

Jimmy Stewart's Wonderful Life Began in Pennsylvania



William C. Kashatus



A lobby card—a placard displayed in theater lobbies to advertise forthcoming motion pictures—for Frank Capra's 1946 classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, considered by Jimmy Stewart (top, right) to be his favorite film of all time. Stewart starred in the film with Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, and Henry Travers.

It's Christmas Eve 1945 in the small town of Bedford Falls. George Bailey, president of the Bailey Building and Loan Association, stands in despair at the edge of a bridge wishing he had never been born.

An unscrupulous competitor, Henry F. Potter, has threatened to shut down the financial institution and see Bailey thrown into prison on the pretense of stealing the townspeople's money. In fact, however, the missing funds were taken by the deceitful Potter.

Snow is falling hard as Bailey stares down at the dark, icy waters below. The swirling current exerts a strange, hypnotic effect. Desperate, the disconsolate bank president leans over the railing and prepares to jump.

Suddenly, a bumbling but well-meaning Clarence Oddbody, Angel Second Class, dispatched from heaven to rescue Bailey, jumps into the freezing waters below. Bailey snaps out of his trance and looks down, horrified, at the sight of the drowning Oddbody.

"Help! Help! Help!" screams Oddbody, who flails about in the rushing river. "I can't swim!"

Bailey quickly removes his coat, dives into the water, and rescues his guardian angel. Thanking him profusely, Oddbody proceeds to show Bailey how meaningless the lives of others would be without his life-long kindness, reminding him, "You've had a wonderful life."

His spirit rekindled and convinced it's better to live, Bailey returns home to his family and discovers that his neighbors have repaid his generosity by raising money to save the building and loan. He realizes that no man is a failure if he has such loyal friends.

Although these are scenes from a movie, the script resonated so much for Keystone State-born and bred actor Jimmy Stewart (1908–1997) that Frank Capra's 1946 classic, *It's A Wonderful Life*, became his favorite film of all time. Stewart, who starred as George Bailey, saw many parallels to his own life's story.

Bedford Falls reminded Stewart of his hometown of Indiana, Indiana County, and the kindness and warmth of the people who lived there. It was also the first film he made after serving as a bomber pilot in World War II. Although Stewart returned home a decorated hero, the war profoundly affected him. Not only had his combat experience led him to question the meaningfulness of a Hollywood career, but it also diminished the confidence he once had in his acting ability.

Midway through the production, Stewart considered leaving the set and returning home to western Pennsylvania to help run his father's hardware store. Had it not been for the encouragement of fellow actor Lionel Barrymore (1878–1954), also a native Pennsylvanian, born in Philadelphia, who played Potter, he most likely would have quit acting altogether.

"Don't you realize how meaningful your career is?" the old pro asked the thirty-eight-year-old Stewart. "What other profession has the power to move millions of people? Acting, young fella, is a noble profession. Now just keep doing what you're doing." Fortunately, Stewart followed his advice.

Few could have predicted Stewart's swift rise from small-town beginnings to international celebrity. His piercing, steel-blue eyes and square jaw made him good-looking, without being especially handsome. Stewart was quiet, honest, and unassuming, without being a bore. He was ambitious, but careful not to take himself too seriously. Instead, his distinctive appeal came from being down-to-earth and remaining true to the values of his small-town Pennsylvania upbringing: duty, honor, service to others, and a strong, unconditional love of family and country. By the time his illustrious acting career ended in 1990, Stewart had appeared in eighty-one feature films, eleven television movies or series, and fifteen documentaries. In the process, he became one of Hollywood's most beloved actors—the embodiment of Everyman—and his films, timeless images of the American way of life.



PHOTO BY DOUG KERR

With the exception of modern store fronts, Indiana's Philadelphia Street has changed little from Stewart's youth. The family's hardware store, J. M. Stewart and Company, established in the mid-nineteenth century by the actor's grandfather James Maitland Stewart, was a Philadelphia Street institution called "the big warehouse" by residents.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Stewart's unassuming disposition, along with his piercing steel-blue eyes and distinctive square jaw, made him one of Hollywood's leading actors between 1936 and 1960.

