

Bondurant family has mixed emotions about 'Lawless'

Some are happy with portrayal, but unhappy with violence, language

CHARLES BOOTHE Staff Writer Aug 30, 2012



Staff Photo by Charles Boothe: Many descendants of the late Jack and Howard Bondurant attended the premiere showing of "Lawless" at the Eagle Cinema in Rocky Mount Wednesday night. They gathered for a party at the cinema before seeing the film. Sitting at the table in the foreground are, from left, Carol Bondurant (wife of G.T. Bondurant), Jack Bondurant's daughters, Emmie Lee Gagni and Betty Lou Mitchell, Mitchell's husband Howard, and Jack Bondurant's son, G.T. Bondurant.

Dozens of members of the Bondurant family attended the first showing of the movie "Lawless" at Eagle Cinema in Rocky Mount Wednesday night, and many walked away with mixed emotions regarding the "rough" content.

G.T. Bondurant of Horsepasture in Henry County was torn in his reaction to the film.

He is the youngest son of the late Jack Bondurant, one of three Franklin County moonshine-making brothers portrayed in the film, which is based on his nephew Matt Bondurant's book "The Wettest County in the World."

In the film, set in 1931 during Prohibition when moonshine was shipped out of the county to large cities, the Bondurant brothers stand up to a violent special agent from Chicago who demands a large take of their moonshine profits.

Although G.T. Bondurant said overall the movie was "pretty good," some of the violence could have been cut back.

"It was kind of rough," he said. "I think they could have taken out some of the violence."

Bondurant said the acting was good and he liked the characters.

"I was born in 1939, and I just didn't remember my dad (who is played by Shia LaBeouf) being that rough," he said. "He was a good dad. Really, I didn't know much about what he was doing at that time (1931, the timeframe of the movie). He didn't bring it home with him."

Bondurant said older members of the family may not be used to seeing modern movies that are often full of violence and foul language.

"I think some of the younger ones in the group liked it a little more than the older ones," he said. "But it is what it is. I hope it does good. I hope people enjoy it. But it would have been just as good or better if it hadn't been so bloody."

Bondurant's sister Betty Lou Mitchell of Snow Creek said she had a difficult time dealing with the violence and language.

"The language in it was beyond what we had or have in the family," she said. "I didn't like the way they (the brothers) were portrayed at all. It made me feel bad."

Mitchell was also puzzled why the shootings were so embellished.

"Why couldn't they have made it like it really was?" she asked. "The law officer in Franklin County shot my dad and Forrest. My dad was shot in the arm, but we didn't know that until after I was married. That was never talked about. We didn't know what he did and he didn't talk about it."

Mitchell said all the violence and language "is not us."

"We may be behind (the times) but there's nothing wrong with being old-fashioned," she added.

Mitchell's son Ronnie of Callaway, the grandson of Jack Bondurant, said he understood why some of the older family members were upset with the violence, language and nudity.

"That's the first time many of them have been to a movie in a lot of years," he said, adding that he sees a lot of movies and understands that film producers want to sell tickets so they make it stand out with violence.

Mitchell said he enjoyed the movie, though.

"Some of it may have been a bit farfetched," he said, "but from what I've heard, a lot of it was true, too."

Mitchell said he was pleased with how the movie portrays the Bondurant brothers as independent men who stood up to corruption.

"I was kind of proud of that aspect of it," he said. "I will have to say that my granddaddy, Jack, was (portrayed as) the least violent of the brothers."

Mitchell also sees the benefits of the publicity the movie generates.

"It's good for Franklin County," he said. "It puts us on the map a little."

Robin Wunderlich is a friend of the Bondurant and Mitchell families and she also has an aunt who married a direct descendant of Jack Bondurant. She said she "really enjoyed the movie."

"I thought it was a history lesson as well," she said. "You learn about Prohibition in school but seeing it (the effects) like that, locally, brought out the significance of it."

Wunderlich said the violence was extreme.

"A lot of people were surprised at the brutality," she said. "It was disturbing, and I wonder how much actually happened and how much was embellished to create interest."

However, she said much of it was probably authentic and the portrayals were realistic.

Wunderlich was particularly impressed with Tom Hardy's portrayal of Forrest Bondurant.

"He was a simple country man, but it was incredible how much wisdom came from him," she said.

She was also pleased with the quality of the production.

"They did a very good job of depicting that era with the sets and costumes," she said.

Wunderlich watched the movie with the Bondurant family in a packed, sold-out theater.

"You could tell the audience was really involved in the movie," she said. "They really liked it. It got good reviews from our family, definitely."

Several of Howard Bondurant's family members also attended the movie's premiere.

Betty Ann Campbell of Penhook, the daughter of Howard Bondurant (played by Jason Clarke in the film), agreed with her cousin Betty Lou Mitchell that the violence and language was just too much.

"Being a family member, and you know that it wasn't like that at all, I just think it wasn't that violent," she said. "It was fiction about your own people. I would not go see it again."

Campbell said she never heard her father talk about what he did during his earlier years.

"In a way, I guess they were bootleggers and they did what they had to do," she said. "But I didn't ever hear my daddy talk about bootlegging or mention that he made liquor. It's been blown out of proportion."

Campbell said she understands that many may enjoy the movie, but it makes a difference when it is based on your own family.

"I don't like to hear it (foul language)," she said. "It was so rough and so ugly. It just makes a difference when it's your own family."

"My daddy had his faults, but when it came down to the end, he was a Christian man, and that was all that really mattered."



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