

Reflections from the Past

The Hermitage Hotel – Historical Quarterly

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Silver Screen Notables

The year was 1918 and Charlie Chaplin walked up to the reception desk of the Hermitage Hotel with a custard pie in his hand. The prop had become famous in some of the slapstick comedy films of recent years. A fan handed him the pie during his motorcade from the train station to the Hermitage Hotel where he stayed while making a Ryman visit to sell war bonds. Amidst speeches, patriotic songs and cheers, over \$350,000 was raised. Chaplin pleased the crowd with his famous walk and a few other antics, in addition to his own patriotic message.



more than a thousand people altogether. Her mystique was heightened before her arrival with a news report that played up to her grandiose image, mentioning that her entourage

Gloria Swanson, star of the “Sunset Boulevard” in 1950, and many grand silent films of the Twenties, visited the Hermitage Hotel in 1953. Ms. Swanson by then had retired from the silver screen and was now promoting a line of fashionable women’s wear. Three fashion shows brought in included a French maid and publicist, particular tastes in foods, and a stated preference that any fans wishing to give her a bouquet should please choose pink or red carnations. At time of check-in she befriended star-struck hotel employee, Lannie Neal, and invited him to dinner, much to his surprise.



Vivien Leigh, who achieved fame as Scarlett O’Hara in “Gone with the Wind” had a limited layover at the Hermitage Hotel with her husband Lawrence Olivier in 1940. They were grounded by storms and rough flying conditions. Less than four months into their marriage, they enjoyed a room service dinner in their suite during their stay.



Likewise, Spencer Tracy came to Nashville in 1941 en route to Hollywood during filming of “The Yearling” in Florida. The film production would be interrupted by the war, and was later completed and released in 1946 with Gregory Peck taking the actor’s role. Tracy visited again with Katherine Hepburn who was here for a personal appearance at a movie premier at the Loews Theater.



Fess Parker, Hollywood’s version of “Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier” came to visit in 1955. A whirlwind schedule of appearances included a luncheon at the Hermitage Hotel, a visit with the governor, and greetings to schoolchildren at Harvey’s Department Store.

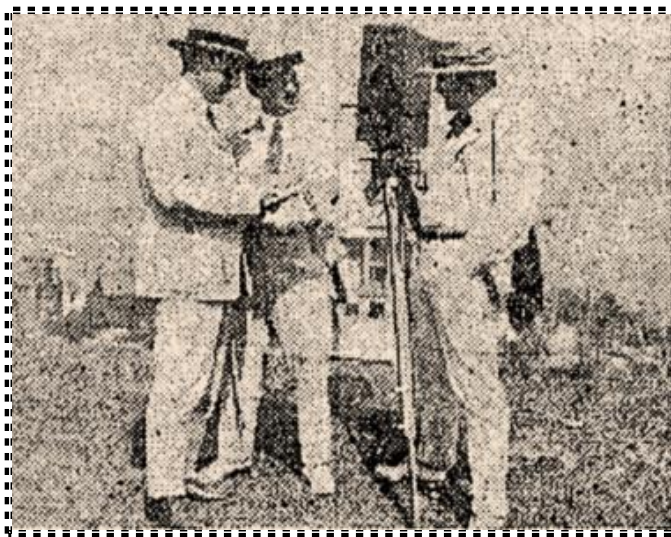


From a long list, other movie and television stars who've been Hermitage Hotel guests in the distant past have included George Raft, Al Jolson, Bette Davis, Cesar Romero, Yul Brynner, Joan Fontaine, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Gracie Moore, Dinah Shore, Audie Murphy, Charles Coburn, Robin Williams, Leonard Nimoy, Barbara Eden, Art Linkletter and comedian Red Skelton. The first true film star to come to Nashville was Bryant Washburn, who eventually played roles in 375 films. He stayed in a Hermitage Hotel suite and made publicity appearances at the Hippodrome on New Year's day of 1915, along with a program that included a three girl acrobatic and dancing act.