Born on May 20, 1908, James Maitland Stewart was the eldest child and only son of Alexander and Elizabeth "Bessie" Jackson Stewart, descendants of Irish immigrants who settled in Indiana County at the close of the eighteenth century. Stories of Stewart's folksy, small-town background belie the fact that his family was affluent and well-educated. The quaint hardware store established by his grandfather had blossomed into a profitable family business by the time Stewart was born, enabling his father to provide handsomely for his small but growing family.

After the birth of two daughters, Mary and Virginia, Alexander Stewart built a spacious Dutch Colonial-style house at 104 North Seventh St. on Vinegar Hill overlooking Indiana. His wife furnished their new home with antique furniture from her parents and

more recent acquisitions, such as a Steinway and Sons grand piano. The family spent their evenings in the living room singing a variety of songs as she played the piano. When the children grew older and learned to play instruments, young Jimmy accompanied the quintet on an accordion while Mary played the violin and Virginia succeeded her mother on the Steinway. Singing on Sunday evenings was limited to hymns; the Stewarts were deeply religious and devout members of Indiana's Calvary Presbyterian Church. "My parents did their best to teach me faith in God," recalled the actor years later. Part of the training stressed the need to lead a Christian lifestyle, or as Stewart explained, "to shun pomposity and glibness, to be modest, because a decent, gentlemanly man is modest." His father served as a fitting example.

The senior Stewart was a pillar of the community. Not only was he the proprietor of the town's popular hardware store, but also a devoted member of the church choir and a volunteer fireman. At home he could be a demanding taskmaster. He assumed the responsibility for disciplining his three children, although he often deferred to his wife, who was a warm, fun-loving soul. "I came from a very disciplined household, recalled Stewart. "My mother stopped Dad from being—well, over-boisterous. She was the only person he would listen to about anything. And there were times when we kids sure appreciated that. He would raise his voice about pretty nearly anything—but never to her."

Stewart's fascination with the military, as well as his fervent patriotism, was cultivated at an early age by his father. After the nation entered World War I, Alexander Stewart enlisted in the U.S. Army and was commissioned a captain in the Ordnance Department and served ten months in France. Although he had three small children at home, there was never any question that the strong-willed father would serve his country. A Stewart had fought in every American war dating to the Revolutionary War. It wasn't simply a patriotic duty but a family legacy. The young Stewart missed his father terribly, but took pride in the family tradition of military service and persuaded his mother to buy him a soldier suit, which



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Three generations of Stewarts in front of the family hardware store (from left): Alexander, J. M., and Jimmy.

he constantly wore. He also relished the various artifacts that Alexander shipped home from France, including German helmets, gas masks, and swords. Those objects inspired the youngster's theatrical career, which began in the basement of the family house where he staged amateur productions with such patriotic titles as *To Hell with the Kaiser*.

Stewart enjoyed the advantage of a quality education. He attended the Model School established by the Indiana Normal School (now Indiana University of Pennsylvania). Supervising teachers were members of the college faculty who were assisted by student-teachers, and the ratio of pupils to faculty was unusually low. But Stewart's active imagination and creative mind tended to drift during class. He managed to earn good grades in civics, but did not fare as well in his other subjects or in physical education. Nevertheless, Stewart followed family tradition and, in 1923, entered Mercersburg Academy, an all-boys private boarding school in Mercersburg, Franklin County, steeped in Presbyterian tradition and a feeder school for Princeton University. Although reserved, Stewart's self-deprecating wit and ability to play the accordion made him popular with students. At Mercersburg, he excelled academically, competed on the football and track teams, and belonged to the literary society. His only acting stint



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during his prep school days was a token appearance in the senior class play, *The Wolves*. His collegiate years would prove to be a different story.

