

This Day in History... February 1, 1901

Birth of Clark Gable

William Clark Gable was born on February 1, 1901, in Cadiz, Ohio.

Growing up, Gable played piano and brass instruments and was the only boy in the men's town band. As a teenager, he was tall and shy, but had a loud voice. He also enjoyed Shakespeare, particularly sonnets, but would only recite them in the company of close friends.

Gable's father eventually moved the family to a farm in Ravenna, Ohio. Though his father wanted him to work on the farm, Gable left to work in a tire factory in Akron. Then when he was 17, Gable saw a production of *The Bird of Paradise* and realized he wanted to be an actor. Though he managed to find work with several small theater companies, he still had to take a variety of other jobs to make his way to Hollywood. These jobs included a stint as a horse manager, a necktie salesman, and a logger.

Along the way, Gable met Laura Hope Crews in Portland. A stage and film actress, she encouraged

Gable to pursue his acting dreams. (20 years later they met again on the set of *Gone with the Wind* when she played Aunt Pittypat.) In the meantime, Gable met Josephine Dillon, a theater manager, who became his acting coach (and later first wife). Dillon helped to improve his posture, physique, and speech habits, preparing him for Hollywood. She also gave him the money he needed to get to Hollywood.

Upon arriving in Hollywood, Gable first found work as an extra. He appeared in this capacity in 13 films including *The Merry Widow*, *The Plastic Age*, *Forbidden Paradise*, and a series of two-reel comedies called *The Pacemakers*. Gable also appeared in *The Johnstown Flood*. Interestingly, his future wife Carole Lombard was also an extra in this film, though not in the same scene.

The lack of starring roles led Gable to return to the stage, where he befriended Lionel Barrymore. He joined an acting company in Houston, Texas, which provided him with great experience. Gable then went to New York City, where he was praised for his role in *Machinal*, before returning to Los Angeles. There he put on an impressive performance in *The Last Mile* that earned him a contract with MGM.

Gable's first role in a sound film was as a villain in *The Painted Desert*. Many of his parts during this period were in supporting roles, and often as the villain. Gable's gritty performance in *A Free Soul* resonated with audiences. One review claimed, "A star in the making has been made, one that, to our reckoning, will outdraw every other star... Never have we seen audiences work themselves into such enthusiasm as when Clark Gable walks on the screen." That was his last supporting role – for the rest of his career, Gable was a leading man.

In the coming years, Gable starred with some of the day's top leading ladies. Among them was Joan Crawford, whom he considered his favorite actress to work with. He also appeared in eight films with Greta Garbo, seven with Myrna Loy, six with Jean Harlow, four with Lana Turner, and three with Norma Shearer and Ava Gardner. In particular, Gable's performance with Harlow in *Red Dust* made him MGM's top male star.

In 1934, Gable was lent out to Columbia Studios to appear in *It Happened One Night*. Though he wasn't the first choice, he worked well with director Frank Capra and won the Academy Award for Best Actor. He then returned to MGM and was nominated for an Academy Award for his role in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Between 1936 and 1940, Gable appeared in three films with Spencer Tracy. Each film was a box office hit, and the pairing was only split after Tracy demanded top billing.

Gable's best-known performance came in 1939's *Gone with the Wind*. He wasn't the first choice for the role of Rhett Butler but Gary Cooper turned it down. Gable was initially hesitant to take the role, since he worried he'd disappoint all the people that wanted Cooper. But he eventually took the part, which earned him a nomination for Best Actor. He later claimed that whenever his popularity waned, there would be a rerelease of *Gone with the Wind* that helped him maintain his leading actor status.

In 1942 Gable, who was beyond the age of the draft, sent a telegram to President Franklin Roosevelt requesting a combat assignment. Despite the president's refusal, he enlisted with the Army Air Forces. After completing training, his first assignment was to make a recruiting film for the Eighth Air Force. Then in 1943 he went to England where he flew five official combat missions, earning the Air Medal and Distinguished Flying Cross.

After his service, Gable returned home and rested before returning to acting. Over the next few years he appeared in a number of films including *Adventure*, *The Hucksters*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Mogambo*. Unhappy with the quality of these films, Gable left MGM to work independently. He then formed a production company, though he only made one film – *The King and Four Queens*. Gable found producing and acting was detrimental to his health, so he returned to just acting. He appeared in a number of movies in the late 50s including *Band of Angels*, *Teacher's Pet*, *Run Silent, Run Deep*, *But Not for Me*, and *It Started in Naples*. Gable's last film was *The Misfits*, which was also Marilyn Monroe's last completed film. Many agreed this was one of his finest performances.

Gable suffered a heart attack in early 1960, some suspect because of the physical demands of his role in *The Misfits*, and died on November 16, 1960.



Gone with the Wind stamp from the 1990 Classic Films Set



From the 1930s Celebrate the Century Sheet



Gable threatened to boycott the Gone with the Wind premiere when McDaniel was asked no to attend. But she told him to go anyway.



According to the men he served with, Gable went on far more flights than the official count – close to two dozen. He was also a threat to Hitler, who ordered a reward for his capture.



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