

*T-Mss 2001-053

Guide to the Joan Crawford Papers, 1932-1976

Billy Rose Theatre Division



The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
New York, New York

The Billy Rose Theatre Division. New York Public Library.
40 Lincoln Center Plaza
New York, NY 10023-7498
(212) 870-1639

theatrediv@nypl.org

<http://nypl.org/research/lpa/the/the.html>

Processed by: Jennifer L. Winters

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Encoded By: Jennifer L. Winters

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Joan Crawford Papers, 1932-1976

Creator: Crawford, Joan

Collection ID: *T-Mss 2001-053

Size: 1.68 linear feet ; 4 boxes

Repository: The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Billy Rose Theatre Division. New York, New York

Abstract: Joan Crawford was a well-known Hollywood film actress, whose most active period was during the 1930s and 1940s. The collection consists mainly of personal correspondence and insurance papers from her later life, but also includes personal papers, business papers, handwritten notes, and photographs.

Languages
Represented: English

Administrative Information

Source: The Joan Crawford Papers were purchased in 2001 from Charles Apfelbaum.

Access: Collection is open to the public. Photocopying prohibited. Advance notice may be required

Preferred
Citation: Joan Crawford Papers, *T-Mss 2001-053, Billy Rose Theatre Division,
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Biographical Note

Joan Crawford was born Lucille LeSueur on March 23, 1908. When her mother later married Henry Cassin, a theater manager from Oklahoma, her name was changed to Billie Cassin. (As an adult, many of her friends privately continued to call her Billie.) After winning a Charleston contest at the age of 13, she became determined to be on stage. By age 19 she was in the chorus line of the Broadway show *Innocent Eyes*, where MGM executive Harry Rapf discovered her, and signed her to her first movie contract.

After a few minor roles under the name Lucille LeSueur, MGM sponsored a fan-magazine contest to pick out a new name for the young star. The freshly minted Joan Crawford's first big movie role was as Irene in *Sally, Irene and Mary* (1925), but the role that made her a star was as a flapper that literally danced on the table tops in *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928).

Unlike many silent movie era stars, Crawford's transition to "talkies" was smooth and by 1932 she was starring in classics like *Grand Hotel* (1932) with Greta Garbo. Throughout the 1930s Crawford worked steadily for MGM in films like *Letty Lynton* (1932), *Dancing Lady* (1933), and *The Gorgeous Hussy* (1936) co-starring with her future husband Franchot Tone. Crawford's popularity skyrocketed in 1939 with the release of *The Women*, in which Crawford played the iconic role of "Crystal", the hard-boiled husband-stealing shopgirl. Despite this, by 1943 magazines were proclaiming her to be "box-office poison" and MGM seemed to agree. Crawford soon left MGM for Warner Brothers, where she snagged the title role in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Her performance in *Mildred Pierce* earned Crawford her one and only Oscar for Best Actress.

In 1946 Warner Brothers signed Crawford to a seven-year contract at \$200,000 per film, only to release her from her contract after just three years. Her 1955 marriage to Pepsi chairman and CEO Alfred Steele coincided with her waning movie career, and led to her subsequent career as a Pepsi board member and publicity executive. She continued her involvement with Pepsi even after Steele's death in 1959.

In 1962 Crawford's acting career was briefly revitalized with the release of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, which paired her with her infamous rival Bette Davis. That year Crawford also penned a memoir *Portrait of Joan*. The popularity of the spooky *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* led to Crawford's appearance in a series of horror films throughout the 1960s, including a 1969 episode of *Night Gallery* with novice director Steven Spielberg. Crawford made her final film, *Trog*, in 1970. The 1970s saw her public appearances decrease. She died in 1977 of pancreatic cancer.

Crawford's personal life always took a backseat to her professional life. She was married five times: James Welton (1923-1924 divorced); Douglas Fairbanks, Jr (1929-1933 divorced); Franchot Tone (1935-1939 divorced); Phillip Terry (1942-1946 divorced); Alfred Steele (1955-1959 widowed). Crawford also adopted four children - Christina (adopted in 1940) and Christopher (adopted in 1944), twins Cathy and Cindy (adopted in 1947). A year after Joan Crawford's death, Christina Crawford published the tell-all book

Mommie Dearest (1978). The 1981 movie adaptation of the book familiarized a whole new generation with Joan Crawford, ensuring that Crawford's reputation would live on.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Joan Crawford contain correspondence, business and personal papers, personal notes and a few photographs. The collection focuses on Crawford's later years in the 1960s and 1970s, as her acting career waned, and therefore contains no scripts and very little about her time in Hollywood. It is divided into three series: personal correspondence, business papers, and personal papers.

The bulk of the collection is made up of personal correspondence. The letters to Crawford, as well as the notes she made for her secretaries (Florence Walsh and Betty Barker), give insight into her everyday life. Throughout the collection there are items designated by Crawford to be worthy of her "treasure box". "Treasure box" items are generally more personal notes to Crawford that contain particularly kind words or whose authors were particularly dear to her.

