



# ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 57



SUMMER 2025

## THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF ROCKBRIDGE

By Dick Sessoms

Kendal, December 13, 2012

IN THE AUTUMN of 1974, a lonely con artist named Mel Greenberg was sprung from our Lexington jail after serving about three months. A few of you probably have vivid memories of his famous visit. Some of you likely have heard pieces of his saga — and retain some sketchy details of his Civil War movie scam. Others may know little of this tale.

Dick Sessoms, a 1956 graduate of Hampden-Sydney College, is a former president of Historic Lexington Foundation. He was an official of the VMI Athletic Association and Colonial Williamsburg, eventually returning to Lexington to become Washington and Lee's alumni director and, later, its major gifts officer. He has been married for 63 years to Sally Drake, whose Lexington connections are deep and plentiful. Dick is a life member of the Dramatists Guild.

It was boiling hot that June, and dull as dishwater. The lunch bunch at McCrum's Drug Store on Main Street had no inkling that a smooth-talking visitor from California would soon make national news. But *Newsweek* the next month reported:

"There hadn't been much action in Lexington, Virginia, since the Civil War — when Stonewall Jackson lived there and the Yankees shot up the place. So when cigar-chomping,



Roanoke Times, December 26, 1998

52-year-old Mel Greenberg drove into the sleepy, Shenandoah Valley town in a sleek new Matador and said he was a Hollywood advance man for an epic Civil War movie, the townspeople were delighted to see him.”

Well, *of course* we were! And given the impact of our two colleges with their Honor Systems, we're prone to take people at their word.

Moreover, Mel looked the part of a movie producer. Balding, the cigar, paunch, lounge-lizard jewelry, the leisure suit he wore, a certain fidgety glamour — CHARM!

Said Innkeeper Norman Anderson: “He just seemed to have that Hollywood flair.”

Said real estate agent Ruth Anne Herring: “Sometimes you look at people and are immediately on guard, but it wasn't that way with him.”

Maybe it was Mel's car . . . the canary-yellow convertible with the black top. And those California license plates!

He drove that car into town on a Monday and stopped for lunch. We learned later that Mel was a lonely widower, and when he asked a couple of locals about renting land, they said, Sure, there's plenty of land — but why? He later claimed he just said the first thing that came to his mind: He was from Universal International Studios and wanted to make a movie here.

So Ruth Anne Herring began to work with Mel. On Tuesday she showed him Pete Whitlock's farm down near Natural Bridge. “Man, he's got antiques that even our prop man has never seen,” said Mel. It would be perfect for the Civil War film he was going to make. He offered to rent the house and land for \$10,000. *That* got everyone's attention.

Ruth Anne asked: “Civil War? Stonewall Jackson?” Greenberg said yes, and she asked him who was in the film. Thinking fast, so Greenberg claimed later, he named the first

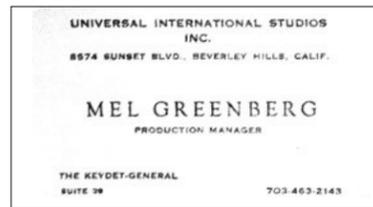


Silvers; Douglas

Hollywood stars that came to mind: Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, Audrey Hepburn, Phil Silvers.

Wow!

Greenberg later claimed that he began to have second thoughts. But something caused him to just go with the currents. “When I got back to my motel, there were 87 calls waiting for me. Suddenly I was someone. I had lost my wife, and I was lonesome, and now I was someone everybody wanted to see. People were doing anything to get themselves in the movies. They wanted to believe me because they thought there was something in it for them.”



Soon he established himself in the Keydet-General Motel, Suite 39. He met Norman Anderson, the Keydet-General innkeeper, and won Norman's support immediately by booking 30 rooms for all the Hollywood stars and crew who'd be arriving in July. And Anderson surely got excited about the amount of money that would be generated by big-spending movie folk.

Greenberg then knuckled down to business. He had a business card printed. Listing the Keydet-General phone number would later be part of Mel's undoing, but of course he didn't know that then.

He also placed a classified ad in the *Lexington News-Gazette*.

