

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: Granville's path to Reagan confidant

Child movie star became successful local executive

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"When she returned home from the hospital after her husband died, the first phone call Bonita Granville Wrather received was from President and Mrs. Reagan. The Reagans cried unabashedly...over the loss of their friend Jack Wrather....," The Los Angeles Times reported in 1985.

Bonita Granville and Jack Wrather began to socialize with the Reagans in the early 1960s in Hollywood and the desert and were part of a group that urged Reagan to run for governor of California. When he further succeeded in winning the White House, the Wrathers were part of Reagan's inner circle, his kitchen cabinet, along with desert denizens Walter and Leonore Annenberg. But Granville had more modest beginnings.

Bonita Granville was from a New York theater family and she appeared on the stage as a baby. When the family moved to California, Granville made her motion picture debut in 1931 at age seven, playing Laurence Olivier's daughter. Her skill immediately earned her many subsequent roles.

Granville was nominated for an Academy Award in 1936 for "These Three" — an adaptation of the scandalous Lillian Hellman play "The Children's Hour." The film was directed by William Wyler and produced by Samuel Goldwyn and starred Merle Oberon, Miriam Hopkins and heartthrob Joel McCrea in the leading roles. To elude the censors, the play was altered, with only innuendo and obtuse references made by Granville's malicious character to the lesbian relationship between the two leading women, but still very salty stuff for the middle of the 1930s.

A series of films followed in which Granville was typecast in variously "nasty" roles for the Warner Bros., before finally being cast as Nancy Drew, girl detective, in 1939. She moved to



The romance continued underwater. Bonita Granville and Jackie Cooper share a kiss, photographed from the underwater window in the side of the El Mirador Hotel pool in 1940. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MGM where she won supporting roles in movies with Hollywood's elite like Jimmy Stewart and Norma Shearer. And she was lent out to Paramount for a film with Alan Ladd and to Warner Bros. for "Now, Voyager" with Bette Davis. She would play opposite Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy's resident girlfriend in two of the last films of that series.

Like teenage actresses, she had romances during these years, most notably with fellow movie star Jackie Cooper. Cooper was very famous and had already spent considerable time in Palm Springs often staying at the Estella Villas or the Racquet Club. Granville and Cooper were seen as wholesome enough for the studio publicity machines and were photographed frolicking together at the El Mirador Hotel in 1940.

The studio also manufactured gossip, "Why Bonita Granville Dodged Jackie Cooper! Youthful amours don't always run smooth, and even among the young folk of Hollywood there's a wee bit of heartbreak. There is an amusing story of adolescent jealousy among the younger stars, concerning the clever

Bonita Granville. After studio hours Bonita and that popular nineteen-year-old Jackie Cooper, have been seeing a great deal of each other...(but) Jackie is supposed to be sweet on Judy Garland, playing her first adult role. Judy is quite devastating in grown-up gowns, specially designed for her by Adrian... Bonita has to go right through (her film) wearing very well-worn and very juvenile garments. She couldn't bear the idea of Jackie seeing her in this garb, alongside the gorgeously-gowned Judy. So she kept well away...Bonita Granville is considered one of the smartest dressers of the younger set of Hollywood, she has exquisite taste, and an attractive appearance and it would never do to let Jackie see her as a little girl again."

The child stars were indeed off-screen sweethearts, having "gone steady" for years when in 1942 they starred together in RKO Radio's "Syncopation" where they enacted a musical romance, "a swing time extravaganza" illustrating the history of jazz. There were rumors the two would wed.

All grown up and in her mid-20s, Granville negotiated the transition from

child star to movie star with grace. In all, she would make some 55 movies. But in 1947, Granville married businessman Jack Wrather, not Cooper, and gave up her career in front of the camera.

She became an integral part of Wrather's many business interests which included oil wells, Muzak Corporation, (the purveyor of elevator music,) the Queen Mary docked off Long Beach, the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, and the Wrather family compound in Palm Springs, L'Horizon. She produced Wrather Corporation's television series "Lassie" and "The Lone Ranger" until 1972 when they went into syndication and she co-produced "The Magic of Lassie" starring fellow desert-dweller Alice Faye and her longtime friend, Jimmy Stewart. The Wrathers were fixtures in the desert's social scene throughout the 1960s.

Years later the Los Angeles Times would note that "the child star had become the entrepreneurial equal of her husband, although that seemed small solace to her after his death." The paper quoted her then, "I always felt that Jack and I would end up together going to the moon. Or doing something very adventurous. Because we loved to do interesting and different things..."

Together they did do interesting and different things, despite her wistful quote, chief among them the Wrathers built one of the largest entertainment conglomerates of the 20th century, Wrather Corporation, which they eventually sold to Walt Disney Company for \$152 million.

Just a few years after Jack Wrather's untimely death, the Reagans would issue a lament about Granville's also too-early passing, calling her "a figure of beauty and grace in the motion picture business. But more than that, she was a warm and caring friend. For so many years, she enriched our lives with her sparking personality, her wonderful sense of humor, her loyalty and her love."

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