

Gardner, Ava ^[1]

AVA GARDNER

By Doris Rollins Cannon, 2012

1922-1990



Ava Gardner ^[2]A child destined to become an international movie sensation, with a personal life that rivaled fiction, Ava Gardner, was born on December 24, 1922 in the small farm community of Grabtown, eight miles from Smithfield in [Johnston County](#) ^[3], North Carolina. Ava Lavinia Gardner was the youngest of five daughters and two sons of farmer Jonas Bailey "J.B." and Mary Elizabeth "Mollie" Baker Gardner (one son died as a child). The family was highly respected by all. Their house was one of the largest in the community, but since electricity had not come to rural areas in Ava's childhood days, it had no running water or indoor plumbing.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardner were faithful Baptists, and when [Sardis Baptist Church](#) ^[4] was built on nearby Brogden Road in 1914, the timber was donated by Ava's father, who also helped in the construction. Mrs. Gardner was superintendent of the Sunday School. The old church building, now weathered and used as a storage barn, still stands not far from the modern brick Sardis Church.

By the time Ava was age two, her parents had lost their house and land during a widespread agricultural depression. In 1925 they moved a mile down the road to the Brogden community and became occupants and operators of the [Teacherage](#) ^[5], a boarding house for six young female teachers at Brogden School (grades 1-6). Ava's mother was the cook and beloved "second mother" for the teachers, and her father maintained the building and operated a sawmill behind the school.

Little curly-haired Ava was a blend of shy sweetness and reckless "tomboyishness." At age six, she alarmed the neighborhood by climbing the water tower behind the school, and she later cut her leg while scrambling through jagged glass in a broken schoolhouse window to retrieve her books. Her first grade teacher was Maggie Williams, wife of David "Carbine" Williams of [Cumberland County](#) ^[6], N.C. While serving a term in prison, he invented the M-1 carbine rifle which became vital to American troops in [World War II](#) ^[7].

In 1935, during the [Great Depression](#) ^[8], the Gardners were uprooted again. Funds were no longer available for operation of the Teacherage, so Ava and her parents moved to Newport News, Va, where Mrs. Gardner again operated a boarding house, this time for shipyard workers. Mr. Gardner again maintained the building and grounds.

After long-term respiratory problems, Ava's father died on May 26, 1938, in Newport News. By mid-summer, Ava and her mother moved to the rural community of Rock Ridge, near Wilson, N.C., where Mrs. Gardner operated the boarding house for teachers at Rock Ridge School.

Rock Ridge is the same community where [James B. "Jim" Hunt](#) ^[9], 15 years younger than Ava, grew up on a dairy farm. He later served a record four-terms as governor of North Carolina in the 1970s and 1980s. Also in politics during that era was Ava's brother, Jack Gardner of Smithfield, who was a member of the North Carolina House of Representatives from 1971 through 1977. Elected again in 1980, he died of a stroke shortly after being sworn into office in January, 1981.

Ava graduated from Rock Ridge High School in 1939 and a few months later began a secretarial course as a day student at Atlantic Christian College (now [Barton College](#) ^[10]) in the nearby town of Wilson.

In the interval between high school and college, she visited her oldest sister, Beatrice, called "Bappie," and brother-in-law, photographer Larry Tarr, in New York City. A portrait of Ava was placed in the Tarr Studio window, and the image of the beautiful teenager caught the eye of a young man who set the wheels in motion toward Hollywood.

At that time, Ava had no acting experience whatever. She'd never had a major role in a school play, and was said to have been replaced in a minor one. She lacked self-confidence, ambition, and other attributes that prospective film actresses usually possessed. But her fate was sealed when it was discovered that her natural beauty could light up a movie screen like a university bonfire after a winning ball game.

Months after a silent screen test in New York City (Ava's Johnston County accent was too thick for the filmmakers to understand), Ava was offered a contract by [MGM studios](#) ^[11]. Her mother would not allow her to go to Hollywood alone, so her sister Bappie went with her as protector and career guide. The two boarded a train for 'Tinsel Town' in the August heat of 1941.

Early in her career, a studio publicist wrote that the real name of the North Carolina country girl was Lucy Johnson, and Ava Gardner was the name given her by MGM. That error continues to pop up now and then on TV quiz shows and in trivia books and other publications.

As soon as Ava was spotted eating lunch in the MGM commissary, she was pursued by [Mickey Rooney](#) ^[12], the highest-paid male star of that time, and she became the first of his eight wives. Their marriage lasted only a year, and their [divorce](#) ^[13] became final on May 21, 1943, the day Ava's mother died of cancer. "It was the saddest day of my life," Ava said.

In 1945, Ava married band leader and clarinetist [Artie Shaw](#) ^[14], one of the greats of the big-band swing era and also one of the most intellectual men in show business. That union also lasted only a year, but it had its rewards. As a young girl, Ava called herself "dumb" and said she hated school and couldn't wait for it to end. But while married to Shaw, she enrolled in challenging literature and economic courses at [UCLA](#) ^[15] and made excellent grades.

Ava's third and last husband, and the love of her life, was legendary singer/actor [Frank Sinatra](#) ^[16]. They married in 1951 and divorced in 1957 after a passionate and stormy relationship that couldn't be calmed. But they remained in touch for the rest of their days.

In her prime, Ava was known as "The World's Most Beautiful Woman," and she was ardently pursued by many other famous men, including billionaire [Howard Hughes](#) ^[17]. She had no children, but doted on her nieces and nephews and children of friends. She came home to [Johnston](#) ^[18] and [Wilson](#) ^[18] counties often, and usually secretly, to spend precious time with her family, neighbors and other friends from her early years.

