

Docents Newsletter

Special Edition

Historical Society of Dayton Valley

October 2010

Hollywood visits Dayton in 1960

By Bob Wallace

Dayton's Old Town streets were filled during this year's Dayton Valley Days with a number of people who lived in Dayton or surrounding areas as children when Hollywood came to town to make a movie. Entitled "The Misfits," the cast of characters was what some would refer to as "top drawer:" Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Thelma Ritter and Eli Wallach.

Fifty years on, the Dayton Valley Days parade celebrated the filming with look-a-like Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable contestants, followed by tales of why Dayton was chosen for the film, who might have been included in the movie made in Dayton, and what the local citizens, now in their adult lives, thought of all the commotion that a movie company makes when it sets foot in town for several weeks.

Laura Tennant writes about how Dayton was chosen for the location, Martin Griffith wrote a lengthy piece distributed by the Associated Press throughout the U.S. and Canada, and Toni VanCleave recalled details of how she and other local residents reacted to all those Hollywood actors filming a story in the town these locals called home.

What better way to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the filming of this story than by putting together a special edition of the "Docents Newsletter"? Special thanks to Laura Tennant for providing the background on how Dayton was chosen to be the focal point of this movie, and to Toni VanCleave for recalling details of watching Hollywood film a story in her hometown.

'Twist of fate' chooses Dayton for "The Misfits"

By Laura Tennant

It was August 1960 when many of Hollywood's favorite stars, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, Eli Wallach and Thelma Ritter arrived in Dayton, Nevada to make "*The Misfits*."

Why did "*The Misfits*" screenplay author, producer and director choose this tiny historic town, population about 250, to make a movie using Hollywood's finest? It was merely a twist of fate.

Author James Goode, a journalist who wrote a day-by-day account of "*The Misfits*," tells 'why' in his book. "The Story of The Misfits" was published first in 1963; later republished in 1986 as "The Making of the Misfits." Locally, the book can be checked out at the Nevada State Library in Carson City, NV or order it at the Lyon County Branch Library in Dayton on Old Dayton Valley Road and Breakwater, southeast Dayton Valley.

"John Huston, director, Frank Taylor, producer and Arthur Miller, screenplay author, visited Reno in December 1959 for a two-day survey (site to make the movie); however, in a matter of six hours, they chose locations. Miller led the party unerringly to the Stix House (near Pyramid Lake) where he had met some cowboys in the first place, then to a dry lake bed east of Reno and to Gerlach, Nevada (pronounced Gerlock) for the scenes shot in the bar and rodeo." (There was a rodeo grounds in Gerlach.)

Then, Miller went to Ireland for two weeks with Huston to polish the screenplay.

A March 3, 1960 date was set (to start shooting the movie), but an actor's strike delayed finishing

- Continued on Page 2 -

production of "*Let's Make Love*," starring Marilyn Monroe, for five weeks. This began the twist of fate.

So, The Misfits' production staff "made another trip to Reno, realizing the roadway between Reno and Gerlach amounted to a 90-mile trip. Having the cast and crews staying in Reno, commuting daily, would be impossible. Someone suggested Dayton – photos were sent to Huston in Ireland.

"Huston approved Dayton although it meant building new rodeo grounds...a last location check was made in March after the Academy Awards in Hollywood when Taylor, construction crews and photographers chartered two planes for a last look in Dayton.

"They rebuilt the town ..." said Goode.

THE REST IS HISTORY

Portions of the movie were also filmed near Pyramid Lake, Reno and Stagecoach, east of Dayton, on the alkali flats known today as "Misfits Flats." It was Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe's last movie, and, at the time, was the most expensive black and white movie ever made. Although the stars' acting ability receives acclaim, the movie was never a box office hit.

Nev. town celebrates 50th anniversary of filming of last movie of Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable

By Martin Griffith (AP)

RENO, Nev. – Toni Westbrook-VanCleave was only 6 at the time, but she still remembers Marilyn Monroe strapping on a toy gun belt and playing cowboys and Indians with her young brother during a break in filming of "The Misfits."

