

## Clara Bow (Inspiring Women Series)

By Stella Crouch

Clara Bow was an American actress who shaped cinema, celebrity, fashion, “sex appeal” and what was deemed “acceptable” in Hollywood. Unfortunately, much of the complexity of her personality and her roles have been forgotten or attributed to other people. Those who have heard of her most likely know of her and Helen Kane being the inspiration behind Max Fleischer’s “Betty Boop”.

Bow was born in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn at 697 Bergen Street. Bow lived with her parents, Sarah and Robert Bow, above a dilapidated church. Like many working-class people of her time, she had conflicting records of her birth year. Despite her gravestone being inscribed with the birth date 1907 it is generally accepted that Bow was born in 1905. She was her parents' third child, but her two older sisters, born in 1903 and 1904, had died in infancy.

During her childhood, Clara Bow’s mother attempted to kill herself several times which led to Bow feeling anxious when leaving her mother in fears that she might find her dead one day. When Bow's mother was 16, she fell from a second-story window and suffered a severe head injury. She was later diagnosed with "psychosis due to epilepsy". From the age of four, Bow had learned how to care for her mother during the seizures, as well as how to deal with her hostile episodes. She said her mother could be "mean to me - and she often was", but "she didn't mean to be and that it was because she couldn't help it". This led to Bow feeling robbed of her childhood saying "As a kid I took care of my mother, she didn't take care of me". Sarah worsened gradually, and when she realized her daughter was set for a movie career, Bow's mother told her she "would be much better off dead". One night in February 1922, Bow awoke to a butcher knife held against her throat by her mother. Clara was able to fend off the attack, and locked her mother in her room. In the morning, Bow's mother had no recollection of the episode, and later she was committed to a "sanitarium" by Robert Bow. She later said that she thought that part of the reason her father committed her mother was so he could have more time alone with her to which would later be proven correct as he raped her not long after her mother was living in the sanitarium.

Her father frequently sexually abused her from infancy, which she unfortunately never seemed to properly acknowledge because she believed it was her father’s display of affection; she told herself: “He did it for me. He did it because he loves me”. Even in her later years she never seemed to realise it wasn’t her fault. Even more so then now, women during those times were often blamed women for sexual harassment and violence.

Growing up she was seen as “too masculine for her own good”. Her mother was concerned that she mostly hung out with boys and played kick ball in the streets of Brooklyn. She said once that "I could lick any boy my size. My right arm was quite famous. My right arm was developed from pitching so much ... Once I hopped a ride behind a big fire engine. I got a lot of credit from the gang for that." Bow attended P.S. 111, P.S. 9, and P.S. 98 and was often picked on. As she grew up, she felt shy among other girls, and was teased for her worn-out clothes and "carrot-top" hair.

She cited a major event in her childhood that took place when a close friend, a younger boy who lived in her building burned to death. She heard his screams and ran to his aid, rolling him up in a carpet to quell the fire; however he was too badly burned and died in her arms. This left a lasting impact on Bow and an anxiety around fire. She was forced to drop out of school in 7th grade in order to work and sustain her family. She never learned the etiquette that was being required by the movie industry in their attempt to imitate Manhattan's wealthy elite. Her social behavior was seen as scandalous. She had many "beaus" during her time in Hollywood, sometimes simultaneously, and the press made sure to publish every "risque" moment she had, any breakdowns on set, especially during her frustrating transition to sound, and even whenever she gained or lost weight, something that is sadly still not uncommon today.

In the early 1920s, roughly 50 million Americans, half the population at that time, attended the movies every week and Bow was no exception. On the silver screen she found peace and an escape from her life saying, "For the first time in my life I knew there was beauty in the world. For the first time I saw distant lands, serene, lovely homes, romance, nobility, glamor". And further; "I always had a queer feeling about actors and actresses on the screen ... I knew I would have done it differently. I couldn't analyze it, but I could always feel it". At 16, Bow said she "knew" she wanted to be a motion pictures actress, even if she was a "square, awkward, funny-faced kid."

Against her mother's wishes, Bow competed in Brewster publications' magazine's annual nationwide acting contest, "Fame and Fortune", in fall 1921. At the time winning the contest meant a high chance of finding acting roles and success in the industry. In the contest's final screen test, Bow was up against an already scene-experienced woman who did "a beautiful piece of acting". A set member later stated that when Bow did the scene, she actually became her character and "lived it".

In the January 1922 issue of Motion Picture Classics, the contest judges concluded that, "She is very young, only 16. But she is full of confidence, determination and ambition. She is endowed with a mentality far beyond her years. She has a genuine spark of divine fire. The five different screen tests she had, showed this very plainly, her emotional range of expression provoking a fine enthusiasm from every contest judge who saw the tests. She screens perfectly. Her personal appearance is almost enough to carry her to success without the aid of the brains she indubitably possesses." Despite winning and the publishers "commitment" to helping her get roles ultimately nothing came of it.

She protested the publisher and their empty words and one day while outside Brewster's office she met director Christy Cabanne, who cast her in *Beyond the Rainbow*, produced late 1921 in New York City and released February 19, 1922. Bow did five scenes and impressed Cabanne with her ability to produce tears on call, but was cut from the final print which devastated her. Eventually, director Elmer Clifton needed a masculine actress for his film *Down to the Sea in Ships* and saw Bow in Motion Picture Classic magazine, and sent for her. In an attempt to overcome her youthful looks, Bow put her hair up and arrived in a dress she "sneaked" from her mother.



