

Clark Gable, in Pictures

Candid Images of the Actor's Life

CHRYSTOPHER J. SPICER



Clark Gable, in Pictures

ALSO BY CHRYSTOPHER J. SPICER

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BY MARTHA CRAWFORD CANTARINI
AND CHRYSTOPHER J. SPICER

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To my late friends,
Barry "Baz" Flanagan
with whom I went to the movies,
and
Cammie King (Bonnie Blue Butler) Conlon
who remembered the movies with me



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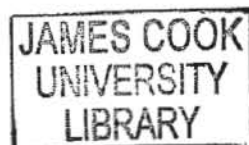
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On the front cover: Clark looks happy and relaxed
with both camera and prize, California, 1934
(courtesy Carole Sampeck/Carole Lombard Archive)

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Many of these photographs did not come to this collection as 8 × 10 black-and-white glossies, sharply focused and clearly lit. Some were of considerable age and were probably taken with a Box Brownie or vest-pocket Kodak, and they looked it. So, I would first like to express my profound gratitude to my talented and very patient wife, Marci, who spent many hours digitally restoring and enhancing many of these photographs in order for them to be considered for publication.

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If one looks too long into the camera,
The camera will look at you.



Preface

This book has taken me on a journey, as many books do. What started out to be a compilation of photographs from my collection became a journey to photographs in other people's albums and the stories surrounding them. Every life is a story and during the course of his life Clark Gable appeared in so many photographed stories that eventually his life became one. Beneath the surface, though, there were often two versions of that story: the officially photographed studio version and the candid everyday one that appears in many of the photographs in this book. However, on many occasions those two versions would mingle because both private and public photographers would be present.

Because of his popularity, Clark's life in and out of the studio was one of the most photographed of the time. Yet after he had gone, no central archive of documents or photographs about this actor's life survived to ensure that the memory of this man whose acting life had begun on stage during the 1920s, and whose significant movie career spanned over 65 films from the silent era until just before his death, was maintained for the future. Consequently, this project to compile a personal photographic record of him had to cast nets far indeed upon the waters of memory, and so these photographs have come from a wide variety of sources and places, often through the kindness of strangers. Many have never been previously published.

While writing my previous biography (*Clark Gable: Biography, Filmography, Bibliography*, McFarland, 2002), I became interested in the person behind the studio star portraits. I began to look for him through the smaller, more casual lens because it is there within these candid "snapshots" taken with box Brownies and Kodak vest pocket cameras where for me the human being is revealed. There is the friendly, mannered, elegantly sociable yet down-home Clark who enjoyed mingling with people, young and old, from all walks of life, as well as the enthralling raconteur who enjoyed nothing more than sitting down with a small circle of friends to swap a few stories, whether around a campfire or a table at Ciro's. Here in these images we can see that infrequently revealed, off-stage Clark: the man at peace canoeing on a lake or proudly holding a fish he's caught, happily sitting behind the wheel of a new car or enjoying himself at the Indianapolis 500. In that sense, then, I have attempted to follow a Clark Gable tradition here by telling some stories.

However, we are not only revealed by our physical selves but also by our possessions and our environment, those inanimate objects with which we surround ourselves that are animated by us. Our houses, cars, furniture, books, occupation and recreation all tell their own stories

about us to the observer, so there are some photographs here about Clark in which he is nowhere to be seen. One of his great passions, for example, was unique, expensive and fast cars. He didn't collect them as investments to be stored; they were there to be driven fast, were meticulously cared for by him, were changed often and were frequently customized to his personal taste. Actually, the more you think about that, there is much in Clark's life that can be summed up by his attitude to cars.

