

Ava Gardner Museum unveils new exhibit 'Ava: My Real Story'

Great Old Pals: A display featuring Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck at the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield, North Carolina. (Anthony C. Hayes)

Smithfield, NC — Ava Gardner — perhaps the most alluring starlet of Hollywood's Golden Age — looked enough like a mythical goddess to persuasively play such a part on film. But long before donning a Grecian chiton and sandals in *One Touch of Venus*, Ava ran barefooted through the freshly-plowed soil of a tobacco farm in North Carolina.

Ava's real-life journeys may have taken her from New York and Los Angeles to London, Madrid, Monaco, and Rome, but Johnston County in eastern North Carolina would always be home. And it is here — in Smithfield — she rests today with her family and friends.



Ava Gardner's birthplace was once surrounded by a 1,700 acre farm. (Anthony C. Hayes)

It is also in Smithfield where a state of the art museum lovingly presents the life of the headstrong hometown girl and Hollywood legend.

Separating fact from fiction is an intriguing new exhibit at the Ava Gardner Museum, simply titled: "Ava: My Real Story." The display — which includes an interactive kiosk — highlights Ava's North Carolina roots, lasting friendships, charitable work, love and marriage to Frank Sinatra, and her mixed encounters with the media.

The exhibit — which is housed in the museum library — was unveiled last Friday night, as part of this year's Ava Gardner Festival.

"Ava: My Real Story" joins many other fascinating displays at the Ava Gardner Museum, including personal letters, photographs, gifts, awards, costumes and clothing, a gold-plated derringer, and two rather large showcases — one housing artifacts associated with three of Hollywood's Ernest Hemingway adaptations (*The Killers*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and *The Sun Also Rises*) and one recalling Ava's films and friendship with her "great old pal," Gregory Peck.



Vinny Czepiel tries out the new touch-screen kiosk. (Anthony C. Hayes)

On hand for the opening were Ava's niece Mary Edna Grantham; great-niece Ava Thompson; and Carmen Vargas – Gardner's longtime housekeeper and personal assistant. Each took a few moments before the unveiling to share private memories of a very unassuming Ava Gardner.

Festival-goers could also take in a screening of *The Barefoot Contessa* and enjoy a guided, hour-long bus tour of Ava's childhood homes and her humble grave.

Museum Director Lynell Seabold told the *Baltimore Post-Examiner* the new exhibit was designed with a Millennial crowd in mind.

"Everyone is using touch-screen technology these days – that's how they get their information. So we wanted to incorporate that aspect into this latest exhibit. There's always that fear of losing your audience as the years go by, but if you look around here tonight, you'll notice there are a lot of younger people who are fans of **Ava Gardner** (<https://baltimorepostexaminer.com/marlene-dietrich-frank-sinatra-and-ava-gardner-inspired-playwright-willard-manus/2019/02/01>)."

She Was So Stunningly Beautiful

Sujin and Rebecca – two determined drama school students from New York – were amongst the two dozen or so younger individuals in the crowd of some 150 who braved a heavy rain on opening night.



Aspiring actresses Sujin and Rebecca with festival-goer Mercy Clayton. (Anthony C. Hayes)

"Ava Gardner was my mom's favorite actress," explained Alaska native Sujin, "so growing up, I watched all of her movies. I didn't know until recently that this museum existed, so on a whim, I asked Rebecca if she wanted to come down with me."

"It was a pretty easy drive from my parents home in Delaware," chimed Rebecca. "This is a cute little town, and of course the connection to Ava just gives me chills. In my second year of school, one of the films I watched was *The Killers* with Burt Lancaster and Ava. She was amazing, and you can see how she became one of the most important figures in Hollywood. She was so stunningly beautiful and her personality is way out there. I'd like to be like that, and being here as an aspiring actress and seeing her costumes makes me feel like, 'Yeah – I can do that!'"

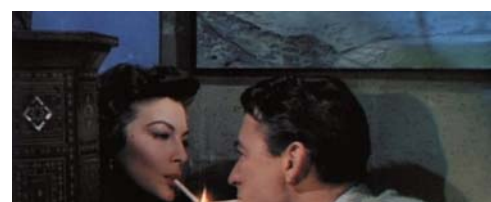
Museum Board Member Rick Lotz told us he hopes the new exhibit helps to dispel some of the more outlandish things that are said about Ava.

"Like most Hollywood stars – especially the ones who value their privacy – there are a lot of things that are said or written just because they sell newspapers and magazines. We're trying to correct some of the myths we hear everyday when people come to tour the museum."

We asked Lotz if he would cite one example.

"Well, a lot of people think that a Hollywood movie star – especially someone of Ava's caliber – must have been aloof or hard to get close to. In reality, she was probably the most down-to-earth person who ever went to Hollywood.

"Other myths revolve around her financial status, but she invested very wisely and left a substantial endowment for her remaining sisters when she died. That money has passed not only through her family, but to her two favorite charities: The Queen Victoria Hospital and The Animal Trust, which are both in London."





Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck in an iconic screenshot from *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.

Lotz said Ava's concern for others, her love of animals, and the bonds of her lasting friendships, can all be clearly seen in a call she made to Gregory Peck shortly before she died.

'Ava was ill, so she contacted her great friend Gregory Peck and said, 'I'm concerned about what will happen to Carmen and my corgi when I die.' Peck said, 'They can both come live with me.' That is exactly what happened. Carmen and the corgi went to live with Peck and his wife. And after Peck and his wife had both passed away, Carmen went to live with their daughter.'

Property Of Knots Landing

Mary Edna Grantham still laughs when she recalls one trip to Raleigh to greet her aunt Ava at the airport.

