

'Wettest County in the World'

Star of moonshining movie makes visit to learn dialect

MORRIS STEPHENSON Staff Writer Feb 17, 2011



Staff Photo by Morris Stephenson: Actor Jason Clarke, fourth from left, takes a break from studying the Franklin County dialect at the home of Andrew Mitchell in Snow Creek. Assisting Clarke are, from left, Talmadge Mitchell, Howard Mitchell, Andrew Mitchell, Clarke, David Mitchell, Ronnie Mitchell, Steve Mitchell and G.T. Bondurant, seated right. Clarke will portray Howard Bondurant, one of the three Bondurant brothers, in the upcoming movie *Wettest County in the World*.

Jason Clarke, co-star of Fox Television's new police drama "Chicago Code," spent several days in Franklin County this week studying the dialect of Snow Creek residents to prepare for his role in the upcoming movie "Wettest County in the World."

Clarke, a 32-year-old native of Australia, will play the role of Howard Bondurant in the movie, based on Matt Bondurant's novel about Franklin County.

Production on the movie begins Feb. 28 in Georgia.

The writer contacted Whitney Mitchell Eanes, daughter David and Lynn Mitchell of Snow Creek, to set up a meeting with Clarke, who wanted to visit the county to study the native dialect.

Eanes then contacted Andrew Mitchell, and Bondurant called Mitchell on Friday, Feb. 11.

Clarke drove from Chicago to Franklin County, where he arrived Sunday around noon. The actor spent most of Sunday afternoon with Mitchell and his friends.

Monday afternoon, Clarke drove to Andrew Mitchell's home on Sutton Hollow Road, where the recording session and learning process began for Clarke.

The actor met with Talmadge Mitchell, the 92-year-old monarch of the Mitchell clan, along with Howard, David, Ronnie, Steve and Andrew Mitchell, and G.T. Bondurant and his wife, Carolyn.

Clarke concentrated on recording individual members of the Mitchell family as they read words and sentences from a book Clarke brought with him. Clarke said he would take the recordings and listen to them again and again until the dialect became natural to him.

Clarke also said he was letting his hair and beard grow until the cast and crew gathers in Georgia for the first time at the end of the month.

"I don't know what they're looking for (in the way of personal appearance), but I'll find out when we get there," he said.

Clarke also spent a lot of time talking to the Mitchells and Bondurant about the personalities of the three Bondurant brothers and especially his character, Howard.

The Sony film is based on the author's fictional novel and depicts Franklin County in the late 1920s and early 1930s, prior to the Great Moonshine Conspiracy Trial of 1935.

The author spent summers with his grandfather in the Snow Creek area when he was growing up.

While the novel is listed as fiction, the book is based on the lives of his grandfather and two great-uncles who made moonshine while fighting the "establishment" that offered local protection by law enforcement officers if "protection money" was paid.

For those who cooperated, their moonshine operations were safe, and they were guaranteed their loads of white lightning would not be touched inside the county.

In the novel, brothers Howard, Forrest and Jack Bondurant refused to cooperate. Thus, the brothers ended up paying the consequences with the destruction of their stills and whiskey.

Clarke said the movie will be shot at a location similar to Franklin County, about 45 miles from Atlanta.

"I'm not exactly sure just where the film will be made... maybe Peachtree or something like that," he said Monday.

The movie will be directed by John Hillcoat, who also directed "The Proposition" and "The Road." Shia LaBeouf is cast as Jack Bondurant, and Tom Hardy will portray Forrest.

During Clarke's visit, he spoke about the new television series "Chicago Code." He co-stars in the series with Jennifer Beals, who has the role of Chicago's first female police superintendent. Clarke plays the role of Polish homicide detective Jarek Wysocki.

During a conversation Monday evening at the Comfort Inn in Rocky Mount, Clarke said he had been an actor for about 15 years.

"I started out to be a lawyer, but I wasn't doing very well. So I decided to study to become an actor," he said with a smile.

In addition to "Chicago Code," Clarke is credited with roles in the third season of "The Brotherhood" and in the Johnny Depp film, "Public Enemies."

But the humble actor emphasized that his visit to Franklin County "isn't about me," adding how important it was for him to be able to become acquainted with the Mitchells and Bondurants.

He also wanted to learn from them about the brothers and this period of time in Franklin County.

Monday night, he was still studying. Clarke even had Andrew Mitchell read some of Howard Bondurant's lines from the movie script so he could record it.

"I could tell he (Clarke) was quickly picking up on the way we talk," Andrew Mitchell said Tuesday. "He was getting it Monday evening, as we were just sitting around talking. He didn't sound anything like he did when he first got here."

"Jason really doesn't know anything yet about the movie or the schedule. He seems to believe it will take about six weeks to film the movie, but right now, he just doesn't know until he gets down there and starts going," Mitchell said.

"I know one thing. We have all enjoyed his visit and we're anxious to see the movie when it comes out," he added.

