

# WIDE AWAKE JOHNSTON



The 5,000-square-foot Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield includes many of Gardner's personal dresses and costumes from her movie roles and television appearances. The museum has added five new exhibits this year. Contributed photo

## ALL ABOUT AVA

### Smithfield venue honors movie star's small town roots

By Janelle Clevinger

SMITHFIELD — In the 1950s, Ava Gardner was a household name having starred in Hollywood blockbuster films such as “Show Boat,” “Pandora and the Flying Dutchman,” “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” “The Barefoot Contessa,” “Bhowani Junction” and “On the Beach.” But her life began in the community of Grabtown in Johnston County as the youngest of seven children born to a tobacco sharecropper and his wife.

To honor her roots and her success, Ava Gardner exhibits were first held in Smithfield in 1979. In 1981, the Ava Gardner Museum opened in the old Brogden “teacherage,” Ava’s childhood home and a boarding school for teachers that Ava’s mother ran.

After moving in and out of several locations over the years, the museum found its permanent home in 2000 at 325 E. Market St., Smithfield.

In 2020, the museum suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic as most other businesses did, losing a large percentage of expected visitors. To add insult to injury, a plumbing disaster in January of this year caused the museum to flood.

“Although none of the collection was damaged, we had to remove everything and replace the carpeting, flooring and molding, repaint the entire space and even replace the kitchen cabinets and bathroom fixtures,” said Lynell Seabold, the museum’s executive director. “The renovations were extensive, and much in the museum is brand new, although our square footage — over 5,000 square feet of exhibit space — remains unchanged.”

The museum usually adds one or two new exhibits per year but decided to up that amount this year as major changes were happening anyway.

“Since we were changing everything, we decided to put in five brand new exhibits this year,” Seabold said.

#### NEW EXHIBITS

The new exhibits are costumes from Gardner’s films; costumes from Gardner’s television appearances; a chicken platter used by Gardner’s mother when she entertained her daughter and new husband, actor Mickey Rooney (photos of the actual visit are included in the exhibit); a dress from Gardner’s personal collection; and a dress worn by Gardner made with material obtained by Howard Hughes. Hughes, an eccentric aviator and businessman, and Gardner were close friends for over 20 years.

“During WWII, silk was a precious commodity as it was being used for parachutes,” Seabold said. “Howard, in his never-ending quest to impress Ava, got some of the very hard-to-obtain silk material and had a dress made for her.”

Seabold said that the museum is always adding new items to its collection, staying in constant contact with several Gardner memorabilia collectors.

“I just purchased a new artifact from a collector we have been in contact with for years,” Seabold said. “He decided to sell a few items, and we were able to purchase an artifact from Ava’s film “Show Boat.”

“We also have an artifact that we just added to the collection that was loaned to us by Ava’s great-niece, who was named after Ava, as well as a charm that was given to Ava by Howard Hughes, both of which have never been on exhibit before,” Seabold added. “We do have several items that have come from the family, and we are lucky to have many family members who have been involved with the museum and been on our board of directors.”

Gardner, who was born on Dec. 24, 1922, would have turned 100 in 2022, and the museum is planning on celebrating in a big way.



“We are having a year-long celebration of Ava’s 100th birthday starting with the Ava Gardner Festival on Oct. 7 and 8, 2022, and going throughout 2023,” Seabold said. “We have many events and special plans in the works and are in touch with several collectors, hoping to have an exhibit of items from collectors around the world during our special celebration.”

Seabold said that hearing what visitors have learned about Gardner while visiting the museum reinforces her belief that the museum is serving its purpose.

“I love when our visitors say they learned about Ava’s personal life and who she was as a person,” Seabold said.

“Most of us know about Ava’s film career, and we do cover her career at the Ava Gardner Museum, but to be able to give our visitors the feeling that they ‘know’ Ava is important. She was funny, loyal, generous, loving, and we want people to know she did not have any ‘airs’ about being a famous movie star. At the end of the day, she was still that simple North

Carolina girl who is now buried here in Smithfield with her family, as she requested.”

“Ava came from humble beginnings in rural North Carolina and became one of the most famous and sought-after actors in the world,” Seabold continued.

“She was an independent, open-minded woman ahead of her time. She paid her own way throughout her life and was a lifelong supporter of equal rights. Growing up as a child in the segregated South, she went on to support racial equality causes and to stand up for her friends who experienced bigotry or intolerance.”

When Gardner was 11 years old, her family moved to Newport News, Virginia, to search for work. At 15 years old, Gardner moved to Rock Ridge in Wilson County after her father’s death.

She attended high school there and graduated in 1939. She then attended secretarial classes at Atlantic Christian College (now Barton College) for about a year before visiting her sister in New

## Plan to Go?

The Ava Gardner Museum is located at 325 E. Market St. Smithfield.

Parking is available on the street as well as in a parking lot behind the museum building.

Hours are Monday through Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission is \$12 (ages 18 – 64); \$10 (ages 65 and up); \$10 (active-duty military); \$10 (ages 13 to 17); \$8 (ages 6 to 12); and free for children under 6. A special group rate for 10 or more people is offered for \$10 per person.

For more information, contact the museum at 919-934-5830 or email [avainfo@avagardner.org](mailto:avainfo@avagardner.org).

York and catching her big break after a talent scout saw her photo in the window of her brother-in-law’s studio.

Gardner was married three times: to actor Mickey Rooney, jazz musician and composer Artie Shaw and singer and actor Frank Sinatra. In 1968, she moved to London, where she lived until her death in January 1990 at the age of 67. She had continued acting until 1986. In 1999, she was ranked No. 25 on the greatest female screen legends of classic American cinema list by the American Film

Institute.

Gardner is buried in Smithfield’s Sunset Memorial Park next to her siblings and their parents, Jonas and Molly Gardner.

Seabold said that the Ava Gardner Museum is a source of pride for many people in Smithfield.

“We have brought visitors to Smithfield from every state and at least 22 other countries,” Seabold said. “They will often ask our docents for recommendations for places to eat, to shop, or stay the night which helps our local economy.”

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