

This Day in History... May 16, 1905

Happy Birthday Henry Fonda

Henry Jaynes Fonda was born on May 16, 1905, in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Fonda's ancestors had moved from Genoa, Italy, to the Netherlands before becoming some of the first Dutch settlers in upstate New York (known as New Netherland at the time). They also established the town of Fonda, New York, which still bears their name today. These ancestors later moved to Nebraska in the late 1800s.

Fonda was a shy child, but had a talent for skating, swimming, and running. He worked part-time at his father's print plant and considered working as a journalist. Fonda was also a boy scout and enjoyed drawing. After high school he studied journalism at the University of Minnesota, but didn't graduate.

Fonda first got into acting when he was 20 years old. His mother's friend, Dodie Brando (mother of Marlon Brando), suggested he try out for a part in the Omaha Community Playhouse production of *You and I*. He got the part and was quickly enamored with the entire process, learning about every aspect of the theater. In 1928 he quit his job to move east in hopes of finding work as an actor.



Fonda was the 11th honoree in the Legends of Hollywood Series.

Fonda moved to Massachusetts where he found a small role and then joined the University Players. He then moved to New York City where he befriended and lived with James Stewart. During this time Fonda appeared in several Broadway productions.

Fonda's big break came in 1935 when he was offered a part in *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, reprising his role from the Broadway play that had gained him significant attention. Soon Stewart moved out to Hollywood to join him and they lived next door to Greta Garbo. That same year, Fonda appeared in *I Dream Too Much* with Lily Pons. *The New York Times* called him "the most likable of the new crop of romantic juveniles." Fonda then appeared in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the first Technicolor movie to be filmed outdoors.



From the 1997 Opera Singers issue

In the coming years, Fonda worked with Hollywood's elite, including Bette Davis and John Ford. He had several big hits, including *You Only Live Once*, *Jezebel*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Jesse James*, and *Drums Along the Mohawk*. Then in 1940, he appeared in *The Grapes of Wrath* for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. Many consider this to be the best performance of his career.

Fonda took a break from acting during World War II, claiming, "I don't want to be in a fake war in a studio." He enlisted in the Navy and served for three years, earning a Bronze Star for his service. After returning home, Fonda played Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*, worked with Joan Crawford in *Daisy Kenyon*, and Ford again in *The Fugitive*. He also appeared in *Fort Apache* with John Wayne and Shirley Temple.



In their later years, Stewart and Fonda painted model airplanes together.

After that, Fonda returned to Broadway to play the title role in *Mister Roberts*, wearing his own officer's cap. He earned a Tony Award for the performance and spent the next several years in successful stage productions. After eight years away from Hollywood, he reprised his role in *Mister Roberts* for the screen. Fonda continued to work in movies, appearing in *War and Peace*, *The Wrong Man*, and *12 Angry Men*, for which he won a BAFTA Best Actor award.

Most of Fonda's roles throughout the 1960s were in war and western films such as *The Longest Day*, *How the West Was Won*, *Battle of Bulge*, and *Once Upon a Time in the West*. In the 70s Fonda continued to work on stage and the big and small screens. He starred in his own TV series, *The Smith Family*, was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame, and received Lifetime Achievement Awards from The Golden Globes and Academy Awards. In 1981 he starred in *On Golden Pond* opposite Katharine Hepburn and his daughter Jane. The film was an unexpected blockbuster and Fonda earned his only Oscar, for Best Actor, as well as a Golden Globe. He was the oldest Best Actor Oscar winner at that time, a record he held until 2021.



Hepburn was the 16th honoree in the Legends of Hollywood Series.

Henry Fonda died the following year, on August 12, 1982. President Ronald Reagan, a former actor, called Fonda "a true professional dedicated to excellence in his craft. He graced the screen with a sincerity and accuracy which made him a legend."

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