, Mrs. Mae Duncan and Mrs. W. L. Gillespie



Extras H. J. Ramey, Herschel Tomlin, Lamar Patterson, and Harley Shepherd are shown posing behind the caboose at the Clayton Depot of the Tallulah Falls Railroad.



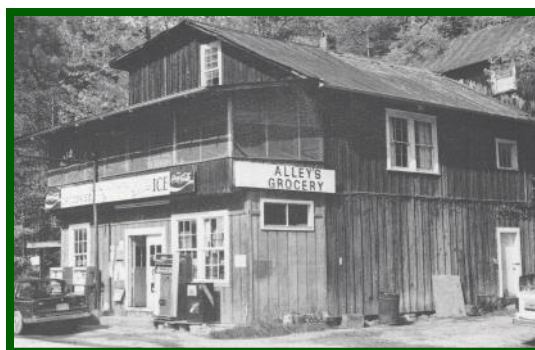
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## Historical Marker Project

We're on the web!  
[www.rabunhistory.org](http://www.rabunhistory.org)



Paul and Ellen Alley began Alley's Store in Lakemont in 1925. Lamar Alley took over the store in 1968 at his father's death and ran it for 40 years. Across the street from the railroad depot, the general store served as a community center as well as a post office. Restored in 2008.

Annie Westerman of Annie's at Alley's has requested a historical marker for this building. If you have a building you would like to be considered, please contact us at: [historicalsociety@rabuncounty.ga.gov](mailto:historicalsociety@rabuncounty.ga.gov) or 706-782-5292.



## Big News!!

Please visit the new "Discussions" blog on our website for new articles and comments from readers. The latest posting by Mick Coleman is *Social History: Small Town Drugstores*.