

COVER STORY

Radio Sportscaster, Television Host, Screen Star, etc.

'Not bad – not bad at all...'

BY GARDNER KISSACK

What effect would saving a person's life have on the rescuer? Or saving several persons? Or dozens? And how did those who were rescued feel?

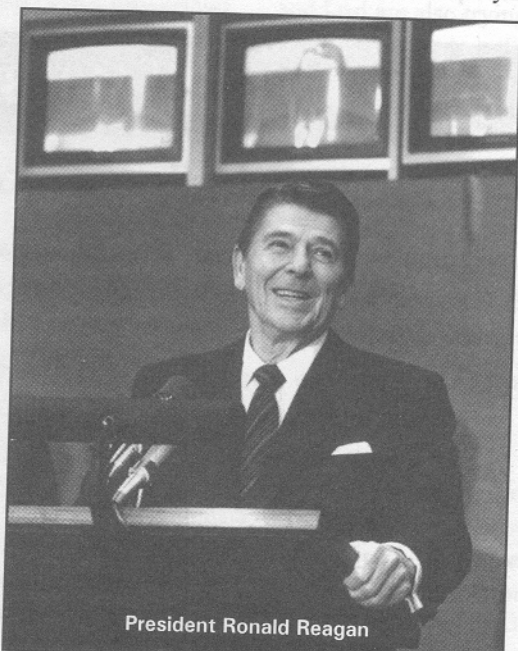
By now, nearly everyone who wants to know, knows the legend of the sturdy, young Dixon, Illinois, lifeguard who saved at least 77 lives from the rushing waters of the Rock River during the summers of 1927 through 1932—the guard's high school and college years. The story is well known and oft repeated. And save lives he did. But once, as a high school senior in 1928, he wrote

lightly of his experiences for an assignment, *Meditations of a Lifeguard*: "On they come, hordes of swimmers, bathers, sleepers, or what have you! A mob of water-seeking humans intent on giving the beach guard something to worry about..."

Gardner Kissack of Chicago Heights, Illinois is a retired school teacher and a member of the Those WereThe Days support staff.

"Now in this motley crew there must be one ray of hope. There is, she's walking onto the dock now. She trips gracefully over to the edge of the crowded pier and settles like a butterfly. The lifeguard strolls

by, turns and strolls again. He settles in the immediate region of the cause of all this sudden awakening. He assumes a manly worried expression designed to touch the heart of any blonde, brunette, or unclassified female. He has done all that is necessary. She speaks and the sound of her voice is like balm to a wounded soul, the worried



President Ronald Reagan

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expression fades in the glow of glorious realization, the birdies strike up in chorus, and somewhere celestial music plays the haunting strains recognizable as 'The End of a Perfect Day.'"

Ronald Reagan was born in Tampico, Illinois, February 6, 1911, in the second-floor flat of a building that was a bakery and later a bank on the east side of Main Street.

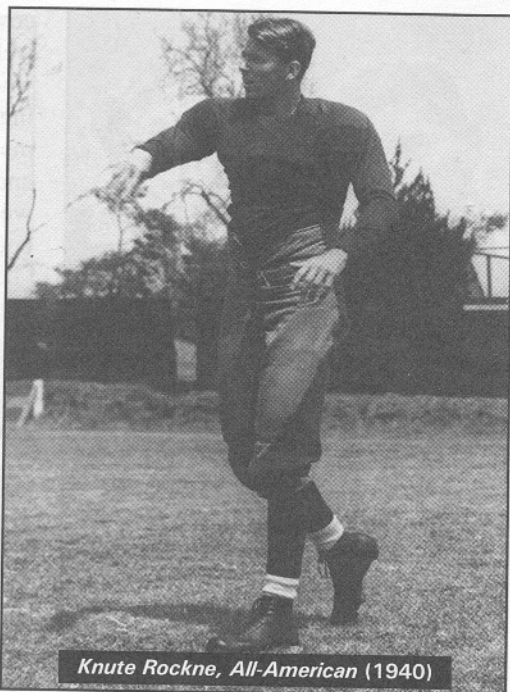
The modest, five-room apartment was

merely adequate for his folks and older (by two years) brother. His father, Jack, was not the best provider, partly because of to his bouts of drinking, but his mother, Nelle, was a staunch believer in the fundamental values of trust, honesty, and dedicated hard work. Her faith was strong, and shared.