He was looking for movie talent for his Civil War movie — dancers, singers, equestrians, and lots of extras for the battles and a banquet scene. (No special talent required: all the actors had to do was eat.)

And there would be a brothel scene.

IT WAS STILL A DAY before the weekly paper's publication, but word leaked out. Hey, everybody! Mel Greenberg is looking for locals to be movie extras! By late afternoon, a crowd collected in front of Suite 39 at the Keydet-General, literally hundreds of people. Everyone wanted to be in Mel's movie.

He hired a local college student to take care of his paperwork and his appointments. He had forms printed up, asking just what you'd expect a movie mogul to ask: What experience? Hat size? Shoe size? Breast size?

Mel said nothing except that he wasn't auditioning anyone until the next day, and he wouldn't see anyone without an appointment. By Wednesday morning, polite bedlam reigned at the Keydet-General.

They all came: doctors, college professors, laborers, secretaries, students, waitresses and many housewives. Black or white, tall, short, fat, thin, old and young — they all had stars in their eyes, crowding into Suite 39, each one eager to make the best impression on the movie-maker. It seems that Mel was conducting interviews at the rate of four appointments every 15 minutes. That's a lot of people.

One report ran in the Buena Vista newspaper: “Nearly every report differed but one thing remained the same, the movie was going to be made in Rockbridge County and most people accepted the fact that those participating would be making large sums of money. One report set the figure of those applying for acting parts at close to 500; other estimates ran as high as 2,000.”

The movie was to be called *Southern Pass*, and shooting would begin in late July. If Mel was nervous, the only sign of it seemed to be his incessant fiddling with the air conditioning controls. He kept to his spiel and a grueling schedule for five days. The local payroll would be more than a million dollars, and Hollywood advance men were on their way to Lexington to deal with technicalities like contracts, a local bank account, etc. etc. etc.

Speaking parts would pay a whopping \$500 for the first word and \$50 for every additional word.

News-Gazette, June 5, 1974

**Universal International Studios**

*Do You Have Any Talent?*

WE WILL BE INTERVIEWING MEN AND WOMEN FOR VARIOUS PARTS IN A FILM TO BE PRODUCED IN THE LEXINGTON AREA SHORTLY.

**Available Parts:**

**Ability to Act - Dance - Ride Horseback - Model, etc.**

CONTACT FOR INTERVIEW

**MEL GREENBERG**  
at Keydet-General Motel — Phone 463-2143.

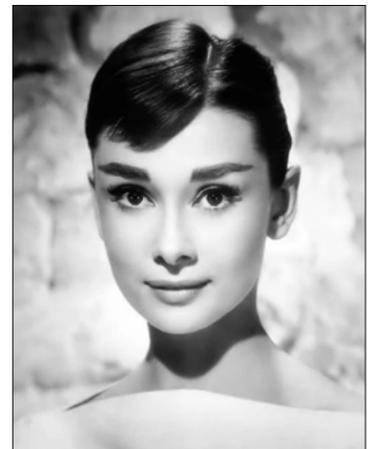
**Thursday, June 6**  
*An equal opportunity employer*

Extras — cavalry officer, bar wench, foot soldier, dancer — were promised the almost unbelievable sum of \$34 an hour, guaranteed. [The minimum wage in 1974 was \$2 an hour.] Above all else, however, was the prospect of mingling with the Hollywood stars from Burt Lancaster to, be still my heart, Audrey Hepburn.

Then there was the piece de resistance: the semi-nude bathtub scene. Mel was never quite clear just how a bathtub scene fit into a Civil War epic, but people said, well, that's just

Hollywood for you. Anyway, it was going to pay \$12,000 to the lucky woman selected for this role. She had to show her backside and a portion of her left breast while a soldier, undoubtedly a lustful Yankee, peered through a tent flap.

There remains some dispute over just which local women bared their assets for Mel. Which preacher's wife, which professor's wife? Mel was interested only in seeing women with busts of 36 inches or more. “You had to be pretty obese for him not to ask you to try out,” one woman told *Newsweek*. Mel's secretary said, “He didn't have to pressure anybody. If you told a girl 12 thousand, well, most of them were pretty willing.”



Hepburn

RUMOR WAS KING from Wednesday to Sunday night that week.

