

GLADYS WALTON on Gladys Walton by Janice Peters & Joe Ingraffia (7/14/24)

Interviewer: Thank you all for attending this evening's event sponsored by the Historic Society of Morro Bay. Tonight we are privileged to have as our honored guest, Gladys Walton, or more precisely, her spirit -self, speaking through Janice Peters, an actress and our former mayor. Gladys was a long time resident of Morro Bay, with an exciting Hollywood history that she'll be sharing with us.

Welcome, Gladys, we are delighted to have you with us.

Thank you, Joe, I'm very glad to be with you 'in spirit' this afternoon.

Interviewer: You've had a very interesting life, Gladys. To start at the beginning, what was your childhood like? Did you grow up in California?

Actually, I was born in Boston in 1903. My parents divorced when I was 3 and my mother and I went to live with my aunt and uncle in Oregon. It was a nice, normal normal life until I was 16, and we took a trip to Hollywood. Movies were very popular and we took a tour of the William S. Hart film studio. Not be be vain, but I was an attractive girl and on the tour, a talent agent approached me and asked if I would like to be a film actress. Well, that sounded exciting, so of course I said yes, and with my mother's approval, I made a screen test at Fox Studios. I guess they liked what they saw, because I got an offer to appear in their films! So I happily dropped out of high school and my mother stayed with me in Los Angeles so I could have a movie career.

Interviewer: That must have been quite a big decision. Were you nervous about it?

No, not at all, really. I come from Romainian Gypsy descent, so I have a natural flair for the dramatic, and I enjoyed performing for the camera.

Interviewer: But you had no acting expereince. How did you 'learn your craft?'

I'm very observant of people, so I watched the other performers. I was young and eager and took direction well. Plus I was quite athletic, so I could do my own stunts, which was a big advantage.

Interviewer: Most of us are not that familiar with your film work, so tell us a little bit about your movies.

When Fox signed me in 1920, they put me in several of their short Sunshine Comedies and eventually gave me the lead in a longer film, "La La Lucille." After that, I did a circus movie, "Pink Tights", where I played a tightrope walker. That was fun!

(2)

Interviewer: A tightrope walker! How did you manage that?

I practiced a lot! I had a few falls, but they had mattresses below me so I didn't get hurt. I actually got pretty good at it!

Interviewer: I heard that Al Capone met you around that time and there was a bit of a romance. Is that true?

Oh, dear, I knew that would come up! Yes, Al got a bit of a crush on my when he saw "Pink Tights," and so he visited the set while I was filming "The Untameable." We chatted and flirted a bit. I was 19 and he was 24 and we did see each other for awhile. The new Hayes morality clauses were just taking effect in Hollywood, so the studio discouraged our relationship, but we remained friends for several years.

Interviewer: Did he ever talk about his "business"?

No, he never spoke about that. We'd usually go to the Santa Anita racetrack and one of his buddies taught me a formula for how to pick winning horses, which worked rather well, I'm happy to say. Later, when Al ended up in prison, I'd visit and bring him a plate of cookies now and then.

Interviewer: Thank you for clarifying that. Did you have any flings with your leading men? Was your movie star life full of glamorous parties?

Hardly! After my mother went back to Oregon, I lived in a boarding house and took a street car to work. One day day, Rudolph Valentino got on the same streetcar and winked at me, but I didn't wink back. As for glamorous, you have to understand, there were no acting unions or rules back then. We worked sometimes 7 days a week and 10-12 hours per day, plus there were required personal appearances, too. Making movies was hard work.

Interviewer: But you were becoming quite successful and well known. We have some of your press clippings here that describe you as "impetuous, lively, and plucky, the greatest find since Mary Pickford!"

Yes, I did become a star. They called me the Little Queen of the Flappers, which was exciting!

(3)

Interviewer: So as your star rose, did your salary rise also?

Yes, it did. In 1921, Universal offered me a contract for \$150 a week, and a starring role in "The Wise Kid." I appeared in dozens of films at Universal and my salary increased to \$600 a week, quite a fortune in those days. Incidentally, one of those films was "Second Hand Rose", which inspired the song written for Fanny Brice and then sung by Barbra Streisand. My house in Morro Bay was sometimes called Rose's Cottage because of that song.

Interviewer: I understand that you once had a run-in with William Randolph Hearst. What can you tell us about that?

Oh, my, yes! One day I was working on a tearfully emotional scene and there was a man visiting the set who was watching me intently. It was breaking my concentration so I asked the director if he would ask the man to leave. He did, but I later found out the man was Hearst! Well, I was the only star of that era who was never invited to the parties at Hearst Castle! Although I did get invited to a party on his yacht one time, so I guess he forgave me a little bit.

Interviewer: What about your personal life? You were married the first time in 1921, correct?

Yes, I married a writer, Frank Lidell, but we divorced six months later. With my work hours, there was no time left for a home life. In fact, after my divorce, one of the studio district sales managers, Henry Herbel, proposed to me. I liked him very much, but didn't want to lose another husband to my career, so I turned him down.

