



This never-before-published photo shows Bette on the beach in Maine with Michael, Margot, and B.D. Photo courtesy of the author.

Bette's Maine Interlude

ew glimpses of "Witch Way," the Cape Elizabeth oceanfront estate shared by actors Bette Davis and Gary Merrill, have just surfaced in the estate the couple's Maine cook. By Matt Barker

Nho hasn't heard of famous Hollywood actress Bette Davis? Even younger generations know through "Bette Davis Eyes." But mention she lived in Cape Elizabeth and

many will return a blank stare. Still, it's true — Bette Davis really did live here, at "Witch Way," throughout the 1950s with her husband, Gary Merrill, after the couple fell in love on the set of *All About*



Ruth Newell (l) with her sister, Frances.



Eve, the Oscar-winning motion picture, along with their children B.D., Michael, and Margot.

Here in the salt air of the Cape, on a dirt road off Old Shore Road on a dazzling multi-acre peninsula with its own rocky headlands and beach, Bette and Gary “embarked on life in their new residence with enthusiasm, remodeling, refurnishing, working on the garden, and keeping a succession of servants in a dither of excitement followed by joyous anxiety,” according to Charles Hingham in *Bette, the Life of Bette Davis*.

At least two of these “excited, anxious” attendants were locals here in the Portland area, including Ruth M. Newell (1908-1981) and Catherine Connolly Feeney (1900-1995). Both ladies were from large Irish families from St. Dominic’s Parish in Portland. Mrs. Feeney often did the laundry for the Merrills, and Bette would personally drive her home to

Portland... “but never Gary.”

Ruth Newell, the same age as Bette, was my mother’s aunt and regaled me with many stories of her time spent living and working at the Cape mansion, where she was their cook. Ruth would cook for huge dinner parties and was frequently kept busy round the clock.

Ruth was employed most of her life by wealthy families in the Greater Portland area. She was the cook for Theodore and Adelaide Wasserman, who perished in the infamous Coconut Grove fire of the early 1940s. But, of course, her biggest employer was Bette. Ruth’s lawyer called her into his office one day and said, “I have a new client for you.” In walks none other than the great actress, and Ruth nearly fainted.

Ruth was quite feisty and strong-willed, just like Bette, and surprisingly they got along well together. She liked Bette but rather disliked Gary. He was often a pain in the neck. Ruth occasionally took her

13 nieces and nephews to visit whatever mansion she was working in at the time, but never took my mother to Witch Way, so early on our family sensed it was something of “a bumpy ride” out there.

It was at Witch Way that little Margot Merrill, who had been adopted, became more than a problem child, displaying severe emotional and mental unbalance. She once stripped down to nothing and threw her clothes in the driveway on a particularly cold day. Another time she tried to choke a kitten Bette had recently given her. She also pulled the hair out of her brother Michael and cut him up with a piece of broken glass. At Witch Way, you might look out a picture window toward the sparkling Atlantic and see a piece of furniture come plummeting earthward from an upper floor – Margot would throw heavy chairs and tables out of windows, thankfully without injuring herself.

Margot’s behavior took a bad toll on Bette’s health and on her relationship with Gary. Finally, they took Margot to New York’s Presbyterian Hospital, where Margot was pronounced to be severely brain damaged, probably since birth, with an I. Q. of about 60.

After many disputes, Bette finally agreed Margot would be placed in an institution at Lake Geneva, in northern New York, where she remains to this day.

Bette Davis and Gary Merrill were very active in the Maine Democratic Party, the Children’s Theater, and a number of local charities. Gary formed a hockey team called Merrill’s Marauders. The team was composed of former college players, and they played right at Witch Way on a large pond in front of the house.

