

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Authentic cowboy Gary Cooper was also desert farmer

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Cary Grant at age 73 was reported by his biographer Graham McCann to have mused: "Death? Of course I think of it. But I don't want to dwell on it ... I think the thing you think about when you're my age is how you're going to do it and whether you'll behave well." Grant carefully cultivated his behavior, and his end was swift and elegant, as he had always been.

But it was another star who set the standard for dignity while dying. Super-duper Gary Cooper was a genuine cowboy and bona fide outdoorsman long before he was called the epitome of ritz-y, million-dollar glamour by Irving Berlin. Cooper would comport himself as the quintessential American man on screen and in life.

Cooper was born in Montana, worked his father's ranch and grew up interested in drawing and art. He was transplanted to Los Angeles with his parents in 1924 as the burgeoning movie business was about to transition to talkies. Wanting money to attend the Chicago Art Institute, Cooper began working as an extra and stunt rider for low-budget westerns. He was almost instantly successful and catapulted to stardom.

Cooper arrived in the Coachella Valley along with the rest of the movie crowd in the 1920s, but his activities in the desert were most unusual.

By 1931 he was so famous the Los Angeles Times printed an extensive interview with him. "I recently purchased over 3,000 acres in Coachella Valley near Palm Springs which I will use for experimental purposes. The ranch is partly covered with a huge date orchard at present with some grapefruit and tomatoes. The land is well supplied with water from flowing wells. It is near Garnet on the proposed aqueduct highway. There are many farm products which have never been grown in the Coachella Valley. The soil there is exceptionally fertile. The field of horticulture is extremely interesting and I'm going to go into it in a big way."

"I have a man in mind to be in charge down there who will experiment with the soil and its possibilities and form new fruits and vegetables as Luther Burbank did ... I am going to find out for myself what will grow in that fertile soil. Anything I discover will be for the benefit of the other ranchers in similar territory.

"It's a far cry from the cow country of Montana to farming in subtropical dry climate but I hope to make some valuable discoveries that other ranchers can't make because they must get as much from the product of their land as possible."

Cooper's willingness to experiment reflected his generosity and curiosity. He was the highest paid movie star in 1936, supplanting Mae West, and third most highly paid person in the country that year after Alfred P. Sloan Jr. and William S. Knudsen, president and vice-president, respectively, of General Motors Corporation. His wild success in the movie business



Gary Cooper and his parents in the desert circa 1930
COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

allowed him to expand his other interests further, often choosing an unusual path.

A true maverick, Cooper was offered the role of the century as Rhett Butler in "Gone With The Wind" but turned it down, secure in his opinion that Clark Gable was a better match for the part. Cooper's outdoorsman and horsemanship and humility was evident and engendered a deep friendship with Ernest Hemingway.

Cooper was the real-life embodiment of the best of Hemingway's characters and played them in the film adaptations of "A Farewell to Arms" and "For Whom the Bell Tolls." (The parallel lives, remarkable friendship and significance of Cooper and Hemingway in the psyche of American men is explored in the documentary film "Hemingway and Cooper: The True Gen" and is worth watching.)

Not unlike the Coachella Valley itself, Cooper embraced modernism, commissioning architect A. Quincy Jones to design a house. Jones would design multiple projects in the desert, most notably Sunnylands for Walter Annenberg. Cooper's choice of modern design seemed contrary to his on-screen personae but

was emblematic of his flexible and curious mind. In real life, Cooper was far from the succinct and simple man he portrayed; he was exceedingly sophisticated.

In 1958 a Desert Sun photograph featured "Nutrition expert Paul C. Bragg" discussing "his favorite topic — diets and health — with actor Gary Cooper before his arrival in Palm Springs on a lecture visit. Bragg, who believes that Americans 'are committing suicide through poor eating habits' will present lectures at the Palm Springs Woman's Club."

Cooper and his parents were regular visitors in the desert. Often seen at The El Mirador, The Desert Inn or Goff's Hotel, they were also houseguests. In 1937 the paper noted: "Grimm is the famous western painter. The Coopers, parents of Gary Cooper, film star ... visited this week with (the) noted desert artist" at the Grimm's Calle Ajo house.

In 1941, Cooper's wife "Rocky" and her "socially important" parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Balfe of New York and La Jolla, "gained a thoroughly favorable impression of Palm Springs and learned a bit about desert sports and recreations."

In 1953 Cooper was elected to the board of directors of the Coachella Valley Savings and Loan Association where Cooper's only brother, Arthur, was executive vice president. Arthur lived in Indio, and their parents would eventually settle down in the desert as well.

Cooper's portrayal of the terminally ill Lou Gehrig in "The Pride of the Yankees" set the screen example for true grace and grit when facing death. Gehrig's poignant farewell speech rang true in Cooper's telling. "For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

A few months short of his 60th birthday, Cooper got a bad break: He was diagnosed with cancer and suffered through debilitating surgeries. Cooper was resolute, calm and laconic, setting the real life standard for decorum around dying.

As the world learned of Cooper's illness, tributes in print, radio and television were everywhere. The Desert Sun recounted a TV special that "depicted how the legend and the man grew together until he became the international symbol of a uniquely American character: The Westerner, with an unflinching code of honor, powerfully innocent, firm, shy, soft-spoken, peaceable until roused, never avoiding an inevitable showdown, what a man ought to be."

Cooper was an utterly authentic man. Hemingway could not have written a better hero. Cooper had behaved well at the end with the utmost courage. He died at home a week after his 60th birthday, quietly. In loud contrast, less than two months later and perhaps in an ultimate act of courage, the life of his best friend Hemingway was ended with a shotgun blast by his own hand.

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