Like other residents of the small northern Nevada town of Dayton, she had no clue of the demons that drove Monroe to be consistently late on the set, causing frustrating delays for director

John Huston and co-stars Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift.

"She was gorgeous, very sweet, naïve," recalled VanCleave, who was a \$10-a-day extra during a rodeo scene. "She wasn't snobby. She seemed real down to earth and friendly."

In testimony to the public's enduring fascination with Monroe, VanCleave and other locals will gather Saturday and Sunday in Dayton, about 40 miles southeast of Reno, to mark the 50th anniversary of filming for the last complete movie for both Monroe and Gable.

The celebration will include a Monroe and Gable look-alike contest, a display of photographs of the stars taken in Dayton, a session of old-timers' reminiscences about the filming, and tours of the old bar where a light-hearted scene was shot of a bouncing Monroe playing paddleball to the delight of male patrons.

Residents of Dayton, then an agricultural community of about 250, turned out en masse in 1960 to serve as extras or watch the filming, and those who are still around rave about the cast's friendliness and accessibility. The town has since mushroomed into a Reno bedroom community of more than 10,000.

"It was a big deal to have these Hollywood legends in town for a month or so. It's a source of pride for us," said Laura Tennant of the Historical Society of Dayton Valley, the celebration's sponsor.

Filmed almost exclusively around Dayton and Reno in July-October 1960, the movie was plagued by almost daily delays caused by Monroe's pill-popping to fall asleep and wake up, said Curtice Taylor, a New York photographer and son of "Misfits" producer Frank Taylor.

The producer would occasionally send his 12-year-old son to her trailer to check on her readiness, thinking a child would be less threatening than an adult, said Taylor, who witnessed most of the filming with his family.

"Nobody said anything to her about the delays," Taylor said. "It could have made things worse. She was the star and she was incredibly vulner-

- Continued on Page 3 -

able.” Eli Wallach, 94, the only surviving cast member, said Huston told the actors not to complain about Monroe's tardiness because it would cause her to cease functioning.

“Huston got us together and said he couldn't make the movie without Marilyn,” Wallach told the Associated Press. “Marilyn had a lot of problems with time, but I never said anything that would make her unhappy. What could I do? She tried her best.”

Unlike Monroe, the focused Gable memorized his lines the night before and showed up on the set on time each morning, Taylor said.

“Clark Gable was bored. He was going crazy with the delays,” he said.

Filming also was delayed by Monroe's growing drug use that prompted her to seek treatment in Los Angeles. At the time, Huston realized the drugs were giving her vacant looks and taking away her ability to “seduce the camera,” Taylor said.

“In one scene while walking down the street on Clift's arm in Dayton, she had the smile of a stoned person,” he said. “It's not the 1,000-watt smile she usually had. The wattage wasn't there.”

The delays helped make “The Misfits” – written by her then-husband, Arthur Miller – one of the most expensive black-and-white films ever made. She and Miller took separate rooms during the filming and divorced a short time later.

Monroe also was troubled by an unhappy childhood, a miscarriage, the stress of doing three movies in a row without rest and the pressure of tackling such serious material, Taylor added.

“There was a lot of pressure on a woman who was not very strong to being with,” he said. “A lot of stuff was converging on her. It's remarkable they finished the movie.”

Despite an all-star cast and acclaimed director, “The Misfits” didn't live up to Frank Taylor's hopes for the “ultimate motion picture,” said former Nevada state Archivist Guy Rocha.

The dark, deep movie about the inner struggles of a group of fictional Nevada misfits was

considered odd by the public and many critics, he said. “It ended up a disappointment,” Rocha said. “It didn't capture the public's imagination. So much more was expected from the movie as far as financial return and critical acclaim.”

But the film developed a cult following since the deaths of its stars, who played characters much like themselves, Rocha said. The movie centers on an insecure, lonely divorcee played by Monroe, an aging but sensitive cowboy (Gable) and a troubled but kind rodeo rider (Clift).

“What happens over time is this movie begins to get a following because of what happened after the filming,” Rocha said. “The movie freezes Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable in time, and has a haunting quality.”

