



Ms. Deeds

Jean Arthur as Babe Bennett with Gary Cooper in Frank Capra's Academy Award-winning *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1936. She earned an Oscar nomination for Best Actress in 1943's *The More the Merrier*. After retiring, from films, she taught drama at Vassar, where she had Meryl Streep as a student.

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Jean Arthur was one of us. Her wonder years growing up near India Street gave her the grit that makes her characters so memorable. BY WILLIAM & DEBRA BARRY

Though enigmatic, husky-voiced movie actress **Jean Arthur** (1900-1991) once charmed America as the embodiment of the modern, independent career woman, and enjoys still growing acclaim for her work in films including *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), *The Plainsman* (1936), and *Shane* (1953), few people realize she spent her formative childhood years in Portland on a street that has ceased to exist.

Three decades ago, we recall Francis O'Brien, the late dean of Maine booksellers, mentioning to us that movie director John Feeney Ford and United Artist president Hiram Abrams weren't the only Hollywood pioneers to spring from Portland. "There was that girl with the wonderful voice...Jean Arthur, who grew up on Munjoy Hill."

Mr. O'Brien, who knew more about Portland than just about anybody, was correct except that the young school girl in question lived below the Hill, just west of India Street. For this trifling inaccuracy he can be forgiven, considering that John Oller rounds the address off incorrectly to Congress Street in his superb study, *Jean Arthur: The Actress Nobody Knew* (Limelight Editions, 2007, \$18.95). Indeed, few Hollywood personalities, except John Ford in recent years have gotten better biographical treatment; The Oller book is first-rate.

Still, while the Arthur biography blows away a lot of dross from studio and filmography sources, such as the spurious year of her birth (which made her half a decade younger than she was), there are still things to be learned about the actress's childhood. Consider the make up and break up of her colorful, talented, dysfunctional family; the child's first introduction to a multi-ethnic neighborhood and school; her father's apparent central role in the sudden catastrophic failure of the venerable half-century-old Lamson Photographic Studio & Longfellow Gallery; as well as the forgotten story of the little public way where the family lived, the vanished Marie Terrace.

In 1908, eight-year-old Gladys Georgianna Greene, the future Jean Arthur, moved with her family from the Yankee-centric town of Plattsburgh, New York, to Portland's "Little Italy," the busiest, most diverse neighborhood in Maine's largest city. The address, 1 Marie Terrace off Congress Street, just west of India Street, was hard by North School, which Gladys would attend. It was a big adjustment socially and scholastically for a child used to a somewhat different life.

Her father, Hubert (Hube) S. Greene, a Vermonter, had gone west in his teens to become a cowboy. Meeting with marginal success, he added painting and photography to his talents. In Billings, Montana, the short, charming, steady-drinking cowpoke-photographer won the attention of the tall, fair, serious Hannah Neilson. They wed in

1890, and three sons followed in rapid succession. In 1893, the family decided to seek its fortune back east. Gladys, the last child and only daughter, was born at Plattsburgh, New York, in 1900. "Official" studio biographies would state New York City in 1905, but that was to make her younger for the fans. She was not alone. Director John Ford did the same, apparently out of personal vanity.

A check of the city directories shows that the Greenes were residing at 1 Marie Terrace between 1908 and 1910. One can search today's maps in vain for such a public way, because in 1915 the city fathers (in an effort at clarity?) changed the name to Congress Terrace. Finally, in 1967-68, during the frenzy of urban renewal, they threw up their hands and demolished the troublesome spot. Located between India and Hampshire Street, it's now the site of a parking lot.

Just a few years earlier, the *Sunday Telegram* ran a banner headline describing the neighborhood: "All Nationalities in Our Local Foreign Possessions: 'Little Italy' the Most Thoroughly Cosmopolitan Part of Portland."

Italians, Jews, Irish, Armenians, and African-Americans intermingled. One Irish longshoreman was quoted, "Jews are good enough for me when it comes to weddings. I'd be a Jew myself, except on St. Patrick's Day, if I could get an invite to a wedding every night." A sub-headline summarized, "One class fraternized well with another and there is very little trouble. Tolerant in their religious views. Women are business like. A Solitary Yankee. Worth visiting of an Evening."

While Yankees were in a minority, they were not unique. Sharing 1 Marie Terrace with Hube Greene's family was Shukry S. Bathouney (or Batlouney), a dealer in oriental goods. At Nos. 2, 3, and 4 were members of the Gorham, Blanchard, Breen, Gilhooley, Chase, Colman, Pridham, Carey, Munson, Nicholas, and Rosenberg clans. Yiddish, Armenian, and Gaeltacht were spoken in the proverbial McNalley's row of flats. Italian was just round the alley. What a change for an eight-year-old brought up on the quiet, tree-lined streets along Lake Champlain. One could be crushed, or one could learn and flourish. Though always a private person, even as a star, Gladys seems to have been an apt enough student in school, making the 1910 list of "Pupils not Late During the Year" and moving along her classes.