Stewart wanted to attend the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, but deferred to his father and enrolled at Princeton, Alexander Stewart's alma mater. While his academic interests ranged from engineering to political science, Stewart's extracurricular activities unwittingly led him to his true vocation, acting. He auditioned for, and was accepted by, Princeton's famous theater group, the Triangle Club, which specialized in lighthearted pro-

Alexander Stewart built a spacious Dutch Colonial-style house at 104 North Seventh St. on Indiana's Vinegar Hill, where Jimmy and his sisters Mary and Virginia were raised.

ductions emphasizing music and undergraduate humor. The troupe would open productions on campus and then tour the country, often attracting the attention of Hollywood and Broadway talent scouts.

During the Triangle Club's 1928 production of *The Golden Dog*, Stewart caught the attention of Joshua Logan (1908–1988), club president and later a noted stage and film director and writer. Impressed with the young actor's presence, Logan cast him in *The Tiger Smiles*, a musical comedy about Princeton's sports teams the following year. Stewart, dressed in a white suit with a dark vest and sporting fake sideburns and a boater, played his accordion in five musical pieces. Reflecting on the actor's performance many years later, Logan remembered that Stewart was "hilarious as he sang and danced across the stage, winning over the audience." He clearly had a future in acting, but he insisted "his

first love was still architecture" and that he was "doing this stage monkey business just for fun." Logan believed otherwise. "I knew deep down that he loved acting but was too embarrassed to admit it."

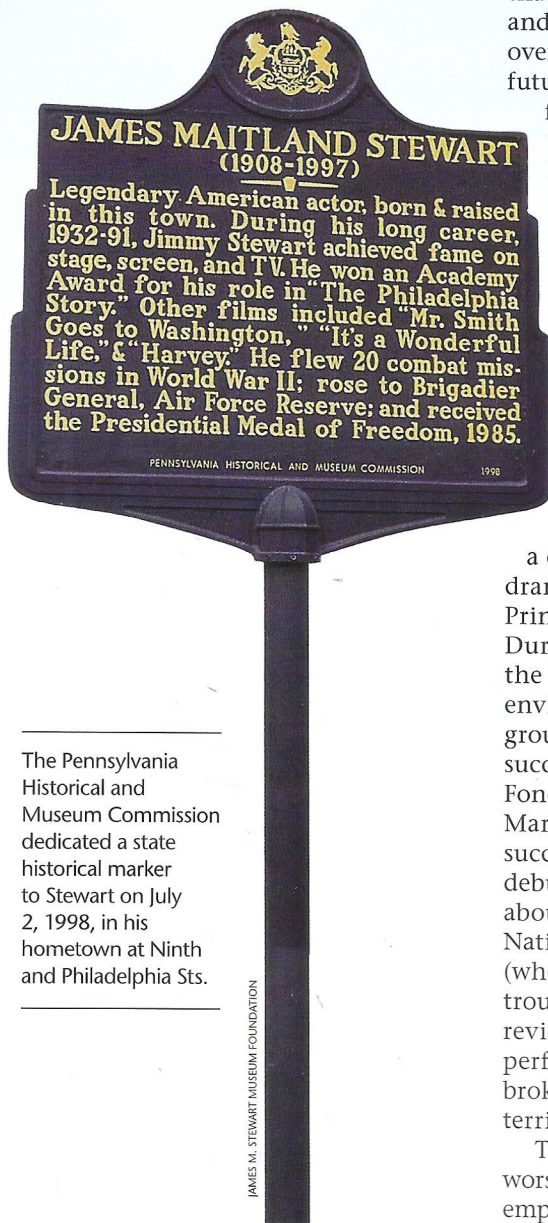
Upon graduation from Princeton in 1932, Stewart intended to pursue a graduate degree in architecture, but Logan persuaded him to act in his summer stock company, the University Players. Based in a small movie theater on Cape Cod, the University Players was a collaborative venture among the dramatic societies of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale Universities. During its brief, five-year existence, the University Players established an enviable reputation as a training ground for Hollywood careers. Its successful alumni included Henry Fonda, Myron McCormick, and Margaret Sullavan. After two modest successes, Stewart made his Broadway debut in a biographical melodrama about temperance crusader Carry Nation. Unfortunately for Stewart (who had only four bit parts) and the troupe, the play was panned by reviewers and closed after thirty-one performances. The University Players broke up not long after. Timing was terrible.

