

*P*OSSESSED

THE LIFE OF JOAN CRAWFORD

DONALD
SPOTO



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About the Book

'I've been protected by studio publicity men most of my life, so in some ways I'm a goddam image, not a person. I was a commodity, a piece of property...I felt an overwhelming obligation to my career, and so I was an actress first, a wife second. I worked almost constantly, and even when I wasn't working, there was that image thing of looking like a star, conducting myself like a star. I just went ahead like a bulldozer. I was a very selfish woman.'

Joan Crawford was a complex, contradictory, driven human being, but not the alcoholic, sadistic monster depicted in the notorious book, *Mommie Dearest*, which appeared a year after her death.

In some ways, Donald Spoto's *Possessed* is the ultimate Hollywood book - about a young woman, poor, abandoned by her father, but determined at all costs to succeed. Born in Texas, Lucille Fay LeSueur escaped destitution by becoming a popular dancer and then managed to make the decisive leap that transformed her into a luminous, unique star of the screen: she became Joan Crawford.

There were many important men in her life, not least Clark Gable, with whom she appeared in eight pictures and with whom she conducted a thirty-year affair. She was married four times, once to the debonair Douglas Fairbanks Jr, unaware that he had failed to discontinue his relationship with Marlene Dietrich.

Dancer, dramatic actress, businesswoman, corporate executive with Pepsi-Cola, Joan Crawford during her lifetime (1906-77) was rarely out of the news. With the use of only recently opened archives and personal papers, Donald Spoto probes behind the lurid headlines to bring us Joan Crawford, the private person as well as the movie legend.

About the Author

Donald Spoto was born near New York City in 1941 and received his PhD degree from Fordham University in 1970. He is the author of twenty-two books, including best-selling biographies of Alfred Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, Ingrid Bergman, Audrey Hepburn and Alan Bates.

Also by Donald Spoto

High Society: Grace Kelly and Hollywood
Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies
Otherwise Engaged: The Life of Alan Bates
Joan: The Mysterious Life of a Heretic Who Became a Saint
Enchantment: The Life of Audrey Hepburn
In Silence: Why We Pray
Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi
Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life
The Hidden Jesus: A New Life
Diana - The Last Year
Notorious: The Life of Ingrid Bergman
Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean
Dynasty: The History of the Royal House of Windsor
A Passion for Life: The Biography of Elizabeth Taylor
Marilyn Monroe: The Biography
Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich
Laurence Olivier: A Life
Madcap: The Life of Preston Sturges
Lenya: A Life
Falling in Love Again: Marlene Dietrich - A Photo-Essay
The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams
The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock
Stanley Kramer: Film Maker
Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man
The Art of Alfred Hitchcock

Possessed

The Life of Joan Crawford

DONALD SPOTO



*for Ole—
again, and always*

... right next to the right one ...
—Tim Christensen, Danish composer and lyricist

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over many months, the staff of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center provided expert and cheerful assistance as I made my way through the voluminous Joan Crawford Papers, Scrapbooks, Letters and Ephemera. Similarly, I am grateful to Stacey Behlmer and her colleagues for indicating important relevant collections at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills. Closer to my home turf, I have relied on the scholarship and generosity of Claus Kjær and his colleagues at the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen.

An especially important part of my research was provided by those who granted extended interviews over several years: Diane Baker; the late Douglas Fairbanks Jr.; Judy Feiffer; Judy Geeson; Mona Malden and the late Karl Malden; the late Joseph L. Mankiewicz; Marian Seldes; and the late John Springer.

A trio of remarkable Joan Crawford admirers has organized Internet websites indispensable for researchers—Stephanie Jones (www.joancrawfordbest.com); Neil Maciejewski (www.legendaryjoancrawford.com); and Donna Nowak (www.filmsofcrawford.com). I salute their careful and thorough presentations of rich materials, their tireless scholarship, and their kind interest in this book. My research would not have been complete without their contributions.