Her real education probably came in watching the children and neighbors of pre-World-War Portland, with its rich mix of accents, cultures and ideas. No actor could ask for more grist at such a formative age.

Interestingly, her father, as the new "Operator and Manager" of Portland's leading photography studio, no doubt photographed her among the multitude of classmates at North School. Several of these



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LEGENDS

school shots appear in the *Sunday Telegram* of October 11, 1911, with the banner, "Principal Parmenter of the North School is Able to Handle over One Thousand Students." TO HANDLE OVER ONE THOUSAND STUDENTS." Hube took some splendid big-city school shots, for nobody ever questioned his skill as an artist. According to Oller, Greene's arrival as operator and manager of The Lamson Studio and Longfellow Gallery was his big chance.

Located at 653½ Congress Street, the studio, founded in 1869 by Joseph H. Lamson (1841-1902), was known as "the finest studio east of Boston," having won acclaim for its portraits of poets Whittier and Longfellow as well as nature scenes. Hube took over from sons J. Harry and Frank Lamson. Just how a blow-in from Plattsburgh got the nod is unknown. Oddly, Frank Forrestall Adams, a Gray, Maine, native, had been managing Lamson from 1904 to 1908; why he was overlooked is unclear. In 1908, Adams founded his own rival photographic operations, which became the real successor to Lamson for decades to come.

Life at 1 Marie Terrace seems to have been a battle royal, with Hube moving in and out, sometimes on photographic jaunts to Florida. The ever-practical Hannah, a Christian Scientist who became an authorized healer, held the family together. At times, she worked as a seamstress and may even have taken in lodgers—who knows in Marie Terrace? Drinking was a family problem, and the first of various separations occurred.

The Lamson Studio seems to have done a slow fade. In the 1911 directory, Hube was working at the studio and a boarder at 298 Congress Street. In 1912, all the Greens sauntered south to Jacksonville, closing out the colorful, sad, but not entirely wasted Maine phase. Their rent on the Terrace was filled by the Attaya family and then the Donatellis.

In 1915, Gladys's parents patched things up and moved to New York City, where she entered, but did not finish, high school. By the 1920s, she was a stenographer-model, living at home, and in 1923 she took off for Hollywood with her mother on a one-year contract. Though her name had to be changed, she remained very much her own person. Jean Arthur did not hang out with the right crowd, hated cheesecake photos and publicity; her career was anything but



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meteoric. She signed during the silents, and her first film was the Ken Maynard western *Somebody Lied* (1923). Her second, in the same year, is far more interesting, if only because *Cameo Kirby* was based on a play by Kennebunkport summer resident Booth Tarkington and directed by John Ford. In fact, this was the first time Ford worked under that name.

The shared Portland tie was noted by both Jean "Greene" Arthur and John "Feeney" Ford, though the latter was brimming with malarkey when he recalled she was "a fine girl, very nice family in Portland." If Ford met the Greens, it was in Hollywood, not Maine, and "nice" is not the word that springs to mind, though enjoyable might have been.

The whole family, including the ever-quarreling Hube and Hannah, continued to be a vibrant, though sometimes annoying, part of the starlet's life, from her mother's early stage managing and criticism to her father's perpetual need for artistic encouragement and economic support. She stood by them to the end, in spite of her own romances and marriages.

In 1935, she did a serious film with Ford, *The Whole Town's Talking*, the first of her bachelor-girl movies. *Variety* smiled: "She is more individualistic, more typically the young American self-reliant, rather sassy, stenog. She will get other opportunities as a result of this auspicious baptism in flippancy."

The first of these fresh opportunities came with Frank Capra's classic *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936). Playing Babe Bennett, the hard-boiled reporter, she transforms herself with seeming effortlessness into a believable, sympathetic defender of the innocent Longfellow Deeds, played by the great Gary Cooper. One wonders if the name Longfellow didn't briefly spark a memory of Hube's lost studio in Portland. In any event, there would be 18 generally excellent movies in the years ahead, stretching to *Shane* in 1953. As an actress and as a person, Jean Arthur lived a long, full life in which she seems to have been true to her hard-earned, original character. More than a little bit of that was surely learned in old Portland, in a rundown apartment building on a vanished street. ■

▶ Don't miss Jean Arthur's classic screwball-comedy performances with Charles Coburn in *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941) and *The More the Merrier* (1943). For more Jean Arthur photos, visit portlandmonthly.com.



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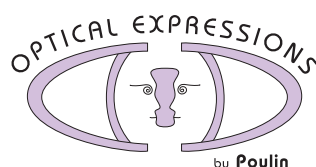
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