Interviewer: But eventually you did marry Herbel? How did that happen?

Well, it was a combination of things. I liked making movies and I really enjoyed doing personal appearances, meeting my fans, but it was hard work. After three years and 30 films back to back, plus dozens of personal appearances in between, I was exhausted and asked the studio for some time off. And the studio refused my request! So I decided to take the time anyway and went on a 3-week vacation to Hawaii. When I got back, the studio had docked my pay for the three weeks and I just decided enough was enough. I walked out on my contract and called Henry Herbel and accepted his proposal. We got married in June 1923.

(4)

Interviewer: But that wasn't the end of your movie career, was it? The talkies were coming in...did you ever do one?

Actually, I starred in five independent films between 1925 and 1928, but I never made a talkie. Apparently my voice did not modulate well on film. It was not compatible, whatever that means! By that time, Henry and I had a growing family, so I happily retired from my film career with no regrets. Being a movie star sounds glamorous, but basically it was a lot of hardwork!

Interviewer: So what was your family life like?

It was quite nice. Henry and I had 6 children altogether, which was quite a difference for me, having been an only child! But we lived on a 40 acre ranch in the San Fernando Valley, which was wonderful for the kids. We raised horses and other animals. I've always loved animals.

Interviewer: But then you moved to Chicago...how did that come about?

In 1930, Henry was still working in marketing for Universal and he transferred to their Chicago office. I've always needed a creative outlet, so I decided to design our home there, which I did. I've been told that house is still listed in the local historical society. I enjoyed my time in the Windy City, although I never quite understood that name...we got a lot more wind in the San Fernando Valley! But Chicago had wonderful museums and art galleries. While I was there, I studied sculpture and portraiture at the Chicago Art Institute and found other directions for my artistic creativity.

Interviewer: Did you move back to California when you and Henry divorced?

Yes. Henry and I were together for 20 years, but after the children were grown, we drifted apart and divorced in 1952.

Interviewer: And how did you meet your next husband?

I'd always been fascinated with flying and took some lessons. I met Spiro Dilles, who was a fighter pilot in the war. We married in 1953 and lived in Malibu Canyon where I raised toy poodles for awhile. Spiro and I were together on and off for 10 years before we divorced.

(5)

Interviewer: And you married a fourth time, didn't you?

Yes, to Kenneth James Wells, for only a couple of years. I hardly remember him! After that, I decided no more marriage for me!

Interviewer: So that brings us to something that's much closer to home, your move to Morro Bay, quite a change from the big city life of Hollywood and Chicago.

I was actually quite ready to leave the big city life and pursue my artistic endeavors in the peaceful beauty of Morro Bay. I moved here in the late 60s, and purchased a lovely little home, built in the 1920s, and decorated with stones from Morro Rock when that was still allowed. I called it Glad's'Castle, and for the record, I would not have invited Mr.Hearst to any of my parties, even if he was still around!

Interviewer: When you bought your house, there was no lighthouse, was there?

Oh, no, that was my idea! I enjoyed designing our Chicago house, and in Morro Bay I wanted to design a picturesque complex on the property...a lived in tourist attraction along the waterfront. I added a dock, a boathouse and a lighthouse guesthouse, complete with an elevator.

Interviewer: Knowing what I know about getting building permits in Morro Bay, did you have any challenges getting your plans approved?

Oh, yes, the city was not enthusiastic about the project...something about height limits and residential versus commercial zoning and other such details. But my friend from Hollywood days, Ronald Reagan, happened to be the governor at the time, and he helped me convince the city and the Coastal Commission that this was an attractive addition to the waterfront, so my plans were approved. And of course, we were right...you all enjoy seeing it and telling visitors about it, don't you?

(6)

Interviewer: And what about the windmill house on your property across the street from your castle complex...was that difficult to get approved?

Well, that was a very practical project. There were parking spaces there for the boat dock users, and I needed a home for my property caretaker. I could have built a regular house, but where's the fun in that? So in 1984 I designed a windmill, and of course, that raised a fuss with the neighbors and the Planning Commission. But I arrived at their meeting in full movie star glamor mode and sweet talked them into granting a variance for the house... as long as it met the height limits and the windmill sails did not actually turn. That took a bit of the wind out of my sails, so to speak, but I got my building approved, and my little fantasy complex was complete.

Interviewer: Your fantasy complex was not exactly peaceful and idyllic, though, was it? I heard things got a bit rowdy in your neighborhood.

Well, yes, unfortunately some people just don't appreciate creativity as much as others! My waterfront neighbor, Orvale Leage, and I didn't exactly hit it off. We had a disagreement about the length of his dock. It was too long and he refused to shorten it, so when he was out of town, I had 3' cut off of it. For some reason, he wasn't pleased that I had saved him the trouble and expense of doing it himself! Orvale and I often had lively shouting matches from out on our docks. Some of the neighbors dubbed our properties Hell's Half Acre! I thought that was quite amusing, and it kept things interesting, I must admit!