I am also grateful to those who, over many years, spoke on the record about Joan Crawford—among them, Jeanine Basinger, Ann Blyth, Ben Cooper, Christina Crawford, Christopher Crawford, George Cukor, Melvyn Douglas, Sydney Guilaroff, Cynthia (Cindy) Crawford Jordan, Carla LaLonde, Casey LaLonde, Cathy Crawford LaLonde, Dick Moore, Anita Page, Betsy Palmer, Otto Preminger, Cliff Robertson and Vincent Sherman.

I owe very much indeed to precious friends: Thomas Cahill, John Canemaker, Mart Crowley, John Darretta, Olivia de Havilland, Paul Elliott, Mary Evans, Lewis Falb, Mike Farrell, Chuck Griffis, Tippi Hedren, Sue Jett, Joseph Kennedy, Irene Mahoney OSU, Patricia Milbourn, Gerald Pinciss and Greg Schreiner.

My wise agent, dear friend and invaluable confidante, Elaine Markson, has looked after my literary interests for four decades. Her associate, Gary Johnson, has an enormous claim on my thanks for (literally) daily assistance and counsel. Also at the MarksonThoma Agency in New York, Julia Kenny smoothes the tangled paths of international and subsidiary rights.

In London, I am fortunate to be represented by Elizabeth Sheinkman, Felicity Blunt and their congenial colleagues at Curtis Brown Ltd.

At the Hutchinson division of Random House UK, Paul Sidey has been—for six books and counting—the most perceptive publisher of my work in Britain. I am as grateful for his four decades of true and loyal friendship as I am for his astute professionalism, his keen intelligence and quick wit—and his support of me and my work. Paul and his family continue to enrich my life with their constancy and affection.

I am also happy to acknowledge the unfailing help of Tess Callaway, Paul's cheerful, efficient and cordial assistant.

For neither the first nor (I am certain) the last time, I dedicate a book to my husband, Ole Flemming Larsen. A respected school administrator and a highly talented artist, he is at the very center of my life. Ole's wisdom and his graceful intelligence enrich me; his humor and patience leaven every day; his unwavering endorsement makes all my efforts possible; and the depth of his commitment to me, and to our life together in Denmark (my adopted country), brings me a wealth of blessings past counting.

DS

Sjælland, Denmark

April 2010

I'll do my own thinking, thank you—and my own existing.

—Joan Crawford, as the title character in *Daisy Kenyon* (1947)

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INTRODUCTION

November 18, 1952

ALMOST SIXTY YEARS later, the envelope's California postmark and Thomas Jefferson's profile on the purple stamp remain unfaded. The content is still clear, too—perfectly typewritten and signed with a bold flourish:

Dear Don,

Thank you for writing such a sweet letter.

I am so happy that you liked my new picture, "Sudden Fear." It was a challenge for me, and there were some very hard scenes. But I enjoyed working in San Francisco, and I was very lucky to work with fine actors like Mr. Jack Palance and Miss Gloria Grahame.

I am so impressed that you read Miss Edna Sherry's book that our movie was based on. I don't think there are many eleven-year-old movie fans who do that!

Thank you again for writing to me. I hope you will stay in touch, and that we will meet some day. Good luck in school!

*Your friend,
Joan Crawford*

I WAS TAKEN TO the movies for the first time on my fourth birthday, in June 1945; the program was an afternoon of Disney cartoons at the Pickwick Theater in Greenwich, Connecticut. When my family moved briefly to White Plains, New York, at the end of that year, I was frequently treated to a matinee at the Pix Playhouse. Then, from 1947 (when I entered first grade) to 1959 (when I left home for college), I went almost every Saturday afternoon either to the RKO Proctor's or to the Loew's in New Rochelle—or to the nearby Larchmont Playhouse, where I saw the thriller *Sudden Fear* in late August 1952. I pestered my mother until she somehow obtained the Hollywood address of the movie's distributor, RKO Radio Pictures. She cautioned me that if I wrote a fan letter telling Miss Crawford how much I liked her movie, I should not expect a reply: "Movie stars don't have time to answer letters from strangers, so try not to be disappointed."