Insurance appraisals, especially those by Wilson & Allen, contain interesting information about Crawford's possessions. The listings of her jewelry collections are especially thorough.

Organization

- Series I: Personal Correspondence
 - Sub-series 1 - Individuals
 - Sub-series 2 - General
 - Sub-series 3 - Sympathy
 - Sub-series 4 - Telegrams
- Series II: Personal Papers
 - Sub-series 1 - Insurance
 - Sub-series 2 - Ephemera
- Series III: Business Papers

Series Descriptions/Container List

Series I: Personal Correspondence, 1959-1976

2 boxes

- Sub-series 1- Individuals
- Sub-series 2- General
- Sub-series 3- Sympathy
- Sub-series 4- Telegrams

This series contains letters and telegrams from Crawford's friends and relatives, as well as a few letters written by Crawford. It is divided into

four sub-series: correspondence from specific individuals, general correspondence, sympathy correspondence following Alfred Steele's death, and telegrams.

Sub-series 1 - Individuals, 1959-1975

40 folders

This sub-series consists mainly of letters and cards to Joan Crawford, though it does include items with Crawford's notes, and some typed correspondence from her. Correspondence from Crawford is included under the addressee's last name. Of particular interest is a letter from Wyatt Cooper with a wonderful story about Joan Crawford's influence on Martha Graham.

- b. 1 f. 1 Armstrong, Lucille, 1971
- b. 1 f. 2 Bachardy, Don
- b. 1 f. 3 Barker, Betty (Bettina), 1970-1977
- b. 1 f. 4 Basinger, Jeanine, 1974 June 24
- b. 1 f. 5 Bodeen, DeWitt, 1976 June 24
Bodeen DeWitt was a director and producer.
- b. 1 f. 6 Brower, Charles H.
Charles H. Brower was an author.
- b. 1 f. 7 Brown, Helen Gurley, 1973-1975
- b. 1 f. 8 Burns, Tom, 1972-1976
- b. 1 f. 9 Carkner, James W., 1959
Includes letter regarding Crawford's continuing role at Pepsi after Steele's death.
- b. 1 f. 10 Clayton, Jack, 1973 Aug. 7
- b. 1 f. 11 Cooper, Wyatt, 1975 July 24
Includes a wonderful story about Martha Graham.
- b. 1 f. 12 Corwin, Sherrill and Dorothy, 1968-1973
- b. 1 f. 13 Dormann, Alice and Henry
- b. 1 f. 14 Ehrhart, Ann, 1969
- b. 1 f. 15 Ehrlich, J.W., 1971 Jan. 19

- b. 1 f. 16 Evans, Harry, 1976
Includes Crawford's response.
- b. 1 f. 17 Frye, William, 1970 Oct. 24
- b. 1 f. 18 Gable, Kathleen (Mrs. Clark)
Includes photographs of John Clark Gable (son of Clark and Kathleen Gable).
- b. 1 f. 19 Haines, William, 1968-1972
- b. 1 f. 20 Jackson, Michael
- b. 1 f. 21 Langdon, Sue Ann
- b. 1 f. 22 LaPides, Joseph, 1974
Includes Crawford's response.
- b. 1 f. 23 Lastfogel, Abe, 1965 Apr. 6
- b. 1 f. 24 Lawrence, Edward, 1974 Apr. 22
- b. 1 f. 25 Martien, Elva, 1971-1975
- b. 1 f. 26 Marti-Ibanez, Felix, 1972 Feb. 17
- b. 1 f. 27 McGehee, Merle, 1974-1976
- b. 1 f. 28 McPherson, Holt, 1970 Apr. 23
- b. 1 f. 29 Nathan, Robert
- b. 1 f. 30 Nelson, Harriet, 1975 June 20
Responding to Crawford's sympathy card after Ozzie's death.
- b. 1 f. 31 Rich, Lee, 1973 June 8
- b. 1 f. 32 Scully, John, 1974 July 8
- b. 1 f. 33 Steinbeck, Elaine (Mrs. John), 1971-1974
- b. 1 f. 34 Taylor, Rikki and Henry
- b. 1 f. 35 Tracy, Louise, 1967 June 28
Louise Tracy was Spencer Tracy's sister.
- b. 1 f. 36 Trittippo, James, 1970 May 20
- b. 1 f. 37 Unkefer, Betty and Luis, 1965-1975

- b. 1 f. 38 Walker, Vivienne
- b. 1 f. 39 Walsh, Florence
Florence Walsh worked as an assistant to Crawford.
- b. 1 f. 40 Werdohl, 'Mamacita'
Mamacita Werdohl worked for Crawford as a housekeeper.