'Back in those days, you'd dress up just to go shopping. But we were standing in there, waiting for her to get off the airplane, and I don't think anyone recognized her. She was wearing plain old blue jeans, a grey sweatshirt, her dark glasses – even though it was night – and flip-flops.

'Now, you could say anything to her, and I said, 'Didn't you have anything besides flip-flops to wear?' She said, 'Oh, they are comfortable.' So, she took one off and showed it to me. On one side, someone had written: PROPERTY OF KNOTS LANDING and on the other side it said DO NOT REMOVE.

'Ava could have cared less!

'When you talk about the true Ava, she was so relaxed around us. Mother would say, 'Ava, we're going to the grocery store; put on some lipstick' and Ava would say, 'I'm NOT putting on lipstick when I come home to Johnston County.'

'That's how she wanted to be, even if she did steal some flip-flops.'

A Lousy Movie Star

Carmen Vargas shared some of her earliest memories of working for Ava Gardner.



'You're My Thrill' was a demo recorded for Ava by Frank Sinatra. (Anthony C. Hayes)

'When I first came to work for her, I introduced myself as Carmen Vargas. She replied, 'Ah, Maria Vargas,' but I said, 'No – I am Carmen Vargas.' She said, 'I know', but I didn't understand what she meant by saying the name Maria Vargas.

'As I worked, I didn't know who she was or what she did for a living. My only concern was that I could hear her, going from room-to-room, talking, talking. I

thought, 'She is a nice lady, but something is wrong. Why does she go from room-to-room talking to herself?'

"Some months later, she said to me, 'Carmen, I would like you to come with me to work.' I said, 'Where are we going?' and she said, 'Maybe Mexico. But don't worry. I'll see you are taken good care of.' I still didn't understand, so I asked, 'What kind of work will you do in Mexico?' and she replied, 'Carmen! Don't you know I am a lousy movie star???'

"That was when I realized that the reason she said Maria Vargas when we met was because that was the role she played in *The Barefoot Contessa*.

"Whenever we would travel, it was my responsibility to take care of Morgan, her little corgi dog. When she passed away, Morgan and I went to California to work for Mr. Gregory Peck.

"I taught Morgan to shake hands, so he would greet guests, and Mr. Peck called him the 'Gentleman from England.' When Morgan died, it was very hard for me, because he was my last connection to Miss Gardner.

"Mr. Peck was very kind. He said, 'We've got to do a nice funeral for this Gentleman from England.' So we stood at his graveside in the yard, and Mr Peck put a nice Chinese elm tree on the top of his grave. And then we placed a plaque on the grave which read: Morgan Gardner Vargas."

The Real Ava Gardner

Ava Thompson said the question she is most asked about her famous great-aunt is, "What was she really like?" Thompson recalled some of the impressions she had as a young teen while visiting Ava in New York.



Ava's Killers dress replica was created by Raleigh designer Danielle Wiggins.
(Anthony C. Hayes)

"There are so many vignettes I could have selected – some are really big, like spending an afternoon at Barbara Streisand's Park Avenue residence or having lunch with Roger Maris. That was a big moment for me. Some of you are old enough to remember that Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's single-season home run record. But the memory I'd like to share is very small.

"Winnie the Pooh said, '*The smallest things take the most room in your heart.*'

"In the fall of 1961, my mother and grandmother loaded me onto a plane in Raleigh, and I flew to Newark with a coconut cake and a bottle of peach brandy. Ava and her driver met me at the airport, and I knew I was in store for a very exciting weekend. On Sunday morning, we had brunch at the Plaza Hotel – that would be a story unto itself – but afterward we took a stroll down 5th Ave. and came across an open bookstore.

"We went in, and I rushed straight to the magazine rack and grabbed a copy of *Mad* magazine. I thought Alfred E. Newman was just a fine fellow. Ava said that I could have the magazine, but she also wanted me to pick out some books. I selected a Nancy Drew novel I hadn't read, but she moved me along and picked out *Winnie the Pooh* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

"Ava was always interested in my education.

"When we got back to the hotel and settled in, Ava took out the books and began to read to me. I thought that was a bit strange because I was 12, but she read for a bit and then asked me to read. I was nervous at first, but once she said I read well, I really started to get into it.

"She'd close her eyes, and I thought if she fell asleep, I could go read the Mad magazine, but she didn't. Then she opened her eyes, took *The Wind in the Willows*, and found a particular passage where Ratty said to Mole – and he says this most dreamily – *'My friend, there is nothing, absolutely nothing half as much worth doing as just messing about in boats.'*

"Ava said, 'I like that – that's true. I really love just messing around.' She had dropped the 'in boats' part.

"Ava was happiest when she was just messing around. She was never particularly invested in her work. She worked so that she could have the money to just mess around.

"At home, I got into trouble for messing around and not doing my chores or my homework. But Ava was so wise.

"She was such a great teacher and mentor because she showed me the balance between the virtue of simply having fun and the virtue of being industrious.

"I hope that story gives you a glimpse of Ava Gardner. You know, we judge people sometimes by the way they relate to animals and children. Ava loved her animals, and she was good to all of the children in her life.

"And that, my friends, was the *real* Ava Gardner."

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The Ava Gardner Museum is located at 325 E. Market Street in Smithfield, North Carolina. For more information, including the closing date of Ava: My Real Story, museum hours and special events, visit [The Ava Gardner Museum. \(https://avagardner.org\)](https://avagardner.org)

Other area attractions may be found at the [Johnston County Visitors Bureau. \(https://www.johnstoncountync.org\)](https://www.johnstoncountync.org)



The Sun Also Rises display at the Ava Gardner Museum. (Anthony C. Hayes)





Ava Gardner rests today with her family and friends in Smithfield, North Carolina. (Anthony C. Hayes)

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