As it happened, my youthful enthusiasm for *Sudden Fear* was not misdirected. A few months after I had pasted Joan Crawford's reply into my scrapbook, the picture was nominated for four Academy Awards, including one for Joan Crawford as best actress of the year. She had already won the Oscar six years earlier, for *Mildred Pierce*, but it took me a long time to catch up with that movie—and much longer to have any clear idea about the actress, her life and her long list of achievements.

By the time of *Sudden Fear*, Joan was in her midforties, well past the age (according to Hollywood's strange standards) for leading ladies to play women in love unless the characters were doomed or pathetic. (That year, the estimable Shirley Booth, fifty-five, was anointed best actress for her role as the grandmotherly wife Lola in *Come Back, Little Sheba*.) But Crawford was having none of the conventional wisdom that nice middle-aged women are or should be indifferent to passion. The role of Myra Hudson in *Sudden Fear* was her own choice; she was the movie's *de*

facto executive producer; she supervised the development of the character and collaborated on the screenplay; and she tackled with enormous gusto the part of a wealthy, successful playwright longing for love. Myra does not retreat quietly to life's upper balcony just because she happens to be forty-something.

By 1952, Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo—Joan's two rivals during her years at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—had long since retired, and Marlene Dietrich was performing in nightclubs. But Joan Crawford kept fighting for new roles for older women, and she succeeded. For half a century, she assessed what the public wanted in each era: the jazz baby during the 1920s; the independent thinker of the 1930s; the troubled postwar woman of the 1940s; the romantically starved woman of the 1950s; the horror queen of the 1960s and 1970s. But those broad categories never exhausted the range of her roles.



MY PARENTS HAD BEEN in high school in the early 1930s, when Joan was already a major star, and when I returned home from the Larchmont Playhouse that Saturday afternoon in 1952, I was astonished to learn that she was very well known to the older generation. By then, 80 percent of Joan Crawford's total motion picture output was behind her: of her eighty-seven feature films, there were only eighteen after 1950. But like Molly Brown, she was unsinkable, unpredictable, indomitable. "I remember that she was a champion Charleston dancer before she was a movie star," my mother said when I received Miss Crawford's reply, "and she had the trophies to prove it." Crawford spanned generations, movie styles—in fact, movie history itself.

Never content with her past achievements, Joan sought only to extend the frontiers of her talent and experience; indeed, one of the major themes of this book is that few are

her equal in terms of the sheer volume, variety and quality of her performances. In addition to her movies, she was heard on dozens of radio dramas from the 1930s through the 1950s, and then she eagerly turned to acting on television, appearing on many of the most popular programs of the time—*The Jack Benny Program*, *I Love Lucy*, *Route 66*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *The Virginian*. Steven Spielberg's first job in the industry was directing Joan in a terse, tense half-hour thriller. Only work in the theatre eluded her: as she admitted, she suffered from paralyzing stage fright that was exacerbated by a poignant shyness in the presence of strangers.

Joan's accomplishments in television are remarkable: twenty dramas; forty appearances on talk shows; thirteen variety and comedy shows; a dozen award programs and game shows; a half-dozen tribute specials; commercials; and public service announcements for charities. Until grave illness forced her to withdraw from the world toward the end of her life, she considered *retirement* a dirty word.

But a mere catalogue of achievements does not justify a full-scale biography. After surveying the shelf of chronicles published about Joan since her death in 1977, the question must be addressed: Why another life story? Quite simply, because perhaps no other movie star—with the possible exception of Marilyn Monroe—has been so underappreciated, misrepresented by rumor, innuendo, fabrication, unfounded allegation and rank distortion.

Joan Crawford was neither Joan of Arc nor the arch she-devil of popular misconception. She was a recognizably human and passionate woman who entertained millions; she made egregious mistakes and learned from them; and she always had a legion of friends and countless admirers. One's fame or power or influence was never the criterion for friendship with Joan, and she was on warm terms with people from every walk of life. The shift in public opinion from respect to contempt only began a year after her

death, with the publication of a book called *Mommie Dearest*, which alleged that Joan was a sadistic alcoholic who took special pleasure in torturing her adopted children.