Somewhat reserved (“a thinker” some said) in his early grade school years – young Ronald’s extreme near-sightedness was not diagnosed until he was a teen – he was apparently unsure of himself. He later solemnly recalled his attempts as a youth of lifting his weakened, fallen father after an evening bender into the sheltering safety of their home.

The family moved several times in those years (1915-1925), settling in Dixon, renting a substantial, two-story frame home at 816 S. Hennepin Street. The boy grew to young manhood through his successes in high school, where he was, by his senior year, president of the North Dixon High School student body, and of the drama club, and the art editor of the yearbook.

B. J. Frazer, his English and history teacher and drama club advisor, remembered that “he was good at taking direction” and starred in two plays (with his high school girlfriend), *You & I*, and *Capt. Applejack*. He played tackle for the varsity football team and had been on the track squad as a sophomore. Because Dixon received Chicago radio stations, he listened to a variety of programs and sportscasts – in their infancies during the 1920s. His summers from age 15 were spent guarding at Dixon’s Lowell Park Beach (land along the Rock River donated to the city by Charles and Myrtle Walgreen, whose family estate, Hazelwood, was nearby), where today a plaque commemorates his



Knute Rockne, All-American (1940)

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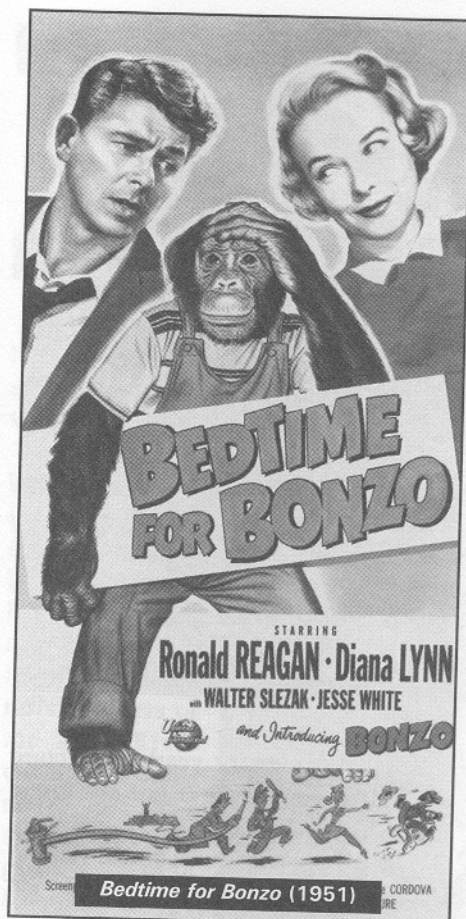
life-saving deeds.

Beneath his senior yearbook picture were these words: *Life is just one grand song, so start the music.*

Over the years his contacts and visits to Dixon were many, often for festivals and homecomings, where he’d get to ride a horse along the parade route. How he loved riding horses! He was an excellent horseman most of his life.

Thinking back with the sharp view that is afforded by hindsight, could there have been any other college for him than the one with such a name as Eureka – perhaps the most inspirational name for a school with the possible exception of Hope College in Holland, Michigan. For him it was Eureka!

His athletic scholarship paid \$90 toward the \$180 annual tuition; he washed dishes to pay for his meals. He was an offensive guard on the football team, on the swim team, in drama club presentations, and feature editor for the *Prism*, Eureka’s yearbook. He graduated a member of the class



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of 1932, but he would return many, many times – once proclaiming “Everything that has been good in my life began here.”

According to Eureka College alum Dr. James M. Brandon ('94), in addition to the impressive museum of memorabilia (Curator Dr. Brian Sajko/www.eureka.edu) for the college's most famous graduate, the sports complex is named for him (and his brother Neil), and a bust of him is at the center of the campus Peace Garden.

After graduation Reagan hitch-hiked to Chicago to find work at a radio station but was told to get some experience first (“in the sticks”). He found some radio work in Davenport, Iowa, and in 1933 became a sportscaster for Des Moines station WHO

covering the Chicago Cubs. He became well known and popular with his listeners, who supposed he was at the ballpark watching the game instead of being in a studio merely reading basic telegraphed reports and facts supplied by ticker tape, so vivid were his embellished play-by-play accounts of the action on the field.