While today's hotel policy provides complete anonymity and privacy for any visiting celebrity, the visits of decades past were reported in the newspapers and are the source of these notes. Recent names, if any, are excluded herein.

Lights! Camera! Action!

Tennessee's "first moving picture play" was filmed at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in September 1914 starring Ladies Hermitage Association members and other local Nashvillians. The Bon Ray Film Company of New York was in process



of shooting 20,000 feet of film of Tennessee's iconic spots, and even planned some footage of confiscated Tennessee firewater being poured into the Cumberland River. As pictured here, they are atop the roof of the Hermitage Hotel, their place of lodging, preparing to take some movie pictures of the state capitol.

It was 1916 when a Tennessean news story broke with the title, "Girls Forced to Leap From High Window." "Poised on a ledge high up on the third floor of the Hermitage Hotel a girl stood Monday afternoon, and a big crowd gathered below when the fire engines arrived gasped as they saw smoke pouring out of the window behind her. For one tense moment she stood there, and then out and down she leaped. With flying hair and whirling clothes the girl's slender form hurled towards the cement walk below. Certain death seemed her fate to those who had not seen the firemen with their big life net spread out below to catch her. And then before a breath had been taken by the crowd, she was safely caught and the clicking motion picture machine whirled as another form, this time a boy's, appeared at the ledge.

In 1923 Hollywood director Allen Holubar settled in to the Hermitage Hotel and put out word for casting auditions, inviting "people of every known type." Three hundred and fifty local citizens turned up in the lobby of the hotel in attempts to be selected. The movie was a re-creation of the 1864 Battle of Franklin, and was shot with great technical skill in Franklin. Regrettably the film, "The Human Mill" was never released. Holubar is pictured here wearing the white hat on location. Some of the cannons came from the state capitol grounds.



Jumping ahead in time, quite a variety of films and videos have found the distinctive qualities of the Hermitage Hotel to be advantageous as a backdrop.

In 1988 some filming for a made for television movie, “Roots: The Gift”, took place over 6 days at the Hermitage Hotel. Actors included Louis Gossett, Jr. The movie aired over the Christmas holidays that year. Written by author Alex Haley, the gift featured in the title was freedom from slavery. Warner Bros. has since released “Roots: The Complete Collection,” a 10-disc DVD collection containing “Roots: The Gift” along with earlier episodes and the miniseries. On a side note, Mr. Gossett, famed for his drill instructor role in “Officer and a Gentleman”, stopped by when Reba McEntire filmed a video in the ballroom, “Sunday Kind of Love” during that same month.



The television show “Nashville”, which enjoyed 6 popular seasons, shot numerous scenes at The Hermitage Hotel. Nashvillians truly enjoyed seeing many places of their hometown on the screen each week. The last scene shot at the Hermitage represented a New Year’s Eve setting in a Paris hotel. The shoot pictured above featured Teddy Conrad and his family during his run for mayor. Other filming took place in guestrooms, the Oak Bar and the Capitol Grille.

An oral history of employees of the Hermitage Hotel on file at the Nashville Public Library includes recollections of desk clerk Mable Louvron, who came to work around 1954 and stayed for about 25 years. She recalls when “The Delta Factor” was filmed here in 1969 and she met author Mickey Spillane. In a breach of protocol that could never happen today, Mable, says, “When Mickey Spillane was here I gave him a big ole kiss right up on the steps.” However, with all the commotion, she reminisced, “that was the worst week I ever spent... lights all over the desk and we couldn’t talk, the hotel was just full of people. There was a scene where this woman wanted to register in and I had to tell her we couldn’t. That was in the scene, see. They were shipwrecked or something.” “Then they made a picture down in the kitchen, you know, where they were supposed to have killed the chef. They had catsup all over the floor. It was real exciting.” The movie setting was primarily in the Caribbean, but the grand ballroom of the Hermitage was convincingly transformed into a glamorous casino.