THE BOOK YOU ARE holding is an attempt to set the record straight on a number of critical matters concerning Joan Crawford's complex character. Not the least of these issues is, in fact, *Mommie Dearest*, which ought to be judged in light of certain matters often ignored. In many ways, Joan was a jumble of contradictions, but the contradictions provide clues to what has been mostly discounted or denied—specifically, that she was much more than just a movie star: she was demonstrably one of the screen's most talented actresses. I have attempted to support this large claim by examining all her extant feature film performances (seventy of her eighty-seven motion pictures).

The list of collaborators testifying to her professionalism comprises a virtual Who's Who of memorable names in film history: Clark Gable (with whom Joan appeared in eight pictures), John Gilbert, Robert Montgomery, Gary Cooper, Melvyn Douglas, James Stewart, Spencer Tracy, the brothers John and Lionel Barrymore, John Wayne, John Garfield, Dana Andrews, Henry Fonda and Cliff Robertson. Her directors included some of the most inventive and stylish filmmakers of her era—among them, Edmund Goulding, Clarence Brown, Robert Z. Leonard, Dorothy Arzner, Frank Borzage, George Cukor, Otto Preminger, Michael Curtiz, Robert Aldrich and Lewis Milestone.

Joan's critics claim that she had no gift for comedy, and that the so-called weeping woman's movie was the extent of her range. But that assertion can be made only by those who have not seen comedies like *Chained*, *Forsaking All Others*, *Love on the Run*, *The Women*, *Susan and God*,

When Ladies Meet and *Above Suspicion*. Those movies prove that she was certainly a gifted exponent of high comedy—a fact that comes as a surprise to those who identify Joan Crawford only with *Mildred Pierce*, *Humoresque* or *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

BORN LUCILLE FAY LE SUEUR, she was renamed in a studio-sponsored publicity contest. As Joan Crawford, she never took an acting lesson, nor did she ever study with a drama coach. Working by instinct, intensely focused and observant, she was completely self-educated; as her first husband, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., told me, “She never ceased in her efforts at self-improvement and was dedicated to her art—to a point of almost religious devotion.”

Joan moved through several phases in her fifty-year career—from Broadway chorus girl to flaming flapper, from silent movie vamp to comic mannequin, from dramatic actress to businesswoman and corporate executive. Through it all, she was tenacious, tough and tender. When people met her, they were often surprised to see that the woman who seemed so much larger than life on-screen was just slightly over five feet tall.

Perhaps because she had come from a crude, poor background and was mistreated in her childhood, Joan always insisted—sometimes even to her own amusement—that people demonstrate exquisite manners and courtesies, toward both herself and others. “People were in awe of her, but she was never in awe of herself,” recalled her friend, the director Herbert Kenwith. “She could speak with all kinds of people on their own levels.”

That quality was evident one day not long before Joan died. She was leaving a Manhattan restaurant when a team of construction workers recognized her and whistled loudly. “Hey, Joanie!” shouted one of them.

Smiling, she went over to shake their hands. "I'm surprised you fellas know who I am!"

"You're one in a million," said a workman. "They sure don't make them like you anymore, baby!"

She loved it.

CHAPTER ONE

A Prairie Bernhardt | 1906 - 1924 |

SHE WAS OVERDRESSED, overweight and overanxious. Standing outside La Grande railway station in downtown Los Angeles, she felt a momentary desire to hurry back into the terminal and board the next Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe train that would take her back home.

But she had no home now, and except for a few dollar bills and some coins, she had no financial resources. Her most recent income—for working during the Christmas shopping season in Kansas City—had paid for some new clothes. The train ticket to Chicago, and from there to Southern California aboard the Los Angeles Express, had been subsidized by her new employer.

She was about five feet three inches tall, red-haired and freckled. Her dark coat camouflaged a few of her 140 pounds—too much weight, she knew, for her small frame. But soon she would be dancing again (day and night, if she had her way), and dancing was her preferred method of weight loss. She clutched her purse and put down the rattan valise that contained her few outfits and—her only

extravagance—two pairs of dancing shoes that were just right for the shimmy, the Charleston and the Black Bottom.

