

Celebrity Watch

40 Years
Interviewing
Notables, Quotables,
&
Heroes

By

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Edited by

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&

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CELEBRITY WATCH

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Oceanside, California

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978-0-9779119-3-6

Printed in the United States of America

Lightning Source
1246 Heil Quaker Blvd.
La Vergne, TN 37086

Cover Design
by
Helen Hartley
PJ Graphics
Oceanside, California

Book Formatted
by
J. H. Martin
Eastern North Carolina

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a recall of forty-plus years of meeting, greeting, and interviewing the famous, near-famous, and other notables of my time.

While this might seem like a vanity piece, considering I came from a little Iowa farming community, the chances of anyone with my geographic background encountering even a fraction of the fascinating people I've met are slim—at best.

I've led a charmed life and one I'd like my family and friends to know about.

I've also included the stories of some unique World War II veterans from opposing sides.

Almost every notable person I've known and written about arrived at their respective station in life just as I did—being in the right place at the right time—choosing the right direction when we arrived at that fateful fork in the road.

We all had something in common: our ordinary lives became extraordinary.

Tom Morrow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to **Jim Martin** of Eastern North Carolina for his many hours spent in designing and formatting this book for print. Its professional look is because of him.

I thank **Tim Stahl** of Stahl Photographics of San Diego, California, for allowing me to use his April 1984 photographs of the “*Some Like It Hot*” gala held at the Hotel Del Coronado. He captured a night that was truly one to remember.

My hat is off to **Helen Hartley** of PJ Graphics in Oceanside, California, for hitting another cover design “homerun.” Helen always makes my efforts look great.

And, finally, I thank two of my most avid readers, my wife, **Rosalee Morrow**, and our friend, **Beverly Scaglione**, for their proof reading skills in helping to catch my typos and errant spellings.

To all of you, I am grateful!

FORTY YEARS OF FUN!

For an Iowa boy growing up far from the spotlight of celebrity, I have been blessed beyond belief in regards to meeting and rubbing shoulders with famous, near famous, and other notable people. To say I found myself in the right place at the right time would be an understatement.

I owe it all to my career in journalism and public relations. While I managed to attend performances of a number of celebrities during my formative years and the early part of my adult life, it wasn't until 1968, that the stars fell upon me.

I had one encounter as a teen-ager that could be considered celebrity status for those days of the '40s and '50s in the state of Iowa. The most powerful radio station was WHO in Des Moines. The "Voice of the Middle West" had a lot of original programming, especially in the morning. The "*Cliff & Helen*" show featured **Cliff** and **Helen Carl**, along with the Buckaroos. It was a fifteen minute music and comedy program that was a favorite "drive-time" offering.

Because my mother had grown up knowing Helen Carl, there were a few occasions where we got together and socialized. She and Cliff would travel throughout the state, taking their show on the road. On one of those occasions, they came to perform at a nearby town; so Mom fixed dinner for all of them. It was a lot of fun, and I thought it was "big stuff" because you could hear them every morning on the radio before I went off to school. It was a time when radio was king. In the mid-'50s, the Cliff and Helen show went off the air; Cliff became program manager for WHO when the station began broadcasting TV.

The Golden Tonsils

My first real celebrity encounter was early 1968, when I met singer **John Gary**. It was at a time when he was beginning to click in his short-lived singing career. I learned he was coming to Thomasville, Georgia for a one-man show on a relatively small stage. At that time, I was a schoolteacher in a Florida minimum security prison about sixty miles south of Thomasville.

My years as a police officer gave me a certain confidence and panache allowing me to approach anyone and start talking. I learned early on that most people will talk to you if approached in the right way.

On this particular occasion, my wife and I, along with another couple, a fellow teacher, and his wife, were in the audience. My friend's wife was confined to a wheelchair and was mesmerized by Gary. She had all of his albums and was a great fan. She wanted to meet him.

After the show, I simply got up and walked behind the curtains where I found the singer sipping on a glass of what appeared to be scotch whiskey. It was a small theater and there didn't appear to be any sort of security, so I was able to easily walk up to him and ask if he wouldn't mind coming down into the audience to meet our wheelchair-bound friend. The audience was mostly gone from the theater, so there was little chance he would be mobbed.

Gary graciously walked with me back down into the seating area where she anxiously awaited. He spent about ten minutes chatting with the four of us, all the time holding our friend's hand. It probably was the highlight of the young woman's rather dreary life, but it taught me one thing: celebrities can be real, ordinary people and, for most, you can talk with them.

John Gary's all too brief singing career was due primarily to the changing tastes in music. His Irish tenor crooning style went out of fashion, and he gradually faded from the spotlight. He didn't go quietly, however. John became an expert scuba diver, setting underwater endurance records, and even trained Apollo astronauts. He and a friend developed an underwater television system they later sold to oil companies to monitor deep-sea drilling.

John was married with eight children and a number of grandchildren. He died in 1998, at the age of sixty-six, after suffering

a number of years with prostate cancer. Fortunately, some of us still have a couple of his more than fifty record albums. His voice truly was golden.

The Candidates

My first newspaper job was as a reporter and photographer at The Bulletin in Bend, Oregon. I was there but a short six months before being promoted to managing editor at a sister newspaper in Eastern Oregon. While at The Bulletin, I was assigned to cover 1968 presidential candidates visiting Oregon. The two I interviewed were Florida Governor **Claude Kirk** and U.S. Senator **Robert F. Kennedy** of New York.