Bette, after semiretirement in the mid-1950s, again starred in several movies during her time living in Maine,

There was a lot of love at Witch Way, even though for the acid-tongued Davis and hard-drinking, kilt-wearing, Maine-loving Merrill, star of *12 O’Clock High*, it was something of “a bumpy ride.”

including 1955’s *The Virgin Queen*, in which she played Queen Elizabeth I. The movies often had huge premieres at the many theaters in Portland, including

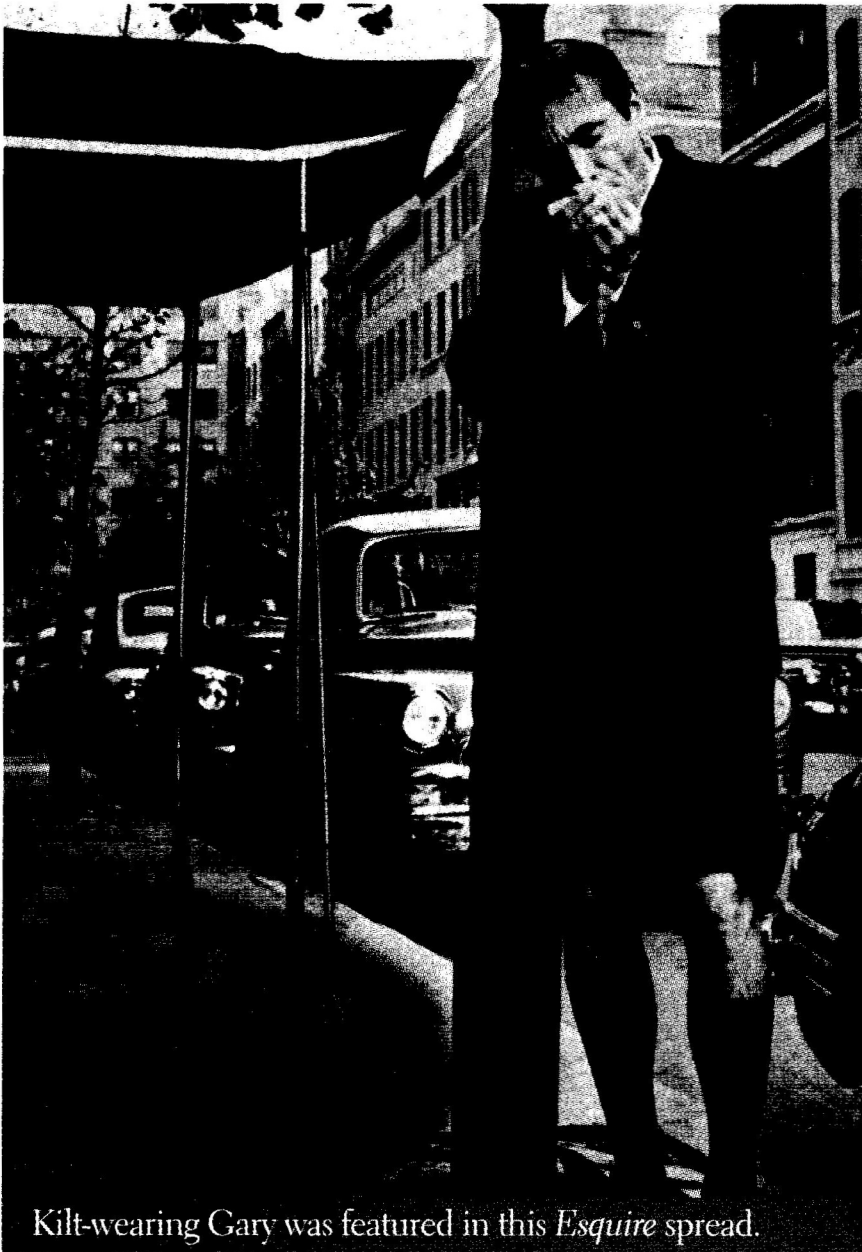


the State Theater. In 1959 she and Gary had a nationwide tour in "The World of Carl Sandburg" which premiered here at the time. The piece featured excerpts from the poet's works.