Interviewer: I imagine it did! When you weren't feuding with your neighbors or building windmills, what was your life like in Morro Bay?

Oh, I quite enjoyed living in Morro Bay. I installed an aviary and raised birds. My favorite was a gray parrot who was often on my shoulder and jabbering in my ear. I also had a koi fish pond. I continued my artwork in my castle, doing detailed painting both inside and out and creating intricate cut glass window designs. I did sculptures and paintings...it was easy to find inspiration in the beauty of the bay.

(7)

Interviewer: You were a single gal now...what was your social life like? Not quite as glamorous as Hollywood, I'm sure!

Oh, glamour goes with me, darling! The Senior Center held dance evenings at the Vets Hall, and I attended them regularly...once a flapper, always a flapper! Mayor Warren Dorn requested my support for his Morro Bay Beautiful organization, which I gladly gave, and I participated in lots of the local events. I never was one to just sit quietly at home.

Interviewer: Well, speaking of that, I've heard stories that your house may have had its very own private ghost. Is that true?

Oh, yes, I believe so. I've always been a bit clairvoyant, which is why I'm here, of course! I felt a presence in the house when I moved in, but it was very benign. But there was a later presence that was much more active. After my uncle died, my aunt Minnie came from Oregon to live with me. She stayed in my basement apartment, which has a lovely yard and bay view. My caretaker, Jack Barry, would deliver her meals to her. One day, he found her in obvious distress, and we needed to get her to the hospital. Rather than try to carry her up the narrow staircase, he grabbed his wheelbarrow and wheeled her up the outdoor walkway to his vehicle. Unfortunately, she died on the way. I think it was her spirit that lingered in the basement, because a plumber who was working down there after she died heard loud pounding not coming from the pipes! My daughter and granddaughter also felt as if there was a presence there. The plumber suggested an exorcism, which we did, and that apparently sent Minnie on her way.

Interviewer: Now we come to another death in the castle, this one violent. I'm sorry to ask, but can you share with us what happened on that terrible day in 1992?

Terrible isn't a strong enough word. It was horrifying. I had another property manager/caregiver, Andy Zatko. Andy was 80 years old and I was 90 and we were friends, too. And in fact the anchor at Anchor Park on the Embarcadero was from Andy's boat. One of our tenants in the windmill house, Lynwood Drake, had stopped paying his rent, so Andy eventually had to evict him. Drake was known around town as "Crazy Jim" and had a record for assault. When he was evicted, his common-law wife left with their infant daughter, and I guess that sent Drake over the edge. He arrived at the castle one day, came into the living room, pulled out a gun and shot Andy point blank in the throat. I was frozen, unable to believe what had happened. Drake held the gun to my forehead, but then just turned and walked out. (more...)

(8)

A neighbor who heard the shot and saw him leaving and called the police. For a long time, I couldn't really comprehend what had happened, even when my daughter later took me to the cemetery to see poor Andy's grave.

Interviewer: I'm sorry to bring that up, but it was obviously a major news story. (To the audience) And Drake ended up killing five other people that night, two in Morro Bay and three in Paso Robles, before he killed himself. (To Gladys) I can't imagine how terrifying that must have been. Did you stay in the castle after that?

No, I wasn't able to live alone anymore, and after the murder in my living room...well, it was time to leave my beloved castle. My daughter Jan found a lovely care home for me in Los Osos and she visited me there often. As the year passed, I felt myself slowly fading away, and I made my final earthly exit in November 1993.

Interviewer: And now that you have moved on to 'another plane', what are your thoughts about your life?

Oh, mostly wonderful thoughts and very few regrets, except for Andy, of course, and sometimes I wish I'd been a more attentive mother to my children. But I lived my life to the full, and quite enjoyed myself.

Interviewer: So I have to ask, do you now haunt your castle and lighthouse and windmill?

Oh, I'm glad you asked! Of course I do! Although I'm a very friendly ghost...no pounding walls or rattling doors. But you can ask the people who have lived there about knick knacks or jewelry that moves from place to place, or beads in a doorway that sway when there's no breeze. That's me! And one time when the current owner was touching up my ceiling paintings in the castle (which I really appreciate, by the way, Bernadette!), she started to lose her balance on the ladder and I gently steadied her so she didn't fall. So I'm a good spirit, still the Little Queen of the Flappers, enjoying my wonderful waterfront castle.

References: Jan Miller, Bernadette Pekerak & Bill Martony; Alice Kohl, Mary Sproul, Linda Beard, Camille Watkins, Gary Ryan, Neil Farrell, Joe Ingrassia, Barbara Grebbs, Murderpedia website by Juan Ignacio Blanco, Broken Silence by Michael G. Ankerich, City of Morro Bay archives.