By mid-December 1923, primarily due to her merits in *Down to the Sea in Ships*, Bow was chosen the most successful of the 1924 WAMPAS Baby Stars. Three months before *Down to the Sea in Ships* was released, Bow danced half nude on a table, uncredited in *Enemies of Women* (1923). She later said this was her “first scandal” however that she didn’t understand society’s “over reaction” to the nude body, specifically the “female” one. She landed a part in *The Daring Years* (1923), where she befriended actress Mary Carr, who taught her how to use make-up and to navigate Hollywood.

On July 22, 1923, Bow left New York. She left her father and boyfriend behind for Hollywood, feeling there was no way to “make it” in New York. *Maytime* was Bow's first Hollywood picture, an adaptation of the popular operetta by the same name. A different film with the same name and based on the musical was made in 1937. Bow met her first boyfriend, cameraman Arthur Jacobson, and got to know director Frank Tuttle the same year. She would go on to work with Tuttle on five more films. Tuttle remembered Bow as someone with “her emotions close to the surface. She could cry on demand, opening the floodgate of tears almost as soon as I asked her to weep. She was dynamite, full of nervous energy and vitality and pitifully eager to please everyone.”

On April 12, 1926, Bow signed her first contract with Paramount: "to retain your services as an actress for the period of six months from June 6, 1926 to December 6, 1926, at a salary of \$750.00 per week". Around this time Sam Carver of the Newman Theater was quoted in *The Reel Journal* as saying that "Clara Bow is taking the place of Gloria Swanson...(and)...filling a long need for a popular taste movie actress."

On August 16, 1926, Bow's agreement with Paramount was renewed into a five-year deal. Bow said this was good timing as she intended to leave the motion picture business at the expiration of the contract in 1931. During this period she met and started dating Gary Cooper and helped launch his career. All together he was in seven films with Bow, however Cooper only co-starred in one, *Children of Divorce*. In 1927 Bow appeared in six Paramount releases: *It*,

Children of Divorce, Rough House Rosie, Wings, Hula and Get Your Man. Wings would go on to win for best picture in 1929, the only silent film and film to not have been released the previous calendar year to do so. Wings was also the first film that we know of to put cameras in airplanes. It was considered "an explicit film" because at one point Bow is walked in on partially nude and you see the upper part of her breasts for a moment.

Bow fumed: "They yell at me to be dignified. But what are the dignified people like? The people who are held up as examples for me? They are snobs. Frightful snobs ... I'm a curiosity in Hollywood. I'm a big freak, because I'm myself! MGM executive Paul Bern and future husband to Jean Harlow said Bow was "the greatest emotional actress on the screen", "sentimental, simple, childish and sweet," and considered her "hard-boiled attitude" a "defense mechanism".



During this time many literary circles began referencing Clara Bow including Dorothy Parker and other members of the Algonquin Round Table. With "talkies" *The Wild Party*,

Dangerous Curves, and The Saturday Night Kid, all released in 1929, Bow gained even more recognition. Bow, like Charlie Chaplin, Louise Brooks, and most other silent film stars, did not embrace the novelty: "I hate talkies ... they're stiff and limiting. You lose a lot of your cuteness, because there's no chance for action, and action is the most important thing to me."

Clara Bow, much like most women of her time, did not receive mental health support close to the level she needed. Despite being overworked, a damaging court trial charging her secretary Daisy DeVoe with financial mismanagement and experiencing intense stress from fame she was deemed "hysterical" by the press and by those who supposedly had her "best interest at heart". She was taunted by her manager B.P. Schulberg who began referring to her as "Crisis-a-day-Clara" during shooting for No Limit and Kick In. In April, Bow was taken to a sanatorium and, at her request, Paramount released her from her contract and her upcoming role in City Streets.

Bow left Hollywood for Rex Bell's ranch in Nevada, her "desert paradise", in June and married him in then small-town Las Vegas in December. In an interview on December 17, Bow discussed recovering, citing sleep, exercise, and food. The day after the interview she returned to Hollywood "for the sole purpose of making enough money to be able to stay out of it." Soon every studio in Hollywood, except Paramount, and even overseas wanted her services.

In the 40s it became known that Bow was a recluse often not letting her husband (Rex Bow) leave the ranch alone. She would lock herself in a signal room for days and not sleep. In 1944, while Bell was running for the U.S. House of Representatives, Bow tried to commit suicide. A note was found in which Bow stated she preferred death to a public life. Even after all of this no one helped her receive the care she needed. She checked into a sanitarium for insomnia and pains in her abdomen and chest. There many inhumane treatments were tested including electroshock therapy. After being discharged Bow did not return to her family, instead choosing to live alone in a bungalow. She rarely left, until her death in 1965, at age 60 of a heart attack.

Despite her story being glossed over by the masses, often not even appearing in film books about the silent and pre code era her legacy still lives on. Though she never described herself as an activist explicitly joining social movements she played a large role distigmatizing sex, the body and masc traits in women. She was one of the first actresses accused of being a lesbian who didn't attempt to dispell the rumors by being queerphobic. Instead she tried to address it. While that seems like the bare minimum today it was seen as quite progressive and even foolish to most.

Her story should serve as a reminder that healthcare, both physical and mental, is a basic human right and how many people's lives, relationships and careers have been cut short by lack of access. She was so much more than an archetype of the "ideal" flapper written by men. When she was promoting her last release in Europe, she told reporters, "I want to be known as a serious actress, and not as an It Girl." While her role as the "It Girl" was no doubt salient she deserves the same level of complexity given to any male celebrity. She, like so many women past and present, faced the dichotomy of "too sexy yet not sexy enough". She pushed back against this idea along with countless other women to get us where we are today. While we still have a long



way to go we must also honour the women who pushed the boundaries and fought before us, including the ones we have to do some digging through the patriarchy to find.



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