

First Lady Of Hollywood

Louella Parsons

BY MATTHEW C. HOFFMAN

Louella Parsons had the distinction of being Hollywood's leading gossip columnist from the glorious 1930s until the mid-1960s.

Her name is forever wedded to Tinseltown's storied past, synonymous with those halcyon days of studio filmmaking and movie magazines. Conjure up images of premieres, art deco nightclubs, dinners at the Brown Derby, and Beverly Hills parties and you would undoubtedly find "Lolly" Parsons in the middle of it.

She was a powerful female whose voice carried clout, whether her words were read in her syndicated column or heard over the radio.

Sixty years later we see what an Oprah Winfrey can do for an author in her "Book Club," instantly turning an obscure novel into a must-read. So, too, was it with Louella in the motion picture community, whose sought-after "plug" could help turn an unknown actor, like a Ronald Reagan, into a major star. Louella, though not quite

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as self-inflated as her modern-day media counterpart, was just as influential in her time, but reaching a far broader audience than just housewives.

A discontented housewife she herself had once been. She could never quite fit into small-town life in Iowa, but Louella's story begins much earlier.

A native Illinoian, she was born Louella Rose Oettinger in Freeport on August 6, 1880, although some accounts list her year of birth as 1881, 1884, and even 1893. She grew up in Dixon, Illinois, and while attending

high school she worked as dramatic editor and assistant to the city editor on the *Morning Star*, the town's local newspaper.

In 1904 she married real estate businessman John Parsons and the two moved to Burlington, Iowa. Here she would have her only child, daughter Harriet, who was born in 1906. After a divorce, Louella married riverboat captain Jack McCaffrey, but this union fared no better. When he left her, she took Harriet with her to Chicago, where Louella started work at the *Tribune*. It was during this time as a reporter that she forged



her first link with Hollywood.

In 1912 she sold a script called *Chains* to the Essanay Company, which was soon turned into a one-reeler starring Francis X. Bushman. This would be her first experience as a scenario writer.

In 1914, Louella began a movie column – the country's first – for the *Chicago Record-Herald* while authoring a book, *How to Write For the 'Movies.'* Four years later she would be out of a job when the paper was taken over by publisher William Randolph Hearst.

Unemployed, Louella and Harriet were on the move again, this time to New York. She continued her movie writing for the *New York Morning Telegraph*. After praising actress Marion Davies in one of her write-ups, Hearst, who was Davies' benefactor, took notice and made a shrewd deal to get Louella into his stable. A three-year contract was struck to syndicate her writ-



Hollywood Hotel
Clark Gable, Louella Parsons, Stuart Erwin

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ing under the Hearst Universal Service banner, which included 600 daily newspapers.

Forevermore, she would be linked to the Hearst name. Some in Hollywood believed she was given a *lifetime* contract as a reward for keeping her mouth shut about the mysterious death (or murder) of pioneer director Thomas Ince aboard Hearst's private yacht. Rumor had it she was there on that November night in 1924 and witnessed the events that remain unclear to this day.

By 1925, Louella was facing her own mortality when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was given the old "six months to live" line.

At Hearst's behest she spent those months on the West Coast and continued her column in Hollywood. Her health rebounded, and by 1929 her paychecks hit \$500 a week. A year earlier, in 1928, she had made her radio debut. The program, sponsored by Sunkist, had her interviewing movie stars. This program was short-lived, how-



Hollywood Hotel
Humphrey Bogart, Louella Parsons, Bette Davis

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Hollywood Hotel
Dick Powell, Myrna Loy, William Powell, Louella Parsons, Ted Fio Rita

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ever, but served as a trial run for her next big radio break. Before this, though, she got married for a third time, this time to Dr. Harry Martin. "Docky-wocky," as she called him, worked as a technical medical

advisor in motion pictures.

Finally, in 1934, as her name continued to appear bylined throughout the country, her break came when she hosted the *Hollywood Hotel* radio program.

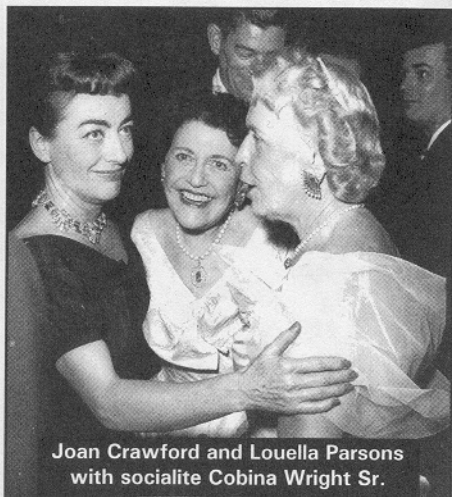
Sponsored by Campbell's Soup, the show had her interviewing movie stars whose films were showcased. Louella did the selecting and those films that were dramatized on air did well at the box office. For this reason she was courted by the high and mighty of Hollywood.