She had barely visible and minor speaking roles in approximately 15 movies in her first five years in Hollywood. In 1946, her status increased with her performance in [Whistle Stop](#) ^[19] with George Raft, and she soared to stardom as singer Kitty Collins in [The Killers](#) ^[20], with Burt Lancaster in his first role. Ava's sultry singing voice was used in some films, and dubbed in others, including [Show Boat](#) ^[21] (1951). But her voice was later heard on the *Show Boat* soundtrack and in a scene in the 1974 film *That's Entertainment!*

The Killers was based on a short story by Ernest Hemingway. Ava also starred in [The Snows of Kilimanjaro](#) ^[22] and [The Sun Also Rises](#) ^[23], also based on Hemingway's works, and the star and author became great pals.

By her own count, the girl from Grabtown made 55 movies, plus two made-for-TV movies and seven guest appearances on the nighttime soap opera [Knots Landing](#) ^[24]. (Some lists of her movie credits are much longer, with some unconfirmed titles and films in which her small part may have been cut from the final version.)

She always shrugged off praise for her work, and insisted, "I was never an actress." But her performances proved otherwise. She was nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award for her role in [Mogambo](#) ^[25] with [Clark Gable](#) in 1953 and a Best Actress Golden Globe for her performance in [The Night of the Iguana](#) ^[26] with [Richard Burton](#) ^[27] in 1964. She also received numerous other honors in America and abroad.

During the last years of her rocky marriage to Sinatra, Ava became fed up with Hollywood life and being hounded by the press. She moved to Spain in 1955, where she lived for over a decade. After that, she spent the last quarter-century of her life in a luxury apartment in London, England, where she enjoyed privacy, evenings at the opera, and friendships with people like [Robert Graves](#) ^[28], the renowned poet and author.

Wilson native Dr. Thomas M. Banks of Florida, a clinical psychologist, was 12-years-old and playing with his buddies on the campus of Atlantic Christian College when he first laid eyes on 16-year-old Ava as she waited for her ride home to Rock Ridge each afternoon. After he teased her and called her his girlfriend, she chased him down and gave him a playful kiss on the cheek. Soon after, he was thrilled to learn his "girlfriend" had gone to Hollywood. He cut out her picture in the local newspaper and began a lifelong hobby of collecting Ava memorabilia. In 1981, he and his wife opened the first [Ava Gardner Museum](#) ^[29] in the old Brogden School Teacherage. It was open four afternoons a week in summer months. When Dr. Banks died in 1989, his collection was donated to the Town of Smithfield, and it became the catalyst for the Ava Gardner Museum that opened in 2000 on Smithfield's Market Street. It is open seven days a week, year round, and draws thousands of visitors from around the world.

The star's last visit to [Johnston County](#) ^[3] was in 1985. She and her sisters, Elsie Creech and Inez Grimes of Smithfield and Myra Peace of Winston-Salem went to the museum in the old building where Ava spent over ten years of her childhood. The summer season had ended and the door was locked. Ava told her sisters to not bother anyone by asking them to bring a key. "I know what's in there," she said. "I lived it."

However, it is doubtful that she could ever have grasped the full extent of her fame. She is one of very few North Carolina natives to grace the cover of Time magazine (Sept. 3, 1951). (Other born-and-bred Tar Heels who made the cover of *Time* were Rev. Billy Graham, Sen. Sam Ervin, and Sen. Jesse Helms.) It is estimated that Ava's image was on approximately 3,000 magazine covers worldwide during the peak years of her career. In 1998, a near-life-size bronze statue of the star was erected in Tossa de Mar, Spain, where Ava filmed *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* in 1951 and captured hearts of the villagers with her Carolina warmth and charm.

In 1986, the star suffered a stroke which left her with some difficulty walking and without full use of her left arm.

Having been diagnosed with lupus, which attacks the body's immune system, she died of pneumonia in her London apartment on January 25, 1990. She was only one month past her 67th birthday.

Her funeral was held in Smithfield on January 29. Over 3,000 people passed by her closed coffin in Underwood Funeral Home on the night before her burial. A large crowd, minus any celebrities, attended the graveside service. The press was there in full force and the air was alive with the sound of clicking cameras. One of the first floral arrangements to arrive was from Frank Sinatra, who personally called in the order to a local florist.

Ava's death was reported around the globe. The headline "The Last Goddess" blazed beneath the photo of Ava on the cover of [People magazine](#) ^[30], and Paris Match magazine in France devoted two issues to the star, including eight pages of photos taken in the museum in the old boarding house for teachers.

As she had requested, the star was laid to rest beside her beloved family members in Sunset Memorial Park by Highway 70 in Smithfield. Her footstone is engraved only with her name and dates of birth and death. A special walkway leads to the Gardner plot.

Many sides of Ava Gardner have been portrayed by the press and in numerous books written about her life, with widely varying degrees of accuracy. But those who knew her best will remember her for her kind heart, for remaining down-to-earth and loyal to her roots, for her feisty independent spirit, her great sense of humor, her total lack of prejudice, and her true talent and professionalism in bringing her characters to life on screen.

Those characters, and the farm girl from Grabtown near Smithfield in Johnston County, North Carolina, will live on through the magic and miracle of film.

References:

Cannon, Doris Rollins. *Grabtown Girl* (Down Home Press, 2001).

Additional Resources:

Ava Gardner Museum, Smithfield, NC: <https://www.johnstoncountync.org/ava-gardner/> [29]

Image Credit:

Ava Gardner. Photo courtesy of Flickr user Lexinatrix, uploaded on February 6, 2005. Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lex/129933276/> [31] (accessed April 24, 2012).

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