Greenberg himself had a few choice words on the subject. In an interview conducted with him by



The Keydet-General in the mid-1970s

a *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reporter a year later, Mel said: “I couldn’t believe there were so many women in Lexington so lacking in modesty that they’d pose nude for a stranger. There were housewives, schoolteachers, students. . . . women from every walk of life. They’d just come in . . . like it happened every day. You wouldn’t believe it. I told them if they didn’t have a 36-inch bust and a sexy back, there was no reason to apply. But women who didn’t come close to looking like that stood in line for hours just so I would look at them. I guess 250 or 300 applied. I would’ve had to stay in Lexington a month just to interview the nudes alone.” That was surely a huge exaggeration, but there were also plenty of applicants who said Mel was a perfect gentleman throughout these interviews — even gallant, gracious.

Ruth Anne Herring later told *Newsweek*: “The majority of us are conservative people, but everyone thought they would be Queen For A Day.”

**Y**ET DESPITE all the enthusiasm, there were those who had questions. “It’s just too good to be true” was a common reaction. Now, while Mel was enjoying his private shows, a few eyebrows began to be raised around town. His habit of saying such and such detail would be taken care of later began to make some folks suspicious. So did his general shortage of money. Actually, however, he didn’t need much money, because he was being wined and dined every night — and fixed up with about every wealthy widow in Lexington.

It just took one persistent skeptic to burst his bubble. Doug Schwartz, a just-graduated Washington and Lee law school student, had a girlfriend, the story goes, who had some serious acting and theatrical experience — real credentials. But Mel wasn’t interested in casting her.

Schwartz became suspicious and starting making phone calls to California. So did at least one W&L journalism professor.

It turned out that Greenberg was pretty easy to expose.

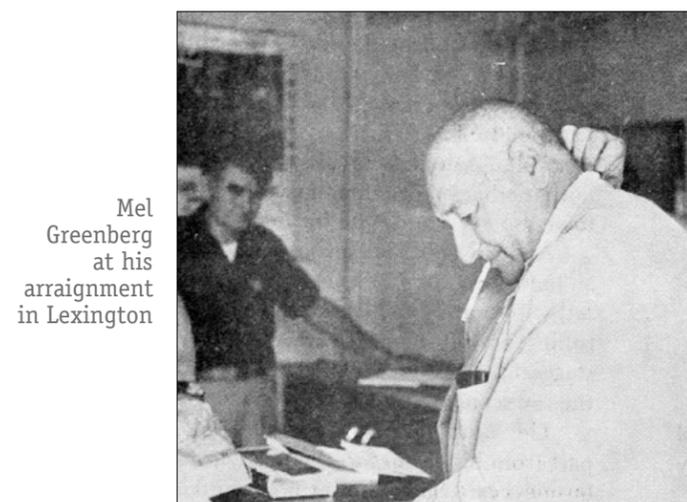
The address Mel gave in Beverly Hills for his studio was a vacant lot; the studio simply didn’t exist. The Screen Actors Guild had never heard of him. Neither had Phil Silvers’ agent, nor Audrey Hepburn’s agent. Nor the agents for Kirk Douglas or Burt Lancaster.

On Saturday morning— this is the fifth day after he arrived in Lexington — Greenberg was called in to see Commonwealth’s Attorney Eric Sisler. At this point Mel hadn’t actually broken any laws, and all Sisler could do was to tell Mel to cool it with the naked interview stuff.

But Mel felt things beginning to close in. On Sunday, he cashed two checks at the Keydet-General for \$180. That night two of his new friends took him to dinner at the Hotel Roanoke. (The wife had been promised a part in the movie, of course.) Mel claimed to be a little short of cash that night and his hosts cashed a \$40 check for him.

By the next morning, Sunday, his sixth day, Mel was gone. He did what con artists do. He fled in the night.

Soon Greenberg checked into a motel in Hillsboro, Ohio, with a funny story. He was making a movie he said, featuring Rock Hudson, and he needed a veritable bevy of local beauties to try out. This time, however, someone was a bit suspicious and called the cops. They in turn



Mel Greenberg at his arraignment in Lexington

Lexington News-Gazette

called the number on Mel’s business card, which happened to be that of the Keydet-General Motel — where, incidentally, he had not paid his bill.