He thoroughly enjoyed the experience, learning and gaining confidence with every broadcast, and years later he delighted in recounting to friends his on-air techniques.

In 1936 he followed the sun west, to California. Years later he would say, “If I had gotten the job I wanted at Montgomery Ward's, I suppose I never would have left Illinois.”

Ronald Reagan married actress Jane Wyman in 1940 and, after being divorced in 1948, on March 4, 1952 married actress Nancy Davis, who had been raised in Chicago on East Lake Shore Drive by her mother, Edith Davis, and renowned surgeon Dr. Loyal Davis. Pal William Holden and his wife were best man and matron of honor. The newlyweds, who honeymooned at the quietly swanky Scottsdale (Arizona) Biltmore, began their journey through life together.

Beginning in June 1937 at \$200 a week (by 1942 it was \$5,000 weekly), his film career ran the gamut from important dramas – *Dark Victory*, with Bette Davis ('39); *Santa Fe Trail* with Errol Flynn; *Knute Rockne, All-American*, and *Kings Row* (his co-star, Robert Cummings, told people on the set, “Someday I'm going to vote for this fellow for President!”) to such light-hearted fare as *Million Dollar Baby* in 1941; *The Girl from Jones Beach* (1949), and, most notably, *Bedtime for Bonzo* in 1951.

Some of the pictures were forgettable (he made nine films in 1938, seven in '39), many were unforgettable, and in light of

('53); *Cattle Queen of Montana*, with Barbara Stanwyck ('54).

He was the television host (and sometime cast member) for the *General Electric Theater* (1954-1962) and of *Death Valley Days* (1965-'66), and corporate spokesman for General Electric.

Both popular prime time weekly programs were, of course, seen by tens of millions of viewers across the country over the years.

And so the music continued for this son of Illinois. After his GE years his career was mostly just Gee!

He became active in politics and was governor of California (1967-1975). That service became a political stepping-stone to his election as the 40th President of the United States, serving two terms (1981-1989).

As Ronald Reagan said, summing up his life in January 1989 (as his Marine One helicopter lifted above the White House in Washington, D.C.), "All in all, not bad – not bad at all." ■

Tune in TWTD October 23 to hear Ronald Reagan on radio.

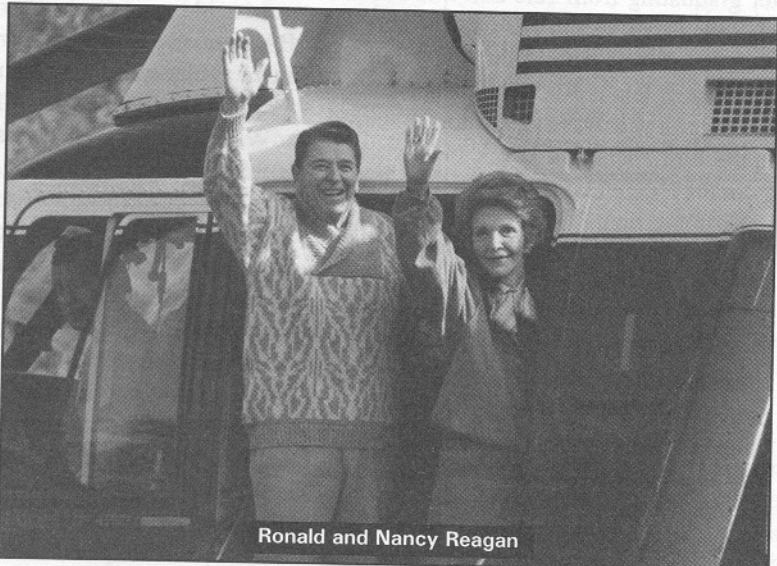


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subsequent events, all are interesting and enjoyable in one way or another. He and his wife Nancy did but one film together, *Hellcats of the Navy*, in 1957. (During World War II, he made many military training films – his poor eyesight kept him stateside – and someone observed that more people had seen him in uniform than any other soldier except for General Eisenhower.)

His filmography includes at least 56

movies. Some of them are *Love Is On the Air* (1937); *Boy Meets Girl* ('38); *Brother Rat* ('38); *Tugboat Annie Sails Again* ('40); *This is the Army* ('43); *That Hagen Girl* ('47); *Law and Order*



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