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Off the Beaten Path: The Ava Gardner Museum & Burial Site

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Called “the most photographed woman in the world,” at one point, MGM was getting 3,000 requests a week for photos of Ava Gardner.

She was called the most photographed woman in the world, was Frank

Sinatra's greatest love, and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. She lit up the big screen and captured audiences with her natural beauty, poise and earthy acting. Her tumultuous love life made headlines that flew off the newsstands. She lived in such glamorous places as Los Angeles, Spain, and London. But at her core, she was a country girl from a North Carolina community so small it didn't even earn a dot on the map. A visit to the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield will walk you through the life of this talented, enchanting, fiercely independent woman.

Ava Lavinia Gardner was born on Christmas Eve, 1922, in Grabtown in a house with no indoor plumbing. She was the youngest of seven children, and her father was a poor tenant farmer who grew tobacco and cotton. She was a tomboy who loved to go barefoot. When she grew up she wanted to get married, have children, stay home and cook fried chicken for her family, just like her mother had done. It's easy to imagine the life she might have lived if her stunning beauty hadn't catapulted her into stardom, almost overnight.

On a trip to New York to visit her older sister, Ava's brother-in-law, Larry Tarr, took a picture of Ava and displayed it in the window of his Fifth Avenue photography studio. An MGM employee noticed the photo, which led to Ava landing a screen test. During the test, Ava's southern drawl was so thick that the talent scout couldn't understand a word she said, so he asked her to stop talking and simply walk around the set. Her beauty alone was enough to win over the talent scout, and in 1941, she was offered a seven year MGM contract for \$50 a week, barely a living wage in the big city of Los Angeles. She began training in acting and was taught to speak without an accent.

Shortly after moving to LA, she was touring the MGM lot when she was spotted by Mickey Rooney, who at the time was dressed as Carmen Miranda for a comedy skit. Upon seeing the young Ava, he was instantly smitten, and although she initially rejected his advances, the two were married after only a few dates. In less than a year, Ava had gone from a small-town nobody to being married to the biggest star of the day.

But Rooney was a notorious playboy, and married life didn't calm him down. The two were divorced a year later. Ava was soon married again, to band leader and clarinetist Artie Shaw. Her second marriage was over as quickly as the first.

Ava's third and final marriage was to the love of her life, Frank Sinatra.

"Ava and Sinatra made one of the great, passionate, mad love encounters of all time," Ava's biographer Lee Server said in an interview with the BBC. "At the same time, they fought all the time, they fought like wild beasts. It was legendary, people in a restaurant or a night club at nearby tables would worry about getting hit by a flying bottle or a steak knife coming through the air."

Ava's and Sinatra's marriage would end in 1957, but the two remained close until Ava's death in 1990. Ava would never remarry.

Meanwhile, Ava's career had taken off. In 1946, she was loaned to Universal Studios for the femme fatale role of Kitty Collins in the movie adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." This would be the role that would propel her to stardom. The museum displays a replica of the

stunning black satin evening dress worn by Ava for the part. Ava would go on to perform in two other Hemingway films and would later become close friends with the author while living in Spain.

Ava's career continued to climb with leading roles in several hit films. She was nominated for an Academy Award for best actress for her role in "Mogambo" (1953). She won the Silver Shell for Best Actress at the San Sebastián Film Festival and was nominated for a BAFTA Award and a Golden Globe for her performance in "The Night of the Iguana" (1964). Her Silver Shell award can be seen at the museum. Also on display is the original dress worn by Ava during the popular musical "Show Boat" (1951). Movie posters from films like "Pandora and the Flying Dutchman" (1951) and "The Barefoot Contessa" (1954) adorn the walls around the museum.

But Ava was growing tired of Hollywood, and filming internationally had given her a taste for life outside of the United States.

"One trip abroad, honey, and I almost never looked back," Ava wrote in her autobiography, "Ava: My Story."

After Ava's marriage to Sinatra fell apart, Ava moved to Spain, where she would fill a decade with partying, flamenco dancing, and men. At 46, Ava moved to London, where she would live a more sedate life until her death from pneumonia just after her 67th birthday. She was buried in Smithfield beside her mother and father. The Ava Gardner Museum is just one mile from her grave.

Throughout her life, despite her fame and fortune, her many romances,

and her travels around the world, Ava Gardner stayed true to her North Carolina roots, coming back home often to visit her family.

“She was pretty much a very down-home person despite her Hollywood aura,” says Donna Czepiel, museum docent. “I think that if people come [to the museum] they’ll get a real sense of who she was.”

Farmer’s daughter. International celebrity. Swashbuckler. Above all, Ava was a woman who lived life to the fullest with no regrets.

“If I had to live my life over again,” Ava wrote in her autobiography, “I’d live it the same way....”

The Ava Gardner Museum is located at 325 E. Market St., Smithfield. Ava’s burial site is located one mile northeast of the museum at the corner of Market St. and NC-210 W.