Just 12 days after filming ended, Gable died of a heart attack at age 59. Less than 21 months later, Monroe died of a drug overdose at age 36 in what was ruled a suicide. Clift appeared in several other films before he died at age 45 in 1966.

Wallach hailed the trio's performances, called the movie “extraordinary” and said it was one of the most fascinating experiences of his long Hollywood career.

“I was working with marvelous actors like Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, great, great people,” he said. “I was captivated by the role Marilyn played in the movie. Clark Gable was an extraordinary man, gentle and sweet. I feel lucky to have been in the film with them.”

VanCleave said she and other Dayton residents also cherish their brush with the actors.

“We thought the whole cast was wonderful, larger than life,” she said. “But to be honest, I never thought it was a very good movie.”

Toni VanCleave in her own words on “The Misfits” movie

[The words here were posted by Toni via email to the HSDV for use in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of filming of this movie. The introduction was written by Laura Tennant. -Ed.]

Toni's father's store was on Main Street east (next
- Continued on Page 4 -

door) of the Union Hotel. She and her family lived in Dayton in 1960. She lives in Silver Springs now, is active with the Chamber, Princess House and in the entertainment industry. I got this email on September 7. Toni is also involved with the Civil War Re-enactment group. She told her story at the HSDV-sponsored Misfits Rap Session held at the Dayton Valley Community Center on September 18. It was recorded by Gary McElroy with Morgan Webber's equipment.

I remember how handsome Clark Gable was, after all I **was** almost 7 years old! I watched with my mother as they filmed the scenes where (after Marilyn's paddle ball scene) Mr. Gable's character was drunk, came out of the Odeon Hall, climbed up on the car to call his kids and fell off. I have some of her photos of that scene. I understand he really got hurt in that fall.

I remember some of the rodeo scenes and standing in line at the food line. They hired the entire town to be extras and paid us \$10 a day and meals! My brothers and I thought that was pretty cool because we got our Social Security cards so we could work. I also remember my little cowgirl outfit – hat, shirt, skirt and boots. It was red with black trim and white fringe!

Mom told me about Marilyn kissing Rick on the cheek and said he didn't wash his face for a month (may have been a bit of an exaggeration). Also about her coming into my Daddy's little grocery store, putting on a toy gun belt and playing "Cowboys & Indians" with my little brother Mark around the aisles in the store. And I remember wanting to be as pretty as her.

Reflections on "The Misfits"

By Bob Wallace

During our September docents meeting at the museum the suggestion was made that each of us write a brief history on where we were in 1960

when Hollywood visited northern Nevada to film "The Misfits." Several folks noted that they were still in school at one level or another – intermediate, high school or college/university – and may not have been aware that some of the top names in Hollywood of that era were visiting the Reno and Dayton areas to make a motion picture.

At about that time I had just been assigned to the 12th Naval District Band on Treasure Island so was familiarizing myself with how to get around in the San Francisco Bay Area, finding out how to get to San Jose, for instance, about eight years before that song came out on record. Hearing a radio news story on Hollywood actors the likes of Gable, Monroe and Clift filming in Reno (I knew where Reno was) and Dayton (I had no clue where "out in the desert town of Dayton" might be at that time) was interesting to the degree that I knew of several of the actors at that point, not necessarily all of them.

Shortly after moving into our new home in Dayton in April of 2006, we visited the Dayton Valley Branch Library and found the DVD with "The Misfits," brought it home and watched it, not once, but several times, in part trying to figure out where some of those scenes had been filmed in this area. Lurking behind the rodeo grounds, for instance, one could see the top of the school house museum. Driving around Old Town Dayton, one was able to locate several buildings that had been in the movie, although several others were no longer standing.

While in the midst of writing the last portion of this issue on September 27, a quick search of the Lyon County Library system finds that the James Goode book, "The Story of the Misfits," is available, as is "The Misfits" movie. Both the book and the DVD are listed as being available at all branch libraries. Given the interest in the book and movie during Dayton Valley Days celebration of the making of the movie, you may have to wait in line a day or two to get one or the other.

Something else to keep in mind? Next February marks the 50th anniversary of the debut of this movie, at the time the most expensive black-and-white film ever made. All that expense, and some of it spent right here in Dayton!