

## This Day in History... July 17, 1899

### Birth of James Cagney

James Francis Cagney was born on July 17, 1899, in New York City, New York.

Cagney grew up in New York City's rough Lower East Side. He held a variety of different jobs in his youth to help the family pay bills, but he also found time for extra-curricular outlets. He learned to tap dance and how to box. Cagney once considered a professional boxing career, but his father had been an amateur fighter and his mother wouldn't allow it.

Cagney first got into acting while working as a scenery assistant for a local theatre where his brother acted. Once, when his brother was too ill to go on stage, James stood in for him and delivered a perfect performance. After that, he started auditioning for plays and enjoyed the experience.

Cagney toured the vaudeville circuit in the 1920s and appeared on Broadway. Things were not easy at first, and Cagney's initial attempt to break into the movies was a flop. It wasn't until he performed in the play *Penny Arcade* that he got a chance at the silver screen.

After seeing Cagney perform, the popular singer and actor Al Jolson purchased the rights to the play. He sold them to Warner Brothers on the condition that both Cagney and his co-star Joan Blondell be cast in the same roles for the film version. Cagney's three-week contract with Warner Brothers soon extended to seven years. His successful movie career was underway.

With his unique blend of conceit and charm, Cagney became Hollywood's greatest "tough guy." In 1931, he earned fame as a wisecracking criminal in *The Public Enemy*. The scene in which Cagney shoved a grapefruit into the face of his co-star Mae Clark was one of the film's most memorable moments.

In *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), Cagney played an arrogant gangster who was on death row for murder. He portrayed sneering, defiant criminals in many other movies including *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), and *White Heat* (1949). Cagney once remarked, "The fact that I am supposed to be a tough guy in real life doesn't bother me in the least. It's amusing."

His portrayal of entertainer George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* earned Cagney an Academy Award in 1942. The film allowed him to show off his spectacular dancing abilities. In 1974, Cagney was awarded the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award, an event that was reportedly attended by the most Hollywood stars in history. After 20 years in retirement, Cagney returned to screen for a small role in *Ragtime* in 1981. He made his final appearance three years later on the TV movie *Terrible Joe Moran*. That same year he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

After years of declining health, Cagney died in his New York home on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1986. Close friend President Ronald Reagan delivered the eulogy at his funeral.



James Cagney was the fifth honoree in the Legends of Hollywood Series.



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