The Great Depression was at its worst and, with little chance of finding employment with an architectural

firm, the budding actor planned to return home to his family's hardware business. At the age of twenty-four, Stewart had made little emotional investment in acting, casually assuming a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude toward the profession. His experience with the University Players, however, convinced him that his future lay with acting. "Quite suddenly I didn't care if I ever designed another building," he admitted, "just so long as I could get somewhere on stage." Returning home to Indiana, Jimmy informed his parents of his decision. They were stunned, but gradually came to accept the inevitable. "Okay, if that's the way you want it, Jim," Alexander replied, resigning himself to the idea. His mother was less accepting, but agreed to "go along with the decision" realizing that her son's "mind was made up."

Stewart's big break came in autumn 1932 when New York producer Arthur J. Beckhard found a part for him in *Goodbye Again*. The comedy opened on Broadway in December and proved to be a long-running hit. Although Stewart's role was only a three-minute cameo appearance, it routinely brought down the house. The *New Yorker* singled him out as the "hot new comic actor in town," making him an instant celebrity. Despite his success, Stewart had trouble finding another acting job after the play closed. The Great Depression devastated the theater industry, as most of the paying customers strayed to much cheaper talking pictures, and many of Broadway's live venues were converted into movie houses. "I was having a rough time," Stewart admitted. "From 1932 to 1934 I'd only worked three months. Every play I got into folded."

To make ends meet, he took a job as a stage manager and moved into a two-room flat with Henry Fonda. The two actors became acquainted during their summer together with the University Players and were developing a close friendship that revolved around acting, building model airplanes, and drawing. Both men had similar temperaments, being comfortable with silence but having an infectious sense of humor that often resulted in practical jokes. The only topic about which they disagreed was politics, which nearly cost them their friendship until they agreed to not discuss it. Stewart was a conservative Republican and Fonda, a liberal Democrat.



The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission dedicated a state historical marker to Stewart on July 2, 1998, in his hometown at Ninth and Philadelphia Sts.

The year 1934 proved to be a banner one for Stewart. In February, he landed a major role in *Yellow Jack*, a powerful drama about the outbreak of yellow fever at a U.S. Army base in Cuba in 1900. Stewart played Private Johnny O'Hara, a soldier who volunteered to be inoculated with the yellow fever germ to trace the progress of the disease. The *New York World Telegram* credited him with a "performance that is simple, sensitive and true . . . and replete with poetic underbeat." The play earned Stewart a screen test with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Studios and, eventually, a short-term contract. Southern California was vastly different from his conservative upbringing in western Pennsylvania or even from the more formal lifestyle of Broadway, but Stewart believed the silver screen was a risk he needed to take. Acting had become his passion, and movies were quickly replacing theater in popularity.

In June 1935, Stewart left Broadway for Hollywood. He was reunited with Fonda, who had recently begun his own movie career with Twentieth Century Fox Studios. Once again, the two men roomed together, sharing a house in the Hollywood suburb of Brentwood.

Although he never dated Margaret Sullavan, perhaps because she was once married to Fonda, the rising actress promoted Stewart's movie career. In autumn 1935, Sullavan lobbied MGM to cast him as her co-star in *Next Time We Love*, a provocative melodrama about the disintegration of a marriage between a journalist and a rising Broadway starlet. In preparation for the film, Sullavan coached Stewart, teaching him how to use his off-screen awkwardness to his on-screen advantage. She taught him how to channel his most private feelings into the character being portrayed, enabling him to bring those emotions to the surface. The ability to reveal such intimacy was in stark contrast to the stage acting, which stressed a more rehearsed style, but it was the key to film acting. "When you played a scene with her," Stewart explained, "you were never quite sure exactly what was going to happen. She just had you off guard a little bit. I found that this was one of the most valuable things that [motion] pictures could have because it takes away the technical aspect, and gives it spontaneity." Stewart learned well. He became naturally charming on camera, instead of trying to mimic the mannerisms of a



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The U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative postage stamp honoring Stewart in 2006. A poster-sized enlargement of the stamp was presented to Indiana's Jimmy Stewart Museum.

charmer. In the process, he gained a new confidence in his acting abilities and won rave reviews for his performance in the movie.