It was January 1925, the wild era of the so-called flappers and bright young things who emerged after the Great War,¹ and she was a charter member of the new age. She smoked, she drank—even during those Prohibition years, alcohol was not hard to obtain—and she danced until dawn; she flirted, she wore makeup, she was giddy and took risks. She replaced stiff corsets with loose undergarments and raised her hemline to the knee. She conformed to no conventional standard of behavior; so far, she had lived fast, clinging to life as if she might lose it at any moment. She refused to wear long hair piled on top of her head, as her mother's generation did; instead, she cut and bobbed her hair short. She was a new, modern woman—and frankly sexual, without inhibitions. She never talked about her freewheeling love life; she simply got on with it.



THREE DAYS EARLIER, ON a wintry afternoon, she had said good-bye to her mother in Kansas City. Now, bundled in a woolen coat and wrapped in a patchwork scarf, her hair tucked beneath a dark cloche, she awaited the man assigned to greet her. The perspiration trickled down her back, for the cold-weather outfit was unnecessary: the sun shone brightly at midmorning, and the temperature was climbing toward seventy.

The railway station and surrounding sidewalks of downtown Los Angeles were thronged with motley travelers. There were poor families from the Indian Territories; East Coast businessmen in striped suits, their watch fobs glittering across tightly buttoned vests; society women, draped in chiffon and pearls; and, it seemed to her, a veritable congress of begrimed and bewhiskered cowboys wearing broad-brimmed hats, leather chaps and colorful

bandanas. This cross section of humanity might have been mistaken for a group of players dressed for various productions at a Hollywood movie studio.

Some moments later, a young man, sprucely attired in a summer suit, approached her. As if he had meticulously rehearsed his brief introduction, he removed his rakish straw boater, picked up her suitcase, said that his name was Larry Barbier and asked if she was Miss Lucille Le Sueur.^{fn1} She smiled nervously, said yes and they were spirited away in a waiting taxi.

Larry, as she was told to call him, was an assistant to the assistant to the associate publicity director of the company for which she was about to begin working. He said that he was going to show her an interesting neighborhood near the hotel where a room had been booked for her, and he instructed the driver to head for an area south of the city of Santa Monica known as Venice, on the shore of the bay, twelve miles from downtown Los Angeles. Larry said that he lived in Venice, right near the beach, and that she was welcome to visit any time.

Planned by a man named Abbot Kinney, who made his fortune manufacturing Sweet Caporal cigarettes, Venice was designed to resemble its Italian namesake: it was a fanciful enclave of Los Angeles, the movie capital of the world and a kind of ultimate fantasy land. Kinney had envisioned romantic canals connecting the streets, with beaches and shops linked by bridges to residential areas on flower-banked shores. Construction of lagoons and cottages was begun in 1904, and in 1905 the canals were filled with water. Kinney persuaded merchants, hoteliers and restaurant owners to build in the style of the Venetian Renaissance, and to complete the effect, he imported two dozen gondoliers from Italy, who arrived with a repertory of their native melodies. Venice, California, soon became known as the Playland of the Pacific, and a few months

after Miss Le Sueur's arrival, it was sucked into the booming metropolis of Los Angeles.

In those days before freeways and wide boulevards, the journey from the railway station to the hotel required almost four hours as the taxi negotiated heavy traffic along dusty local streets. By midafternoon, they had finally arrived at the Hotel Washington on Van Buren Place, in the separate inland municipality known as Culver City.

Residents of the Washington routinely complained that the rate of four dollars a week was cutthroat extortion; indeed, the word *modest* was too glamorous a description for the rude accommodations. There was only one bathroom for every thirty guests; a sink with cold water stood in the corner of each tiny room; the electrical system worked erratically; and a single telephone near the front desk had to do for all the residents. But Miss Le Sueur may not have been dejected: after all, her residences in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New York had not been more luxurious.

The advantage to living on Van Buren Place was its proximity to Lucille's new employer. A few blocks distant was the company to which she would soon report for work; within its gates and behind its walls were lakes, orchards, jungles, railway stations, parks, streets and neighborhoods of many eras—everything required by a modern motion picture studio.

