



American Legends: The Life of Joan Crawford

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures of Crawford and important people, places, and scenes.

*Includes Crawford's own quotes about her upbringing, films and relationships.

*Includes a Bibliography for further reading.

"I never go outside unless I look like Joan Crawford the movie star. If you want to see the girl next door, go next door." – Joan Crawford

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

The life of Joan Crawford is one of the most famous Hollywood rags-to-riches tales. While it is common to think of Hollywood as a land offering great opportunity to hard-working actresses, the Horatio Alger myth rarely applies in reality, but it applied almost perfectly to Joan Crawford. Crawford grew up in relative poverty, with both of her childhood father figures abandoning the family before she became a teenager, and she relied on undying ambition in order to progress through the ranks of the show business circuit and then the Hollywood studio system. This drive to succeed continued throughout her entire career, and Crawford's public battles with both studios (MGM in particular) and other stars (first Norma Shearer and later Bette Davis) were borne out of an unmatched competitive streak.

Joan Crawford's life and career also shed light on the treatment of women in pop culture and in cinema during the early 20th century. Her career was not only limited to film acting, as she acted in musical revues and was previously an unabashed flapper during the Roaring Twenties. As her career progressed, she acted in silent films, flourished with the rise of sound cinema in the late 1920s, became a leading lady in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally became a sort of caricature of herself during the late stages of her career in the 1950s and 1960s. Taken together, her filmography comprises roughly 90 films, a career of almost unprecedented scope. Given the length of her career and her range, her career offers one of the most useful examples for tracking the changing way in which women were portrayed on screen from the 1920s-1960s, and it is for this reason that her life story reveals the pressures, pleasures, and expectations of being a Hollywood actress during the first half of the 20th century.

After reaching film stardom, Crawford lived a life of glamour, but she was also constantly involved in public jockeying for position within the film industry and never relinquished the desperate need to succeed that helped her get her start decades earlier. Naturally, there was a wide gulf between Joan's unprivileged upbringing and the comfort she enjoyed as an adult; in fact, her rise from poverty to fame seems almost fabricated, as she went from living in a dilapidated apartment adjacent to a laundry room to become one of the wealthiest actresses in Hollywood. At the same time, comparing Joan's childhood with her adult life reveals many similarities. As child and adult, Crawford had contentious interactions with family members, and a large proportion of her familial relationships are characterized by abuse. Moreover, the bold assertion that often got her in trouble as a youth in her strict all-girls school was instrumental in supplying her with the verve to overcome the significant obstacles that face anyone with Hollywood aspirations. Joan's life is proof that no matter how much Hollywood may transform the lifestyle of a famous actress, she likely won't cast aside the influence of her cultural background.

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