



ROBBINS BARSTOW MASTER OF ADVENTURE

I think I state the obvious, especially when one considers where I'm about to make this statement, when I say that Edgar Rice Burroughs has not only created rich, exciting and interesting characters but a rich, exciting and an interesting fan base. I think we are all aware of the scholarship as well as the attempts at extending the cannon of Burroughs works through what has become known as "Fan Fiction" or pastiches. Fan Fiction is not restricted to the written word and has long been a staple of amateur film making.

For most film fans my age, the Universal Horror Cycle was a seminal experience and led down the road to imitation from Halloween costumes to film making. 8mm was one of the first popular home film formats. Most of us either had parents with the bug or knew someone who had access to one of these movie cameras. Give a young boy a movie camera and he is going to try and emulate the things he sees on the "big" screen. Add to the mix Forrest J. Ackerman's "Famous Monsters of Filmland" and I think we saw the golden age of these fan films.

One of the most prolific of these film makers who was both inspired by and inspired others in the pages of "Famous Monsters" was Don Glut. He made some 40 plus of these amateur films ranging from vampires to super heros. He had to enlist his Mother as the camera operator in the early days because she didn't trust him with such an expensive piece of equipment. This experience led him to a successful career as a children's television scriptwriter, including episodes of Filmation's "Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle". As a side note, it never fails to amuse me that the voice of the Jungle Lord was done by Robert Ridgely who played the executioner, Boris, in Mel Brooks' "Blazing Saddles". Glut is probably best known for his very successful novelization of the "Empire Strikes Back".

I was aware of Robbins Barstow's film "Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge" from my Burroughs film collecting, but did not realize what a ground breaker it was until I picked up Clive Young's "Homemade in

Hollywood Fans Behind the Camera". It may be the first "Fan Film", defined by Young as "an amateur, fictional movie created by fans emulating heroes from pop culture". I'm always leery of firsts. Just when you point one out, you find an earlier example. I think the reason that this film holds this distinction is that not only does it fit the definition, it also was stewarded by Barstow. Many important films have been lost to us because no one cared about them or they became so mired in copyright issues that no one dared to preserve or present them. Therefore one cannot underestimate the value of Barstow's continued interest in his films over the years. One of the interesting things about him is his continued interest in the evolving moving image technologies and his adaptation of his work to them. His advocacy for his works is also important, and resulted in his other major opus "Disneyland Dream" which was included in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress in 2008.



EMANATE AFRICAN EXPLORER PUALIUS RUFUS BARSTINIO

Robbins Barstow got started in the early 30's when he got a Kodascope 16mm projector that he used to show movies to the neighborhood. He moved up a notch when he got hold of an Eastman Camera and began documenting his family exploits. When he was 16, he and the family went on a picnic at a friends and discovered what is now known as Huggins Gorge near Granby, Connecticut. Perfect, a wooded stream, a rocky landscape and a love of Tarzan inspired by both the books and the Weismuller interpretations. Robbins and his brothers John, 14 and Paul, 10 recruited an equal number of girls. They concocted a rousing jungle adventure which revolved around that emanate African explorer Paulus Rufus Barstinio searching for Tarzan (Robbins,) being circumvented and guided by the sinister Mahahatmi Slinkaround, while being rescued by bathing beauties. Looks like a great time was had by all.

While the film is a bit rough around the edges it makes up for it with enthusiasm. What really helps is the voice-over narration provided by Barstow, and polished showing after showing, year after year. He finally recorded and synced it to the film when he transferred the footage to video and got some help from the local PBS affiliate.

Barstow continued making his "home movies" for the rest of his life. The film he is most known for "Disneyland Dream" came about in 1956 when 3M Company sponsored a contest in which you could win a free trip to Disneyland. His son Dan came up with the winning entry, "I like 'Scotch' brand cellophane tape because when some things tear then I can just use it" and the family was off on adventure, complete with matching fringed Davy Crockett jackets.

One of the things I love about this film is Barstow's ability to get everyone from the mailman, to the airline personnel, to the hotel manager to ham it up in order to push his narrative forward. That is the thing that sets his films apart from typical home movies. Rather than a collection of random family shenanigans, he shapes these events into a story. To be sure there are plenty of family shenanigans but he also shoots orchestrated connective pieces and labors over the editing table molding a beginning, middle and end. My sense is that during the editing, the narration begins to take form and then through repeated live performances becomes polished, coalescing into the form that was finally recorded when those technologies became available.

"Disneyland Dream's" other claim to fame is that it is the film debut of comedian/actor Steve Martin. As the film became popular on the web, Steve Martin saw it and recognized that he could be seen handing out brochures in a top hat as the Barstows arrived at

Disneyland. With this realization he wrote a nice letter to Robbins which just added to the films status.

After "Disneyland Dream" Meg Barstow, Robbins wife, thought of a camping trip that would take the family and their camera through 48 states. Footage from these films would end up in a Ken Burn's documentary on the national parks. After retiring from a career in education, the Barstows also got involved in conservation and in particular, saving the whales. He helped to found the Cetacean Society International. In 1974 he made a sequel to "Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge" called "Tarzan and the Lost, Last Whale". This seems to be a more family centric film combining inside jokes and whales, and as far as I can tell has not been brought before the public.

To see the Barstows in action you may go to "archive.org" and do a search on "Robbins Barstow". For the more curious there are two DVD's which feature Robbins talking about his work. "Films from Home Movie Day" contains "Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge" with a commentary track in addition to the narration. "Disneyland Dream" has an interview with Robbins, Meg and Daniel their son (he got to play the Son of Tarzan in the sequel). You may also want to check out 1970's "Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon" which starred Liza Minnelli, Ken Howard, Robert Moore and Paul Barstow (Paulus Rufus Barstinio) as the Schoolmaster. "I Was a Teenage Movie Maker: Don Glut's Amateur Movies", while focusing on Don Glut, documents a good deal of the fan film activity of the late 50s and early 60s.

I had hoped to contact Robbins Barstow for this piece and talk to him a bit about his remarkable life. Sadly in searching for his contact information I found his obituary, Robbins shed his mortal coil in November of 2010.

Anyone out there with some early Tarzan Fan Film credits?



PAULUS RUFUS BARSTINIO CHECKS TARZAN THE UNTAMED