Sub-series 2 - General, 1960-1977

11 folders

This sub-series consists mainly of letters and cards to Joan Crawford, including several items with Crawford's notes (directing her secretaries) and some typed correspondence from Crawford. Arranged alphabetically by last name; those identified only by first name appear alphabetically at the end of the sub-series along with unidentified persons. Correspondence from Crawford is included under the addressee's name.

- b. 2 f. 1 A-B
- b. 2 f. 2 C-D
- b. 2 f. 3 E-F
- b. 2 f. 4 G-H
- b. 2 f. 5 I-K
- b. 2 f. 6 L-M
- b. 2 f. 7 N-R
- b. 2 f. 8 S-T
- b. 2 f. 9 U-Z
- b. 2 f. 10 First names only- A-L
- b. 2 f. 11 First names only- M-Z (and unidentified)

Sub-series 3 - Sympathy, 1959

3 folders

This sub-series includes correspondence sent to Joan Crawford after her husband Alfred Steele's sudden death on April 19, 1959. Many letters are attached to Crawford's response, including a letter from Crawford to two of her children, Cathy and Cindy.

- b. 2 f. 12 A-G, 1959
b. 2 f. 13 H-L, 1959
b. 2 f. 14 M-Z (and unidentified), 1959

Sub-series 4 - Telegrams, 1966-1975

3 folders

This sub-series contains telegrams sent to Crawford.

- b. 2 f. 15 General, 1969-1975
b. 2 f. 16 Unidentified, 1966-1973
b. 2 f. 17 *The Virginian*, 1970
 Regarding Crawford's performance on the television show *The Virginian*.

Series II: Personal Papers, 1932-1976

1 box

- Sub-series 1- Insurance 1932-1975
- Sub-series 2- Ephemera 1959-1976

This series contains Joan Crawford's insurance policies and biographical ephemera: photographs, clippings, various awards and honors, documents concerning Crawford's Brandeis fellowship, as well as Crawford's handwritten address book.

Sub-series 1 - Insurance, 1932-1975 

11 folders

The insurance papers are organized by company and include policies from the 1930s through the 1970s. Of special interest are the appraisals of the Wilson & Allen company, that list and value Crawford's extensive jewelry collection.

- b. 3 f. 1 Equitable Life, 1932-1975
 Includes insurance under the name "Joan Crawford Fairbanks".
b. 3 f. 2 Greater New York, 1972-1973
b. 3 f. 3 Hartford, 1972-1975
b. 3 f. 4 Home Indemnity, 1974-1975
b. 3 f. 5 Medicare, 1974-1975

Regarding dental surgery.

- b. 3 f. 6 Mutual Life Insurance of New York (MONY), 1932-1975
Includes insurance under the name "Joan Crawford Fairbanks".
- b. 3 f. 7 New York Life Insurance, 1935-1975
- b. 3 f. 8 Penn Mutual, 1935-1975
- b. 3 f. 9 Screen Actors Guild (SAG), 1974-1975
Claims regarding an accident Crawford had in her home on December 10, 1974.
- b. 3 f. 10 Wilson and Allen, Inc., 1974-1975
- b. 3 f. 11 Wilson and Allen, Inc., 1961-1975
Includes appraisals of extensive jewelry collection.

Sub-series 2 - Ephemera, 1959-1976

5 folders

Ephemera includes photographs, clippings, various awards and honors, documents concerning her Brandeis fellowship, and Crawford's personal address book (handwritten).

- b. 3 f. 12 Address book
Address book is handwritten and includes other notes.
- b. 3 f. 13 Awards and Honors
Includes 1963 Academy Awards program.
- b. 3 f. 14 Brandeis Fellowship, 1964-1968
- b. 3 f. 15 Clippings, 1937
- b. 3 f. 16 Photographs
Includes 1930s publicity stills and photographs of Crawford at a 1971 book signing.

Series III: Business Papers, 1959-1976

1 box

This series contains checkbooks, records of donations, and papers concerning a 1973 cosmetics advertisement that Crawford made with Eva of Rome Cosmetics. There is also a folder of documents highlighting Crawford's relations with Pepsi, including a letter from Crawford declaring her intention to "finish the tour" for her recently deceased husband. A folder containing records of her rented storage

spaces, both in New York and Los Angeles, finishes the series.

- b. 4 f. 1 Checkbook, 1960-1966
- b. 4 f. 2 Checkbook, 1967-1972
- b. 4 f. 2 Donations, 1969
- b. 4 f. 4 Donations, 1969
- b. 4 f. 5 Donations, 1968-1970
- b. 4 f. 6 Donations, 1968-1969
- b. 4 f. 7 Donations, 1969
- b. 4 f. 8 Eva of Rome advertisement, 1973
- b. 4 f. 9 Pepsi, 1959-1976
Includes draft of a letter from Crawford saying that she intends to
'finish the tour' for her recently deceased husband (Steele).
- b. 4 f. 10 Storage, 1961-1974