

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

Ava Gardner

From Grabtown to Tinseltown

By Alyssa Bailey

New York City, 1938: Movie star Henry Fonda sits with a date at a club. They chat as a well-dressed girl approaches. She can't be older than 16 with her fresh face, striking green eyes and dark curls.

She's timid and star-struck. When she sees Fonda, she drops her purse. He helps her pick it up and gives her an autograph. His date tells the girl: "You should go to Hollywood."

She does. Eight years later, she stars in "The Whistle Stop," her first lead role. She will appear in more than 60 films and TV shows, acting alongside Gregory Peck, Grace Kelly and Clark Gable. With three marriages to celebrities, she will captivate audiences with torrid affairs on and off screen.

But that night she is Ava Gardner, the flustered farm girl from North Carolina, getting her first taste of the movie business.

Humble beginnings

Gardner was born in Grabtown, N.C., a farming community near Smithfield, on Dec. 24, 1922. The youngest of seven children, she helped her family in the tobacco fields. The family struggled in the Great Depression and moved to Newport News, Va., after losing their Grabtown property.

Though Gardner and her family were in Virginia, some of her grown siblings went north. Sister Beatrice "Bappie" Gardner moved to New York City and married photographer Larry Tarr. Tarr saw potential in Gardner during her summer visits. He hung her picture in his Fifth Avenue store window.

It caught the eye of a Loews Theaters legal clerk, who, Gardner wrote, boasted of his MGM studio connection to win girls. But Tarr took his suggestion to send Gardner's photos.

MGM was interested, so Gardner, then at Atlantic Christian College in Wilson, N.C., did a screen test for the studio and was offered a seven-year contract. She would make \$50 a week.

"Movies may not have been a dream of mine," she wrote, "but when I compared the idea of a secretarial job ... with the chance of going to Hollywood and breathing the same air as Clark Gable ... well, the choice was not hard to make."

Rising star

In Hollywood, Gardner worked as an extra. She caught the eye of star Mickey Rooney, who called her for weeks until she went out with him.

The pair wed quietly in January 1942. Gardner characterized their union as a marriage of two youths unaware of what marriage meant. Rooney, who continued living like a bachelor, led Gardner to seek a divorce 17 months later. The day the divorce came "was only made sadder," Gardner wrote, when her mother died of uterine cancer that morning.

Gardner moved up on the MGM lot, playing small roles in movies such as "Maisie Goes to Reno." She auditioned for bigger parts, happy "they even thought of me," she wrote to a friend.

In 1946, Gardner made her star turn as Kitty Collins in Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." But her luck in films came with another luckless marriage. She divorced her second husband, bandleader Artie Shaw, that same year. They had married one year before.

The big time

Gardner's dream of acting alongside Gable came in 1947's "The Hucksters."

Gardner's love life garnered her greater fame when she met singer Frank Sinatra. They married in 1951, 72 hours after Sinatra received a divorce from his wife Nancy.

Gardner's acting career continued to blossom. In 1953, she won a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for her role alongside Kelly and Gable in "Mogambo."

The later years

Gardner's marriage to Sinatra was tumultuous. He was jealous that her



Courtesy of the Ava Gardner Museum

career progressed while his sank. They divorced in 1957, but Gardner's hold on Sinatra lasted until his death. Sister Bappie said he sent Gardner a huge bouquet of flowers on her birthday every year, according to Doris Cannon's biography, "Grabtown Girl."

Gardner was ready to leave Hollywood after the divorce. She moved to Spain for 10 years and then London. Though decades of heavy drinking and smoking weakened her health, Gardner continued to make films in the 1970s and small TV roles in the 1980s.

In 1986, Gardner suffered two strokes that left her paralyzed. "Sometimes, I think it would be better to be born sick and miserable than to know a healthy, good life and have it snatched away in two weeks," she wrote to a friend in a letter reprinted by Cannon.

Four years later, on Jan. 25, 1990, Gardner died of pneumonia. She was 67. She was buried in Sunset Memorial Park in Smithfield, where the Ava Gardner museum opened in 1996.

In Gardner's funeral program, Cannon would compare the actress' career with her performance at age 6 in the first-grade operetta at Brogden School. "The curtains have closed," Cannon wrote, "but the applause will continue through the years."

Gardner, Ava. Ava: My Story.

Cannon, Doris. Grabtown Girl: Gardner's North Carolina Childhood and her Enduring Ties to Home.

Biography: www.tcm.com/index.jsp and

Star of the Month profile: www.tcm.com/thismonth/article/?cid=345152

Ava Gardner Museum, <http://avagardner.org>

Ava Gardner's funeral program, NC Collection, UNC-CH

Profile written by a student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-CH. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, www.ncpress.com.