WHEN LUCILLE LE SUEUR arrived in California, a relatively new form of public entertainment was swiftly becoming a vast corporate industry—and the company that had engaged her was at its epicenter. Nine months earlier, in April 1924, New York theater owner Marcus Loew, who already owned Metro Pictures and Goldwyn Pictures, added Mayer Pictures to his holdings. This he did in order to appoint

forty-year-old Louis B. Mayer—ruthless, patriotic and paternalistic—as chief of Los Angeles studio operations for the new conglomerate. At the same time, Loew appointed as head of film production Mayer’s assistant, the clever, physically frail twenty-five-year-old Irving G. Thalberg, known as the boy wonder of Hollywood. For decades afterward, the business headquarters of the new studio were in New York, the home of Wall Street financiers.

With a little pressure from Mayer, the newly formed megastudio was named Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: MGM, or simply Metro. With remarkable rapidity, the studio could boast (as one savvy publicist put it) “more stars than there are in the heavens”—typical Hollywood hype, but not entirely inappropriate for its impressive roster of popular contract players, which eventually included Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Jean Harlow, Jeanette MacDonald, Norma Shearer, Clark Gable, Myrna Loy and Greta Garbo.^{fn2} More than any other movie studio, Metro was deeply involved in the personal lives of its employees—specifically, its tight control of a tidy public image for each contract player. For Mayer and his colleagues, this was simply a matter of protecting their investments.

From the 1920s to the early 1940s, this studio was the most successful in Hollywood: it never lost money during the Great Depression and released a feature film every week, along with cartoons and short subjects. The eventual decline of the studio was primarily (but not only) caused by the rise of television and by the United States Supreme Court ruling against corporate monopolies, which forced the studios to divest themselves of theater chains; without Loew’s movie houses, Metro could not survive.

None of this was foreseen in 1925. That year, 49 million people (more than 40 percent of the American population) paid an average of ten cents to see a total of 576 silent black-and-white films. This was the heyday of stars like glamorous Gloria Swanson and demure Lillian Gish; of

audacious Douglas Fairbanks and sensual Rudolf Valentino; of exotic Pola Negri and amusing Marion Davies. Metro was about to produce *The Merry Widow*, with dashing John Gilbert, and soon it would release the epic *Ben-Hur*, which showcased the glossy eroticism of Ramon Novarro.

Along with the established stars and vast numbers of technical workers at various studios, extras for the common crowd scenes in movies picked up their paychecks each week. In 1919, a total of thirty-five thousand people worked in some capacity for the movie industry; by 1925, that number had doubled, and most of the studio workers labored six days every week. Lucille was prepared for hard work when she arrived at Metro, as instructed, on Monday, January 12, 1925. Two months later, she celebrated her nineteenth birthday.

LUCILLE FAY LE SUEUR was born in San Antonio, Texas, on March 23, 1906. By the time she registered for the new Social Security program in the 1930s, she had already been accustomed to stating her birth year as 1908; there was, after all, no official document to the contrary, for in 1906, birth certificates were neither mandatory nor routine in Texas. And so, with the encouragement and complicity of studio publicists, she established her birth year as 1908, effectively diminishing her age by two years. According to California law, however, the studio could not have hired a seventeen-year-old in 1925 without parental approval, and this was neither required nor requested in her case. Lucille had applied for a work-study program at Stephens College, Missouri, in 1922, and at that time she truthfully gave her age as sixteen. She certainly could not have hoodwinked anyone at Stephens into accepting her if she was in fact only fourteen years old.