The game was up. Back in Lexington, Mel was charged with two counts of cashing bad checks and one count of defrauding an innkeeper. The last charge was filed even after owner Norm Anderson noted that Greenberg had brought him more business — I think it was five times as much — than the cost of Mel’s six nights at the motel.

Whatever the case, Greenberg was locked up in Ohio, and Lexington settled back down to normal. Most folks were amused we’d all been so gullible. One young sympathizer told *Newsweek*: “We’d never seen a real con man before.” Some admiring students sent a mailgram to Ohio saying: “Hang in there, Mel” and signed it “The Free Mel Greenberg Committee.”

Obviously, Mel had instantly achieved the folk hero status he retains to this day.

After a month or two, Greenberg decided he didn’t like the Hillsboro jail at all, and he stopped fighting extradition. In July he wrote a 19-page open letter to the citizens of Lexington apologizing for his scam. That letter revealed quite a lot about him and some of his motivation for what he did. He said, of course, that he never intended to hurt anyone.

He was finally extradited and brought back here on August 14 — and that’s when the real fun started. T-shirts and bumper stickers immediately insisted: FREE MEL GREENBERG!!!

He was apparently happy to be back in Lexington, and loved our old jail next to the Courthouse on Main Street. He was made a trustee at the jail and even, somehow, got himself in charge of preparing food there. He later claimed he didn’t know anything about cooking but he just knew how to supervise people. And he



loved everyone calling him *Mister Greenberg*. He was allowed to cross the street to visit McCrum’s and even shop at the grocery store up on Main Street.

A few were still mad at him; some had changed summer plans or even quit jobs to be in the movie. He had conned the intelligentsia and the not so, thereby leveling us all. Some people were down right sanctimonious about it. Listen to this example from Mrs. John [Jane] Hughes:

I think there should be published in this paper a list of

those few of us who were not born yesterday and who did not go for an interview at a local motel for a proposed movie.

Other people were a bit more philosophical, as Molly Pellicciaro revealed in her letter to the editor:

Mel, say it ain’t so. Ah, but it is. What did he actually do in Lexington and Rockbridge? An amazing thing. We will all ponder for a good while the extraordinary effect Mel had on our small but diverse society. For the first and only time I can remember in the 8 years I have lived here, there was a unified, powerful sense of community of people working together on the same thing. It doesn’t matter that the same thing meant that 50 or so men were each told that they would be a general and that too many round Rockbridge matrons were told that they would fit around the big banquet table in the movie. What finally remains to matter is that hearts quickened, almost impossible hereabouts in the summer time. And eyes glistened and everyone felt like someone, soldier, field marshal, cook, ballroom coquette. For that short while, everyone mattered and strangers smiled at each other and discussed Mr. G. and his plans for them. It wasn’t all so harmless and joyous. I know, people had honest expectations of working hard and making super good money. Summer plans were broken and rearranged everywhere to fit in Mr. G., and inevitably time was lost to all and

income to some. No one likes being taken, but we weren't taken, we were given; given what? Well for one short span everyone, just everyone, had HOPE. How can you hate the guy?

**E**VENTUALLY, Greenberg's court-appointed attorney, Tommy Spencer, worked out a deal with the prosecutor, Eric Sisler, and Judge Paul Holstein. After paying back his local debts, legal fees and court costs, Mel was released, having served three months in the Lexington jail. He wanted to stay here, of course, and Clyde Mull, who owned the College Inn, offered him a job tending bar. But Judge Holstein suggested that it might be better for Mel to move along.

Twenty-one years later, in an article in the *Rockbridge Advocate*, Doug Harwood traced what happened to Mel after he left town. (I have drawn extensively on that piece.) First, according to Doug, he went to Roanoke, cashing in on his celebrity by becoming the maître d' at the Barn Dinner Theater, where he even organized a special night for his friends in Lexington. But that gig didn't suit him. He next found himself working for a massage parlor called the Blue Dahlia. (Mel brought relevant experience from

having worked in the massage industry in California.) Later, he worked in a jewelry store in Roanoke, getting in a little trouble here and there along the way.