The radio program jumped from 39th to 10th in the ratings, but the stars, for their efforts, received only free soup. So successful was *Hollywood Hotel* that by 1937 it



Hollywood Hotel
Louella Parsons, Mae West

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Joan Crawford and Louella Parsons
with socialite Cobina Wright Sr.

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was turned into a Busby Berkeley film extravaganza starring Dick Powell. Louella also turned up in the cast, playing herself. However, by the summer of 1938 the Radio Guild had to close down all “free talent” broadcasts. With Louella’s main attraction now gone, she left the program and returned to writing.

In the years to come she would make other appearances before the cameras in films such as *Without Reservations* (1946) and *Starlift* (1951), but never again would she be as popular over the airwaves as she was during *Hollywood Hotel*’s success.

Known for her “crow-like” voice and an unsophisticated manner, “Lolly” Parsons was not the most literate of writers, but her impact cannot be underestimated. In her prime she was a one-woman “Access Hollywood”—promoting in her column and on her weekly quarter-hour gossip radio program what was new while revealing secrets akin to those found in the present day tabloids such as *The National Enquirer*. Her sensationalistic prose covered who was going to marry whom, who was “going out” with whom—in short, all the titillation readers and listeners at that time wanted. Her scoops turned up in countries as close as Canada



Hollywood Hotel
Louella Parsons, Ruby Keeler,
Al Jolson, Dick Powell

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and as far as Egypt and India.

Louella was never the most accurate, to be sure, once referring in print to William Wellman’s *The President Vanishes* first as *The Vanishing American* and then as *The President Disappears*. *Time* magazine said of Louella, “Her friends always stand by her. When she prematurely published a claim that an actress was pregnant, the



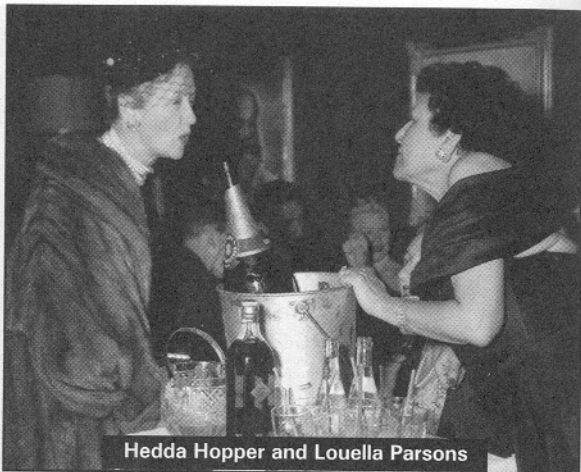
Hollywood Hotel
Charles Winninger, Deanna Durbin, Louella Parsons,
Dick Powell, Binnie Barnes, Frances Langford

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actress's husband hastened to prove her correct." She had secretaries who helped her with all this. Her material always went by teletype from Tinseltown to the *Los Angeles Examiner*, where it then went on to New York City for distribution. A 1940 profile described her as always being in a hurry, "being about 20 minutes late mentally from the time she rises until the time she reaches her bed again."

In 1937, after antagonizing MGM studio head Louis B. Mayer with her power, Louella received fierce competition from Hedda Hopper, whose career was boosted by Mayer. Hopper, a washed-up character actress, would be Louella's chief nemesis, and for the next 25 years, the two would spew venom at each other. No shot was too low. Hedda was known to make fun of Louella's "bald spot."

This bitter rivalry, covered in George Eells' 1973 book *Hedda and Louella*,



Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons

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would go on until Hedda's death in 1966. Today, one can't help but think of the one when the other is mentioned.

A tool of William Hearst, Louella did her best to attack *Citizen Kane* (1941) and discredit director Orson Welles, who based the film on the life of her boss. But this would be a losing battle for Louella. The power of the motion picture medium out-trumped anything Louella could type, and over time *Citizen Kane* would be recognized as a masterpiece while her name would fall out of fashion.

She would write two books in the years to come: the best-seller *The Gay Illiterate* (1944) and the autobiographical *Tell It to Louella* (1962).

In 1965 she ended her column, and on December 9, 1972, she died in a Santa Monica nursing home, perhaps a sad end for a woman who had experienced so many highs in her lifetime – but poetic justice for those hurt by her malicious gossip.

For forty years Louella Parsons served the daily dish while making and breaking careers in the process. Dubbed the First Lady of Hollywood, she was also the most feared woman in town. ■



Louella Parsons, Janet Gaynor, Marion Davies, Dolores Del Rio

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Tune in TWTD June 19 to hear Louella Parsons on Hollywood Hotel.