



Town of Smithfield revives the Ava Gardner Festival

By **Michael Futch**

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SMITHFIELD — During the 1940s and '50s, Hollywood actress Ava Gardner graced the screen as a larger-than-life presence.

Some still consider her the most beautiful actress in Hollywood history. Others may remember her toward the end of her career, playing the tempestuous Ruth Sumner Galveston on the primetime CBS soap opera, “Knots Landing.”

Nearly three decades since her death, the sloe-eyed beauty with the distinctive cleft chin remains a larger-than-life figure for many in her hometown Johnston County.

So much so, that the Ava Gardner Festival — after four years of inactivity — is being revived in Smithfield, home to the downtown Ava Gardner Museum.

“This used to be a huge festival. We used to have a ton of people come out,” Ashby Brame, spokeswoman for the Johnson County Visitors Bureau, said. “They would do all these movie showings. They normally would do heritage tours. As far as bringing back the festival, we’re bringing back all the aspects of it. We’re really excited about that.”

Gardner, who appeared in 59 motion pictures during her lifetime, including “Night of the Iguana,” “Show Boat,” “The Sun Also Rises” and “On the Beach,” was born some seven miles east of Smithfield in the rural crossroads of Grabtown. She’s buried near the outstretched limbs of a huge magnolia tree in Sunset Memorial Park on the edge of Smithfield.

The grave marker simply reads:

Ava Lavinia Gardner

Dec. 24, 1922

Jan. 25, 1990

“I grew up watching her movies and all that,” said 67-year-old Bryan Hobbs, who on a sunny Wednesday afternoon was watering the flowers at the grave sites of his father, mother and mother-in-laws in the cemetery. “I think a lot of people still living knew her then. They still watch her movies on Turner (Classic Movies). I think she’ll be well known for a few more years.”

Hobbs said his mother had told him that his aunt, the late Ida Mae Lee, used to spend the night with Ava when they were young girls and students in high school.

“They were good friends,” he said.

Hobbs knew all about the resurrection of the festival and, as a lifelong resident of Smithfield, the Ava Gardner Museum. Along with the Carolina Premium Outlets just off nearby Interstate 95, the museum continues to be a tourist draw, luring visitors to town and helping to boost the local economy in the process.

“A lot of people come to the museum from all over the country,” he said, his red Ford pickup running all the while on the narrow Sunset Memorial Park roadway. “A lot of retired people come.”

The museum on East Market Street will serve as the central hub of activity for the two-day Ava Gardner Festival. A new interactive museum exhibit, a showing of Gardner’s “The Barefoot Contessa,” heritage tours of her birthplace and resting place, and musical entertainment are all on the agenda.

“She’s still considered one of the most popular actresses of all time,” Brame said. “We have quite a few young people coming to the museum. As far as media goes, when I travel, Ava Gardner is one of the things we’re most known for, nationally and internationally.”

Opening night activities include the unveiling of the “Ava: My Real Story” exhibit in the former museum library. According to publicity materials, this display will showcase Gardner’s personal side. The actress who shared the screen with such major Hollywood actors as Gregory Peck, Richard Burton, Burt Lancaster and Clark Gable — while often playing the femme fatale — was said to be loyal, warm and loving as a friend.

She also was known to be a hard-drinking, wisecracking, libidinous vamp, and at least once described in print as a liberated woman before the term was even invented.

Despite her sultry, soft-focus beauty and onscreen acclaim, her headlines-making marriages to actor Mickey Rooney, swing bandleader Artie Shaw and jazz singer Frank Sinatra, and an international playgirl lifestyle that included homes in Spain and England, the museum touts Gardner as embracing her country roots.

Born on a tobacco farm, she retained a lifelong love of earthy language and going barefoot.

“Although no one believes me,” Gardner was once quoted as saying, “I have always been a country girl and still have a country girl’s values.” Her favorite foods were those she loved as a child, including fried chicken, cornbread and coconut cake.

Visitors will read about those things and glean plenty more from the 5,000-plus-square-foot exhibit space inside the museum, which first opened in 1981 and now houses what museum director Lynell Seabold calls thousands of artifacts.

“Ava believed it belonged here,” said the 59-year-old San Diego native, who took over the position a little over two years ago.

The new wall exhibit in the former museum library will include a touchscreen display, a kiosk where visitors can access vintage photographs of Gardner.

“We’re really branching out,” Seabold said. “We’re trying to get into the current world of museums. It’s a totally new style of exhibit. It’s going to be a new display, going forward.”

For the museum board, it's all about adding more visuals in this youth-skewed world of visual overload to go with what largely has remained a static but vast collection of artifacts, costumes, movie posters, pictures, movie scripts and personal effects of the screen legend.

"This is a great place to be," Seabold said from her museum office. "When people come in the museum, they are happy to be here."

Dissatisfied with Hollywood life and the Hollywood system, Gardner moved to Spain in 1955. Most of her films thereafter were made abroad. And while stardom may have transformed the country girl from Johnston County into a jet-setting cosmopolitan, she never overcame a deep insecurity about life in the spotlight and about her profession.

Ava never believed in her acting abilities.

Once asked about her onscreen work, she replied, "Christ, what did I ever do worth talking about? Every time I tried to act, they stepped on me. That's why it's such a god(expletive) shame. I've been a movie star for 25 years and I've got nothing, nothing, to show for it."

She would spend her last 22 years living in England.

At age 67 in 1990, Gardner died of bronchial pneumonia in Westminster, London.

For decades, she had stood out as one of Hollywood's true stars.

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