From Roanoke, he went to Tennessee and opened up a restaurant called, what else, Mel's Diner, which burned under mysterious circumstances. Then, leaving several appointments with his probation officer unfilled, he vanished. Harwood wrote: "Mel's name pops up every now and then around here. Every once in a while someone talks about writing a book about him, or a song, or a play. Once in a while there are musings about inviting him back for a celebration but for twenty years or so no one here has heard hide nor hair of him."

**W**ELL, IT HAS NOW [in 2012] been 38 years since anyone here has heard from Mel. He was last traced to a tiny town on the Colorado River named Parachute. That was after he had declared Chapter 7 bankruptcy in 1992. Is he still out there somewhere? He would be 90 years old if so.

Unfortunately for all of his adoring fans in Lexington, Mel left no forwarding address.



## FREE MEL GREENBERG!

Dick Sessoms, author of this account of the life, good times and manifold contributions of Mel Greenberg, also wrote a play, along with the late Lexington novelist and bon vivant Katie Letcher Lyle, called *Free Mel Greenberg!* — a musical, like *Southern Pass*, except it actually exists. *Free Mel Greenberg!* (with songs by Peter Hill, a performer, conductor and educator) was produced on amateur and professional stages in New York and the mid-Atlantic.

In his 2012 telling of the Greenberg saga, Dick wrote: *Free Mel Greenberg!* is really about a small town's reaction to the prospect of the big movie. . . . We paint Mel sympathetically . . . as a lovable con artist . . . because, after all, most folks did fall in love with him, and the theater audience has to do the same. In the pivotal nude interview scene, for example, we make Mel stop the girl before she undresses, and give her the part anyway, because she's such a good singer. The play's objective was not to make a profound statement. . . . but simply to entertain. Though we seldom stray from actual 1974 events, *Free Mel Greenberg!* was not intended to be a docudrama but merely Lexington's testament to the con artist as one of America's great mythic characters. We simply re-imagined this great yarn through the eyes of those whom Mel conned.



Nashville hopeful Rita Shiflett performs for the McCrum's crowd.

You can read the entire script [here](#).

You can get a feel for the play from the titles of the songs and even hear one of them — *Get In Line, Sister*, a show-stopper sung and danced when the women of Lexington jam themselves into the protagonist's audition room at the Keydet-General Motel.

## SONG LIST

### Act One

1. *Nothing Ever Happens* — sung by everyone at McCrum's; VMI cadets; W&L professors
2. *Hello, World!* ("I just got back from the perfect date") — sung by Rita, McCrum's waitress, ex-Miss Rockbridge, aspiring Nashville singer
3. *Quiet Little Place* ("Pleasure doin' business . . . easy doing business / In a quiet little place!") — sung by Mel as his grift comes into focus in his mind
4. *Rumor* ("I'll give them the truth that they want to believe") — Mel
5. *That's a Bit of Heaven* ("I've got a notion for Goshen") — Rita's husband, Bill, who wants to stay put

6. *Why Can't I Give Up On You?* ("I know you've always loved me") — Rita
7. *That's What Makes Me Feel So Fine* ("Blowin' smoke and shootin' the bull . . . Can't believe it's been so easy") — sung and danced by Mel
8. *Get in Line, Sister* — The busiest bodies at first, joined soon by all the women in town
9. *What I Couldn't Say Today* — Harry, the mayor

10. *All of My Life* ("I have wanted to be someone, someday") — Rita and Becky Lou, an older, less sparkly waitress

### Act Two

11. *On The Map* — All
12. *Call It a Day* — Rita's country-music audition number
13. *A Simple Country Girl* — Opal, the tourism bureau chief, who's in love with the mayor but smitten by Mel
14. *Let's Have a Party!* — Everyone
15. *Maybe* ("Can we get rid of all that's come between us?") — Rita and Bill
16. *Finale: Free Mel Greenberg!* ("Let him out! Let him be! No more lock, no more key!") — Everyone, including the judge, as the townspeople hoist Mel triumphantly onto a chair

Listen [here](#) to "Get in Line, Sister" from the New York production of *Free Mel Greenberg!*

Read the lyrics [here](#) to "Get in Line, Sister"