Although Bette and Gary had some rough times in Cape Elizabeth, Gary remembered their Maine interlude fondly. He lobstered off his back yard and in his 1988 autobiography, *Bette, Rita, & The Rest of My Life*, said the best times of his life had been spent with Bette and their children at Witch Way. This is in direct contrast to the less-than-idyllic picture painted by B.D. Harmon in 1985.

In 1960 Bette Davis and Gary Merrill were divorced, and they sold their Cape home and moved away.

Gary returned to Maine in 1965 to live, after escorting movie star Rita Hayworth for several years. Gary, whose mother had once been a Westbrook teacher, had many Maine ties, including summers growing up on Black Point in Scarborough and a stint at Bowdoin College. He made an unsuccessful bid for a Maine Congressional seat in 1968 and considered a run for the Presidency in 1976. Merrill was often seen wearing



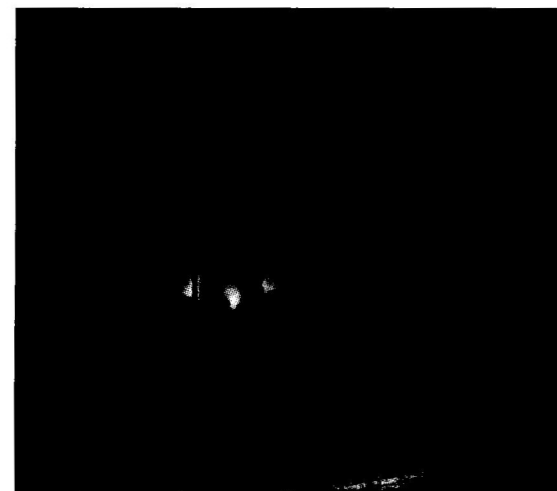
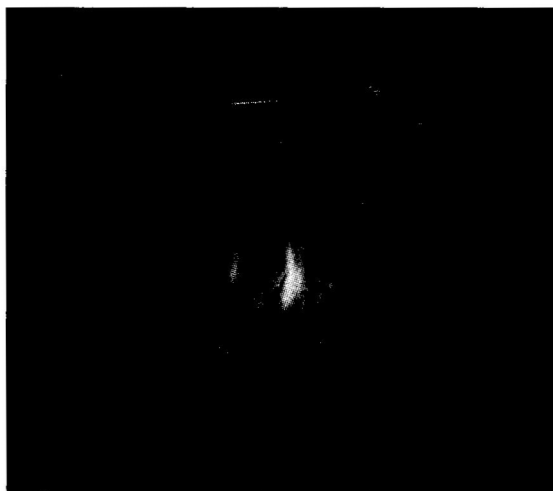
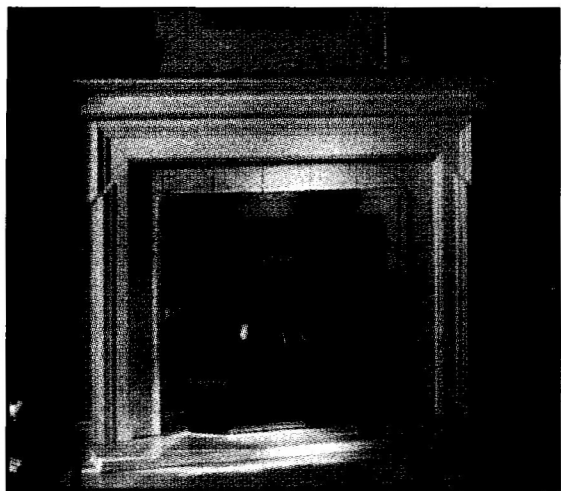
BETTE, RITA, & THE REST OF MY LIFE

Kilt-wearing Gary was featured in this *Esquire* spread.

kilts in the Portland area, saying he believed in wearing "no clothes at all, and this is the closest you can get to it in public." Although Gary played in 42 movies, he never reached the level of fame of Bette Davis, although he recorded breakthrough successes in *12 O'Clock High* and *All About Eve*. Gary did win a 1970 Monte Carlo TV Film Festival award for his portrayal of a Maine lobsterman, and until his death performed lucrative voiceovers for major firms such as Volvo and IBM.