Next Time We Love spawned a flood of acting opportunities for Stewart. Over the next four years he appeared in nineteen movies, playing a variety of roles, including a doctor, lawyer, teacher, mechanic, soldier, farmer, detective, and murderer. He also appeared opposite some of the most popular leading ladies of the day, among them Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn (whose Pennsylvania associations included her graduation from Bryn Mawr College in 1928), Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, Elinor Powell, and Myrna Loy. More important,



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Stewart was cast as an awkward, idealistic senator in Frank Capra's 1939 motion picture *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a role that catapulted him to stardom and solidified his boyish All-American image.

Stewart captured the attention of director Frank Capra, who saw in him the perfect hero for his films. A millionaire who had been writing and directing films for more than a decade, Capra had recently won his first Oscar for *It Happened One Night* (1934), starring Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable. Even though Gable turned in a wonderful performance, Capra was in search of a more sensitive leading man for his films, someone who could project small-town America—an individual who was honest, trustworthy, not very sophisticated but strong enough in his morals to challenge social injustice. He found his leading man in Jimmy Stewart.

Their partnership began with *You Can't Take It With You*, a zany comedy about the Vanderhof-Sycamore family that has so much money that most of its members don't need to work. The patriarch, played by Lionel Barrymore, constantly reminds the clan that they might as well have fun because they can't take any of their money with them when they die. Stewart plays the role of Tony Kirby, the boss of Alice, played by Jean Arthur, the only normal member of the family who works as a stenographer. The film earned Capra Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture of 1938. Its

success led to another pairing of the Italian-born director and his new leading man in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* the following year.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is about Jimmy Stewart's character, Jefferson Smith, an idealistic small-town senator. He finds himself on Capitol Hill battling ruthless politicians who peddle their political influence to special interests back home. *Mr. Smith* was a smash hit at the box office. Stewart performed the role of Smith with such desperation and depth that he established himself as a versatile actor as well as a cinematic patriot. Not only did the film solidify his career, but it earned him his first Academy Award nomination.

Stewart won his first Oscar in 1940 for his role of newspaper reporter Mike Conner in *The Philadelphia Story*, co-starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant. Hepburn's character, Tracy Lord, was inspired by the beautiful and high-spirited Main Line socialite Helen Hope Montgomery Scott (1904–1995), described by *Vanity Fair* as “the unofficial queen of Philadelphia's WASP oligarchy.” Stewart's competition for Best Actor was Henry Fonda for his role in *The Grapes of Wrath* directed by John Ford. After winning, Stewart said he believed his

best friend should have received the award. His father disagreed. Alexander Stewart was so proud of his son's achievement that he displayed the Oscar statuette in the front window of the family's hardware store in Indiana, where it remained until his death in 1961.

By 1941, Stewart had become one of Hollywood's most popular leading men and among its most eligible bachelors. He was at the height of his acting career when drafted for military service in October. Weighing just 150 pounds, Stewart was deemed underweight for duty. Embarrassed by the rejection, he bulked up through a program of weight training and a high-calorie diet. In March 1941, nine months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the thirty-three-year-old Stewart enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps. His decision shocked Hollywood at a time when other movie stars were hoping to avoid service. Louis Mayer, the head of MGM Studios, offered many incentives to keep his most talented male actor out of uniform. "It may sound corny, but what's wrong with wanting to fight for your country?" Stewart explained his decision to enlist. "Why are people so reluctant to use the word *patriotism*?"



Katharine Hepburn originally wanted Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy to co-star in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), but she gladly accepted (left) Stewart and Cary Grant instead.