Kirk was the first Florida Republican governor since the Civil War. He was a brash, bigger-than-life politician with a penchant for being boastful. Governor Kirk didn't have a prayer of beating Richard Nixon for the nomination, but he spent more time on the road campaigning than he put in at his capitol office in Tallahassee. He was a one-term governor. In Texas, he would have been the perfect example of what those folks refer to as, "All hat and no cattle." He did wear a Western style hat while campaigning.

Kennedy, on the other hand, was charismatic, charming, and promised a struggling country a lot of hope. Had he lived, there was little doubt that he would have won. But, 1968 was a terrible year—two assassinations, riots, and the calamitous Democratic Convention in Chicago.

I "briefly" got to talk with Kennedy, asking a couple of questions when he appeared at the auditorium of Bend High School. Two weeks later he was dead.

Before leaving Bend for Baker, Oregon, I chased New York Mayor **John Lindsay** up Bachelor Butte, the popular ski resort outside of Bend. It was cold that day and, ironically, there were no other skiers on the slopes that day except Lindsay and an aide. I was able to get him to comment on his visit to Bend, which was supposed to be a secret. All I remember about that occasion was that I was freezing in my light, summer slacks (from Arizona), and that the mayor had very bad teeth. I've never figured out why people who can afford to do so, don't fix their teeth when they are ugly looking.

EAST TOWARDS THE SNAKE

The day after Robert Kennedy was shot, I was on my way to Baker as managing editor of the daily Democrat Herald. To someone who loves city life, Baker is a nightmare come true. It is near the Wallowa Mountains and rugged Hell's Canyon on the Snake River, the only river in the U.S. that flows north. Baker, now known as Baker City, is surrounded by beautiful snow-capped mountains. It's a five-hour drive to Portland, four-hours to Spokane, and two-hours to Boise—and that's all freeway driving on I-84. You get the idea.

Tinsel Town Moves North

The area was perfect for location filming of Paramount Picture's "*Paint Your Wagon*."

By the fall of 1968, Baker nearly was taken over by Hollywood. Stars, supporting cast, and several hundred crewmembers moved into the city, renting private homes and filling most of the motels and hotels. **Clint Eastwood** and **Lee Marvin** lived two blocks down the street from us. The dialogue coach lived next door.

Harve Presnell and his family was a couple of blocks away and were seen often. Because of my position in the community, the movie's PR man was always on my doorstep, pitching feature story ideas. And, there were many.

By doing those features, I met and even socialized with a good many of them. **Robert** and **Helen Easton** were frequent dinner guests at our home. Bob Easton had been a character actor in dozens of films, but he's best known for being Hollywood's top dialect coach. He can mimic any accent on earth. Easton usually plays a country boy or a southern Confederate-type colonel—he's the epitome of the "what's-his-name" actor. You readily recognize him, but can't place his name.

A number of the film crew were destined to go on to top jobs in Hollywood. Tom Shaw, to name one, was an assistant director on the film but later went on to be a director and assistant director on a number of notable films.

The actors and crew lived in Baker for about three months. They became part of the community and were seen everywhere.

For my part, I interviewed and drank with Lee Marvin—you couldn't just talk, you had to drink as well—spent time talking with wrestler-turned actor Don Hagerty, whose better-known name was "Hard-Boiled" Hagerty from his wrestling days. In the movie he simply was billed as "H.B. Hagerty."

Don and his wife became good friends, whom we visited a few years later in their home in Santa Monica.

The "*Nitty-Gritty Dirt Band*" was popular in the late '60s and was part of the cast. I had heard the actors were so pleased with the way Baker treated them that they wanted to give something back. I arranged a variety show featuring Presnell and the Dirt Band. Bob Easton did a comedy routine and others performed.

Presnell made two memorable movies in those days: *Paint Your Wagon* and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. He seemed to drop out of sight until the mid-'90s when he was rediscovered. In addition to playing the car-dealer-father in the hit movie *Fargo*, Harve also played General George C. Marshall in the war movie *Saving Private Ryan*. He also has done a number of drama and sit-coms on TV. Comparing his earlier movie work and later TV work is interesting because he's bald and the two personas are completely different.

Presnell has a booming, baritone voice. I'm sure he's been compared with Howard Keel numerous times because their voices and singing abilities were very similar. Harve died in 2009.

Another character actor I interviewed and had over for dinner a couple of times was **Ray Walston** of TV's *My Favorite Martian* fame. He was a delightful man and had a great time entertaining my son, Scott, and our baby daughter, Shannon.

Kay and I discovered that no matter how famous someone might be, they'll eat hamburger and potato salad.

During the filming of *Wagon*, movie producers wanted to pay back U.S. Senator **Wayne Morse**, D-Oregon, for his help in getting the movie located in his state. They spent a day making up the senior senator for one scene, which was filmed at Anthony Lakes, a popular ski resort in Eastern Oregon. Morse didn't talk much, patiently sat for make-up, and took direction for his scene where he had a one-word line: "There!" He had to point at an approaching group of riders.

The rushes looked great, but that scene never made it into the film's release. That might have had something to do with Senator Morse's defeat the next year by a young Republican, **Robert Packwood**. I can take some responsibility for getting Bob elected.

Because of my editorials, along with neighboring editors chiming in, Packwood carried Eastern Oregon by enough for him to win. He later thanked me saying I was one of the keys to his success. Needless to say, I was somewhat embarrassed many years later when Packwood was sent "packing" from the Senate for a sex scandal.

One good thing came out of Senator Morse's and Paramount's presence in Baker: I sold a lot of photos and stories to both the Associated Press and United Press International. The AP paid me \$7 a photo; UPI only \$5. Copy paid about \$2 a story.

I was anxious to move back to Arizona and out of the cold—weather-wise and otherwise. The only good thing coming out of Baker, Oregon, was me and an uncompleted

I-84.