From 1970 until 1985, Bette Davis did not speak to Gary. She broke the silence when Merrill, *Press Herald* photographer in tow, stood outside Falmouth

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Book Review with a sign urging people not to purchase *My Mother's Keeper*, a critical biography of Davis written by her daughter B.D, who attended Waynflete during the Witch Way years.

Ironically, a year later Bette bumped into Merrill on an airplane when she came to Portland to film *The Whales of August*.

After leaving Maine, Bette went on to star in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* a 1962 classic featuring Davis as a sadistic sister to Joan Crawford, 1978's *Death On The Nile*, and 1980's *The Watcher In the Woods*, among others. In 1987 she costarred with Lillian Gish in *The Whales of August*, a rather lackluster piece filmed entirely on an island in Casco Bay. It also featured Vincent Price,

Ann Sothern, and Harry Carey, Jr.

Bette Davis, who good-naturedly named Witch Way as a joke on herself, passed away in 1989 at the age of 81, and Gary Merrill, whose life

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seemed at times entwined with Bette's for 40 years, followed her into the great beyond only a few months later.

The *Portland Press Herald* for March 5, 1990, called Gary Franklin Merrill, 74, "a

movie, stage, and television actor, an amateur politician, author, bon vivant, war protester, and lover of Maine. He died of cancer at his Falmouth, Maine, home."

I do not know if my aunt Ruth Newell ever kept in touch with Bette after the actress removed from Maine in 1960. I do know my aunt fondly recalled her days spent at Witch Way. I recently discovered a photo (see page 15) in my aunt's collection showing Bette Davis and her children on the beach in Cape Elizabeth in 1954, a never-before-published photo, of course. Ruth Mary Newell, who was at one time the cook for Turner Jones, president of the local Coca-Cola Bottling Company, was the housekeeper for William S. Linnell, a prominent local attorney, until her retirement in 1971. She passed away in December 1981 at 73.

A detailed account of Bette Davis's time in Cape Elizabeth has yet to be written. Many do not know the story at all, and now, unfortunately, even her house is gone. It was razed a few years ago, much to the dismay of many. A huge modern house has since been built there, but to lovers of Maine, that dramatic property will always be remembered as Witch Way.

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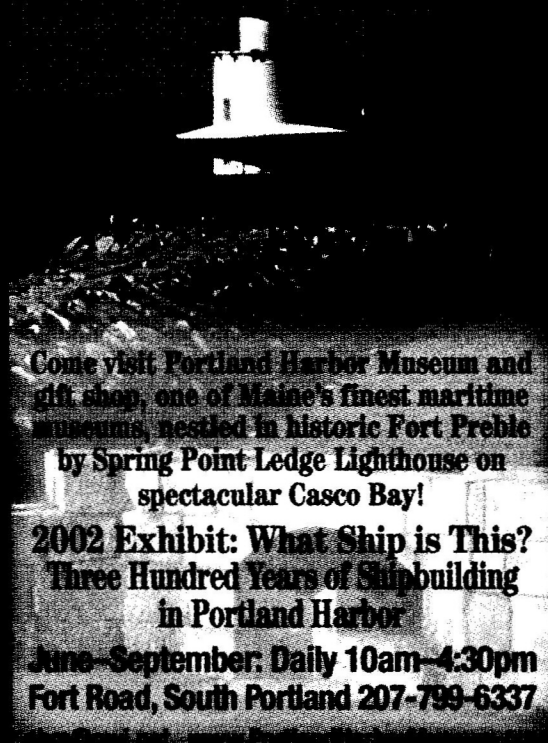
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