Once the war began, the military brass placed a hold order on the actor's personnel file. Apparently no one in the chain of command wanted the responsibility of sending a famous movie star into combat. If Stewart was shot down in enemy territory and taken prisoner, he could have been used as a pawn to obtain important concessions from the United States. It was a frustrating situation for him. He genuinely believed that he had a personal responsibility to fight for his country during a war. True to his nature, however, he never complained nor made any attempt to pull strings. Instead, Stewart spent two years proving his mettle by flying around-the-clock as a B-17 instructor pilot. He rose from a private to a captain in command of his own squadron in the 445th Bomb Group. On November 11, 1943, Stewart was granted his wish to enter combat. Assigned to fly B-24 *Liberators* for the 453rd Bomb Group at Old Buckenham, England, he flew twenty combat missions against Nazi Germany, including one over Berlin. His bravery and leadership in combat earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters, the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, and the French Croix de Guerre with palm.

After the war, Stewart entered the U.S. Air Force Reserve as a full colonel and performed reserve duty for more than twenty years. He became the focus of a media-driven controversy



JAMES M. STEWART MUSEUM FOUNDATION

Drafted in March 1941, Stewart became an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps and a combat aircraft pilot.

that made national headlines in 1957 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower nominated him for the rank of a reserve brigadier general. Maine's Republican U.S. Senator Margaret Chase Smith of the Senate Armed Services Committee touched off the dispute by pointing out that Stewart had not participated in a sufficient number of active duty tours and lacked the proper training for such a nomination. Although Smith admitted that she, like "thousands of his loyal admirers, personally liked Stewart as an actor," she insisted "popularity should not be the yardstick by which we promote officers." The issue went unresolved for nearly two years, during which Stewart said little. In July 1959, the promotion was finally confirmed by the U.S. Senate, and Stewart served as a reserve brigadier general until 1968.

World War II had profoundly affected Stewart. He had seen firsthand the horror of combat and it had changed him both physically and psychologically. Gone was the boyish innocence of his pre-war films, replaced by a tougher, more hardened appearance. His posture seemed stiffer, more defensive. He refused to discuss his wartime experience as a fighter pilot. Although he was proud of his military service and his commission as a brigadier general, Stewart never reveled in either one or used his position for favors. Nor did he ever make a movie that glorified the brutality and devastation of combat.



COURTESY PAUL STUART

Stewart, photographed with his father in front of the family hardware store, returned home from World War II as a highly decorated bomber pilot with twenty bombing missions to his credit.

Throughout his military service, Stewart considered himself "just one of the boys," earning respect and admiration from those he commanded.



COURTESY BOB AMOS

Questioning whether he would ever be able to return to the past glory of his Hollywood career, Stewart again considered returning to Indiana, but Capra persuaded him to take another crack at film acting. Unlike the studios that were attempting to lure Stewart into films based on his wartime heroics, Capra—also fresh from military service and equally nervous about returning to Hollywood—realized the former bomber pilot wanted to put the war behind him. Capra understood the country desperately needed its spirits lifted and wrote a screenplay that would address that need. Based on Philip Van Doren Stern's short story "The Greatest Gift," *It's A Wonderful Life* is about George Bailey, a small-town citizen down on his luck, and a Christmas Eve visit from Oddbody, his guardian angel. When Capra first described the idea to Stewart, he remarked, "Frank, that's the weirdest story I've ever heard . . . but I'm yer boy!"

The film featured an impressive cast of stars, all at different stages in their careers. Donna Reed, a fresh-faced actress at the young age of twenty-five, played the role of Mary Hatch Bailey, George's wife, bringing a special sense of sweetness and innocence to the role. Henry Travers, the enchanting, diminutive English-born actor, played Oddbody and retired not long after the role.

Released on Christmas 1946, *It's A Wonderful Life* was a box office disappointment, panned by the critics for being "too sentimental." Nor did it win a



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In the memorable closing scene of *It's A Wonderful Life*, Stewart is embraced by Donna Reed, who played his wife Mary, and Karolyyn Grimes, who played ZuZu, the couple's young daughter.

single Academy Award. However, the film's timeless message of "redemption through faith" and its countless television re-runs in the 1980s when the film came into public domain, have made it one of the most beloved movies of all time and a perennial holiday favorite. Stewart felt vindicated by the resurgence of interest in the film. "It just took the country a while to appreciate the picture," he said near the end of his life. "People watch it every Christmas. They make it sort of like putting up the Christmas tree. It's part of an annual rite now. That means a great deal to me."