He was a man who wore his professional status as the "King of Hollywood" confidently, like one of his tailored outfits. He was the consummate Hollywood career movie star, whose talent was recognized only four years after his major film career had begun with a Best Actor Academy Award for his performance in *It Happened One Night* (1934). He became one of the MGM studio's most marketable male stars, culminating in his 1939 role as Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*: the ultimate romantic hero who woos the heroine, but who chooses not to take up the offer when he finally wins her. During his career he worked with such famous female actors as Claudette Colbert, Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, Vivien Leigh, Sophia Loren, Myrna Loy, Marilyn Monroe, Norma Shearer, Gene Tierney, and Lana Turner, as well as male actors such as Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Burt Lancaster, and Spencer Tracy. His range of roles varied from the villainous kidnapping chauffeur in *Night Nurse* to the rugged and steamy romance of *Red Dust*, from the high-seas heroism of *Mutiny on the Bounty* to singing and dancing in *Idiot's Delight*, from making difficult decisions about fighting a war in *Command Decision* to being a cowboy roping the last mustangs and coping with age in *The Misfits*.

Yet Clark was a private person who always appreciated being able to shut his front door and leave the studio outside. As many a famous person has realized, celebrity status often means conflict between the public and the private persona. One must stay in the public eye or be forgotten, at which point you are no longer a celebrity. But the public eye is an unremitting gaze; it's the Eye of the Basilisk that sees all, to which a celebrity is completely exposed. Privacy by its very nature hints at secrets, hints that the public is being denied that which it most seeks to know, and so the celebrity is caught on the horns of a dilemma. If the fickle public is denied access to what they want to know for too long, they will switch their attention to someone else, and the celebrity who was somebody becomes nobody. Give the public too much information, though, and your privacy is lost at the risk of the public becoming surfeited with your life and still moving on to someone else. You may have gained fame but at the cost of living in a fishbowl. So, remaining a celebrity becomes a Faustian balancing act at which only the most highly trained performers are truly successful. There is no room for mistakes on this tightrope, under which there is no net.

Consequently, Clark developed some excellent rope-walking skills while of course being carefully managed by his studio's public relations people. Nevertheless, he encountered more than a few predators during his career. Women quite literally couldn't keep their hands off him. He had a female fan following, especially during the thirties, who in the extremities of its desire for physical contact with him certainly equaled anything that fans of later rock stars would exhibit. His shirts were torn from his back, his ties from around his neck, his belts from his pants and his shoes from his feet. On at least one occasion, his plane could not take off because women were sitting on the wings; on another, his car was over turned from the weight of women trying to climb in the windows. His hotel rooms had to be inspected before he entered them so that women could be removed from the wardrobes and from under the bed. His used sheets and towels would frequently be quietly sold to demanding female fans — unwashed of course. His fans weren't all women, though; his lack of an undershirt in *It Hap-*

pened One Night reputedly caused a slump in the male underwear industry, and men everywhere copied the Gable moustache and the Gable hat. His Air Force missions prompted a rise in enlistment. He was even popular with criminals and the disenchanted: gangster John Dillinger was famously gunned down by the FBI after emerging from a showing of Gable's *Manhattan Melodrama*, and the FBI kept a covert file of letters addressed to Clark asking for money or threatening blackmail or kidnapping of both him and, later, his wife Carole Lombard. However, in perhaps the ultimate honor, his name became part of common vocabulary: an often-heard question directed at many a would-be suitor or well-dressed man was, "Who do you think you are? Clark Gable!"

Yet at the same time, there was that private human being behind the public star image. While for most of his career one of the highest-paid male actors in Hollywood, for example, Clark was a pragmatic realist who never forgot that fickle public opinion could put him right back on those humble small-town streets from where he had come. He was not a man who liked to display wealth ostentatiously, and he lived in the same relatively plain ranch house for a third of his life. As a star, he maintained a house staff of cook, gardener, valet and personal assistant, yet he was a man grounded in reality who didn't mind getting his own hands dirty, either within the engine of his latest fast car or in the dirt and around the stables of his Encino ranch. He loved being himself with his dogs, horses, guns, cars, small circle of good friends and family. Although his life for many years centered around his work, one of his major career aims was to reach the kind of star status where he could have a clause written into his contract that allowed him to go home at six at night.

While some chronology is inevitable in any biographical work, I've organized these photographs into sections that reflect major aspects of Clark's life in order to shift focus away from a date series to the random moments that reveal the man. These have been numbered to make that important association between the image and the word easier. After all, each of these photographs is a story in itself of a man who was both public and private, both a star and the person Clark Gable.

Chrystopher J. Spicer • Cairns, Australia