By 1936, magazine articles occasionally reported her true birth year (without correction from the subject or her bosses) and she herself revealed it at least once. The

occasion was a meeting in November 1967 with the Trustees of Brandeis University, who named her a Fellow in recognition of “her interest, time and service to a host of civic and philanthropic causes.” By that time, she had donated a large cache of personal effects to the university.^{fn3}

The extreme paucity of facts concerning Lucille’s parents has not prevented a platoon of writers from spinning fanciful tales about her family and their backgrounds, employment and characters. But very little can confidently be established. Her mother’s name was Anna Bell Johnson, and she was born in November 1884, very likely somewhere in Texas. Lucille’s father was Thomas Le Sueur, born about 1868 in Canada or (say some sources) in Tennessee. Of the couple’s earlier lives and of their marriage, nothing is known except that Tom (as some records identify him) abandoned his wife and children either just before Lucille was born or just after—she never provided any information on the matter. Anna then took in laundry and found local odd jobs to support herself and her two children. The little family was grindingly poor and remained so for years to come.

Despite the imaginations of those who have supplemented missing facts with colorful fictions, Lucille’s early years remain clouded in obscurity—until 1910, when a census recorded that Anna, seven-year-old Harold (always called Hal) and four-year-old Lucille were living with Anna’s new husband, Henry J. Cassin, in the town of Lawton, Oklahoma. Curiously, the Cassin marriage was publicly recorded as Anna’s first; indeed, she may never have married Le Sueur.

Lawton, a sleepy town eighty-eight miles southwest of Oklahoma City and the headquarters of the Comanche Nation, was no busy, crowded metropolitan area. But it boasted the Ramsey Opera House, and Cassin was the booking agent and manager for its repertory of musicals,

traveling shows, vaudevilles, dance recitals and just about anything that came to town capable of attracting paying customers.

“Daddy Cassin,” as Lucille referred to him even after she learned that he was not her father, was the only adult to lavish anything like attention and affection on the little girl. “He was the center of my world—a short, stocky and black-haired man with small brown eyes and a calm manner. A mature man, he was not the type to romp with children, but I could always crawl on his lap—he made room right inside his newspaper. And I knew he loved me.” Born about 1867, Cassin called her Billie, a common nickname at that time for children of both genders. For a dozen years, she identified herself as Billie Cassin. “If I could really give credit to the people who helped me the most,” she said years later, “I guess he’d top the list.”

Cassin often took her to his theater—where, for example, he once featured a classically trained ballet dancer—and, in 1912, treated six-year-old Billie to a performance of something called the “Gypsy Fantasy.” They went backstage to meet the dancer, who embraced Billie after the child said that she wanted to dance, too. The young woman gave the child a pair of used ballet slippers and told her that she would have to work very hard. This counsel was at once taken to heart, and Billie began to offer impromptu dance recitals in a nearby barn or on the family’s front porch. With no more inspiration than the Gypsy Fantasy, she leaped and whirled, usually to the unlikely tune of the popular song “Wait ’Till the Sun Shines, Nellie,” for which she dragooned this or that neighborhood boy to accompany her as impromptu warbler.

“Henry Cassin encouraged me,” she recalled years later. “He seemed to think I had talent. This made my mother furious—no daughter of *hers* was going to be a dancer. But his world was real to me. The opera house must have been

shabby, but to me it was glamorous. It was the life I wanted.”

But her terpsichorean aspirations were interrupted by a painful mishap that summer. Either jumping on purpose or falling by accident, Billie fell from her front porch onto shards of a broken glass bottle. Bleeding profusely, she was gallantly carried inside and comforted by a teenage boy until a doctor arrived. The role of this impromptu Prince Valiant was assumed by a seventeen-year-old high school boy named Don Blanding; he, too, had artistic ambitions, later realized when he became a successful poet, journalist and author of a dozen books. When they next met, twenty years later in Hollywood, Blanding celebrated the childhood incident in a lyric he wrote in honor of the dancer who had become a star.

*She was just the little girl who lived across the street,
All legs and curls and great big eyes and restless
dancing feet,
As vivid as a humming bird, as bright and swift and
gay,
A child who played at make-believe throughout the
livelong day.
With tattered old lace curtains and a battered feather
fan,
She swept and preened, an actress with grubby snub-
nosed clan
Of neighborhood kids for audience enchanted with
the play,
A prairie Bernhardt for a while. And then she went
away.
We missed her on the little street, her laughter and
her fun
Until the dull years blurred her name as years have
ever done.*