On August 9, 1949, Hollywood's most eligible bachelor married Gloria McLean, the daughter of Edgar Hatrick, vice president and general manager of

Hearst Metrotone News, and the mother of two boys from a previous marriage. Although she came from an affluent background, Gloria wasn't a socialite in the conventional sense of the term; instead, she preferred golf, camping, and outdoor recreational activities. Her slender figure and striking good looks landed her several modeling jobs, although she did consider becoming an actress. The couple was introduced by actor Gary Cooper a year earlier, and Stewart was immediately smitten by her. Her sons, Ronald and Michael, embraced Stewart as a devoted father. After the birth of twin daughters, Judy and Kelly, in 1951, the family moved to a two-story, ivy-covered Tudor-style house in Beverly Hills and kept a safe distance from the Hollywood social scene.

Stewart broke new ground as an actor in the 1950s and 1960s. He showed his versatility by starring in several different genres. He proved that beneath the affable, folksy persona he had cultivated, he could also play a rough and vengeful cowboy, which he did in such westerns as *Broken Arrow* (1951), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and *Shenandoah* (1965). He could also adjust his style to light-hearted comedies such as *Harvey* (1950) and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). Other Stewart films were popular biopics such as *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954) and *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1957). Stewart partnered with director Alfred



COURTESY PAUL STUART

The Stewarts at home in Beverly Hills in 1956 (from left): Ronald, Gloria, Michael, Kelly, Jimmy, and Judy.

In 1954, Stewart displayed his versatility as an actor starring as a wheelchair-bound recluse in Alfred Hitchcock's suspense thriller *Rear Window* with fellow Pennsylvanian Grace Kelly.



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Hitchcock to make a series of suspense thrillers, including *Rear Window* (1954), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and *Vertigo* (1958). For *Vertigo*, Stewart needed to reinvent himself to play the tormented character's obsession with dark impulses. He later admitted that he could have never played the role without having the experience of being "engulfed by fear" during combat in World War II.

Gossip columnists occasionally speculated that Stewart had fallen victim to the promiscuity that gripped so many leading men and ladies. After all, he played opposite some of the most attractive women in Hollywood, such as the hypnotically beautiful Philadelphia native Grace Kelly, his co-star in *Rear Window*. Ever the devoted husband, Stewart showered his wife Gloria with even more attention, never tiring of telling her "just how beautiful" she was. The couple became even closer after the death of their son, Ronald, a U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant, killed in action in Vietnam in 1969. It was a devastating blow for Stewart, who might have turned against the war but, instead,

remarked that the real "tragedy was that our boy and so many like him were sacrificed without having a unified country behind them." Years later Stewart gave his support to the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the nation's capital.



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Stewart dealt with his grief by taking on a variety of projects. At the age of sixty-one, he decided to return to the stage in 1970 to star in *Harvey*, the whimsical comedy he had appeared in on Broadway twenty-two years earlier. He also turned to television, acting in a two-year series, *Hawkins*, based on the career of a shrewd country lawyer. One of his last television specials was a 1983 Home Box Office production, *Right of Way*, co-starring Bette Davis, which told of an elderly couple's right to die. Among the plethora of honors Stewart received at the time was the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, presented to him in 1985 by President Ronald Reagan at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. The American Film Institute honored Stewart that year with its Lifetime Achievement Award because he had "captured the essence of American hopes, doubts, and aspirations" with the "idealism, determination, vulnerability, and, above all, basic decency [that] shone through every role he play[ed]."

