

Opinion Article in the *The Smithfield Herald* on March 14, 1978)

“Isn’t It Time That Smithfield Saluted Ava?”

By Doris Cannon
Herald Staff Writer

When I was a 12-year-old curled up with a magazine in a North Carolina mountain porch swing, I learned about a place called “Smithfield.” And, like people all over the world, I did not hear about it because it had a Klan sign or tobacco markets or because of anything or anybody – except Ava Gardner.

I thought it was marvelous that Ava was from North Carolina!

So you can imagine my puzzlement when years later I came to live and work in a place called Smithfield and found not one sign anywhere noting that Ava had put the town on the map.

There is no Ava Gardner Street. There are no signs proclaiming the birthplace of Ava Gardner. There are no pictures of Ava Gardner in the halls of her old Alma Mater.

Why?

Some say it would be unfair to single out Ava when so many Smithfieldians have made great strides in the world.

True, this place seems to have produced more than its share of successful native sons and daughters. But name one who has come close to Ava on the scale of fame. It can’t be done.

I’m not talking about a woman who was married to two show business immortals, Mickey Rooney and Frank Sinatra, and who was a friend of the legendary Howard Hughes. I’m not even talking about one of the most beautiful faces ever to grace the silver screen. Forget that.

I’m talking about a woman who is a fine actress, a dedicated artist, a genuine, pure-T Movie Star!

And I’m certainly not saying Ava needs recognition from Smithfield. (Would half a cup of water enhance the Neuse River?)

I’m saying it is way past time for Smithfield to stand up and say, “Hey everybody, Ava Gardner grew up here!” It’s time to get this feather in the town’s cap out from under the sweatband and up in the breeze where it can be seen.

People who have lived here all their lives probably don’t realize this, but Smithfield is about as forgettable a place on the surface as one is likely to find anywhere.

Before I moved here, I must have passed through the town 50 times, and never noticed it once. There is absolutely nothing to distinguish it from any other small Southern town. Nothing.

But if there was a sign on Market Street, or on the side of one of those bland, boring buildings, saying, "Hi Folks, You're in Ava Gardner's Old Hometown," people would certainly remember they had been through Smithfield. It would give the town a little personality and give passers-through something to go home and talk about.

Out in California, the letters H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D are being washed down the mountainside by torrential rains. It all seems very symbolic of a vanishing golden age that carried us out of the doldrums, through the heartaches, and sometimes onward toward our dreams.

As the Stattler Brothers sing, "The movies were great medicine. Thank you, Thomas Edison, for giving us the best years of our lives."

Thomas isn't around anymore. Neither is Clark Gable. They aren't making Marilyn Monroes these days or Judy Garlands. There is a short supply of John Waynes and Jimmy Stewarts and Kathryn Hepburns and Elizabeth Taylors.

And there is only one Ava Gardner, from a place called Smithfield, North Carolina.

Let's let the world know it. How about it, Chamber of Commerce?