“We The Women” was the name of a CBS television movie in 1974 that was narrated by Mary Tyler Moore. It starred actress Geraldine Fitzgerald who played Carrie Chapman Catt, representing those famous times of August 1920 when the women’s right to vote was battled out at the state capitol and at the Hermitage Hotel as well. The historical special was part of an “American Parade” prime time series leading up to the country’s 1976 bicentennial. Filming in the hotel was set up in Mr. Catt’s actual hotel room overlooking the capitol and included camera equipment, banners, leaflets and an

antique printing machine. The actress described Ms. Catt, whom she studied, as an eloquent, widely traveled woman, who would not be deterred from her goal. On a side note, Harry Burn, who was 78 at the time, was interviewed during the movie production. He remembered August 18, 1920 vividly. After the turmoil resulting from his decisive vote, “I went into an office, shut the door behind me, then climbed out the window and walked along the ledge of the building to the portico. I slipped back into the building and went upstairs to the attic. I could hardly breathe with the heat up there, so I retraced my steps carefully, and then literally ran across to the Hermitage Hotel, through its lobby and out the back way.” *The Evening Sun (Baltimore), Mar 7, 1974, p. 32*

“Country Gold” was the name of a 1982 CBS television premier. The plot included a fictionalized Fan Fair – CMA Awards week. Loni Anderson, described as “the blond bombshell on TV’s WKRP” played a country music superstar whose nomination for an award is jeopardized by another up and coming star, played by Linda Hamilton. The hotel lobby provided a beautiful setting and the ballroom was used as the backdrop for some record industry galas.

Minnesota Fats, while he lived at the hotel for six years, had a poster of Paul Newman and Jackie Gleason from the movie “The Hustler” up on the wall of the mezzanine parlor. He had his own hotel-provided pool table there. Whether he took the Minnesota Fats name after the 1961 movie became a hit, or whether the movie people based the story on his true life is a matter of debate, but he loved being in the limelight. He did go on camera for a 1986 instructional video, “How to Play Pool, by Minnesota Fats.” It can be seen on YouTube. The setting is very clearly the Oak Bar of The Hermitage Hotel. A cameo appearance by Waylon Jennings is included. Fats puts the icing on the cake towards the end of the video with some impressive trick shots.

Last but not least, “Hannah Montana: The Movie” starring Miley Cyrus shot scenes in the hotel during 2008. It was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and grossed \$169 million.

More Movie Trivia:

The writer of the screenplay for *Thelma and Louise*, Callie Khouri, once worked at the Hermitage Hotel in the Veranda Lounge as a waitress.

During the 90s, Steven Spielberg and his Dream Works Company would have a retreat in March and they would occupy the whole Hermitage Hotel for an entire week.

For the 1970 movie, “The Nashville Sound”, which included Loretta Lynn, Roy Acuff, and Jerry Lee Lewis to name just a few, the producer sent a camera crew into the Hermitage Hotel, “to stalk the halls at 5 a.m., finding happy conventioners weaving back to their rooms.”

Some of the country music videos filmed at the Hermitage Hotel include: Josh Turner – “I’m Your Man”, Ronnie McDowell – “I Don’t Want to Set The World on Fire”, and Marty Stuart – “That’s What Love’s About.” Sheryl Crowe starred in a Revlon commercial, and Taylor Swift in a Pepsi commercial here.



The movie, “Master of None” included a scene shot inside the hotel.

The movie “Sergeant York” contract was signed at the Hermitage Hotel on March 22, 1940 after two weeks of negotiation there between Alvin York and Jessee Lasky of Warner Brothers. To nudge along the deliberating York, a bellhop was tipped by Lasky to bring a note stating the governor was ready for a publicity photo of the signing, and it would be unwise to keep the governor waiting.

Do you have some special memories of The Hermitage Hotel ?

To share your own “news” please drop by and see Tom Vickstrom, telephone 615-345-7123 or e-mail archives@thehermitagehotel.com
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