Stewart made his final film in 1990, providing one of the cartoon voices for *An American Tail: Fievel Goes West*. He then retired with characteristic humility, saying, "I think I've done enough." When his wife Gloria died of cancer in 1994, the Hollywood film legend secluded himself in his Beverly Hills residence. He died at home on July 2, 1997, at the age of eighty-nine.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Stewart as a rough-hewn cowboy in *Winchester '73* (left), a troupe clown who's actually a doctor in *The Greatest Show on*

Travel Tips

Jimmy Stewart, a small-town boy from western Pennsylvania, became larger than life over more than a half-century of a distinguished acting career. He could play a hard-edged cowboy as easily as a romantic, a hero as easily as a man obsessed. The complexity, charm, and torment that were part of his dramatic persona live on in his films, many of which have become American classics. Yet Stewart never took his celebrity status too seriously. As a result, he was so beloved by the movie-going public that they referred to him as Jimmy, as if he were a member of the family.

Once, when asked how he'd like to be remembered, Stewart stammered a bit then replied, "I'd say, a guy that believed in hard work, and decent values, love of country, love of family, love of community, and love of God." They were the same values he learned as a youngster growing up in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

William C. Kashatus, Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage.

The author and editor thank Timothy F. Harley, executive director of the Jimmy Stewart Museum, Indiana, Pennsylvania, for his assistance with this article and for providing illustrations.

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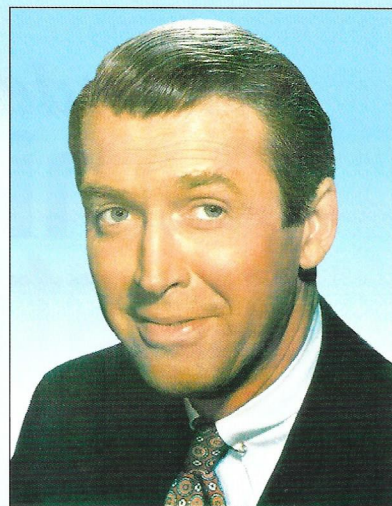
Smith, Starr. *Jimmy Stewart: Bomber*

Individuals interested in exploring the life of Jimmy Stewart should begin with the museum dedicated to the actor in his hometown of Indiana, Pennsylvania. Located on the third floor of the community's Indiana Free Public Library, 835 Philadelphia St., the Jimmy Stewart Museum, established in 1995, captures the actor's quiet magic and small-town charm that catapulted the beloved movie star to enduring fame. Visitors begin their tour in an intimate, 1930s vintage movie theater with a state-of-the-art sound and projection system. An orientation film highlights Stewart's career in film, radio, and television. One of Stewart's eighty feature films is shown in the theater on Saturdays and Sundays at 1 p.m.

The museum installation provides a timeline offering an overview of the actor's life and career as a military hero, entertainer, civic leader, and family man in the context of local and national history. The timeline begins with the arrival of Stewart's ancestors in Indiana County in the late eighteenth century and discusses their role in the region's early history. Included in the exhibit are large images and text panels that address Stewart's extensive film and stage career and includes original movie posters and photographs beginning in the 1930s. The actor's World War II days as a bomber pilot are featured as is his subsequent career as a brigadier general in the U.S. Air Force Reserves. Objects and artifacts include Stewart's personal desk and chair along with numerous awards and citations presented by the motion picture industry film critics, the Boy Scouts, and other organizations. There's a daguerreotype of his great-grandfather wearing a Civil War uniform, baby photographs of the actor, and his father's desk used in the family hardware store.

Across the street from the museum is the site of the Stewart family's hardware store, last owned and operated by the actor's father, Alexander. Next door to the museum, visitors can see the statue dedicated to Stewart on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1983. The spacious Dutch Colonial-style house where Stewart grew up is only a few blocks away at 104 North Seventh St., but it is privately owned and not open to the public.

The Jimmy Stewart Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Adult admission is \$5, with discounts for seniors, students, and children. For more information, e-mail curator@jimmy.org or telephone (724) 349-6112 or toll-free (800) 83-JIMMY. The museum's website www.jimmy.org/ posts an events calendar, filmography, and virtual tour.



JAMES M. STEWART MUSEUM FOUNDATION



Opened in 1995, the Jimmy Stewart Museum in Indiana celebrates the life of a native son and the legendary career of a screen idol.
