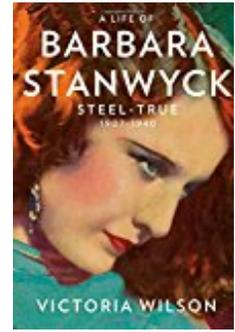


Descended From Horse-Thieves: Who was Barbara Stanwyck?

It would be inaccurate to call Victoria Wilson's nearly 1,000-page biography *A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907-1940* exhaustive. For one, it only covers the first thirty-three years of the actress's life, with fifty more to go. But more importantly, despite the repetitiveness, Wilson's take on Stanwyck's life and era is so commanding and delightful, I would happily read as many pages again and more. After my disappointment with David Thomson's *The Big Screen*, Wilson's tome is a glorious antidote, going far beyond biography to become a riveting history of vaudeville and early cinema, and is refreshingly inclusive of women -- not only the actresses, but the writers, directors, studio executives, and designers who were integral to both industries.



As an actress, Stanwyck had neither the crutch nor the handicap of great beauty. Instead, she had the ability to draw upon some deep personal honesty that allowed her viewers to suspend their disbelief and enter entirely into the imaginary world she proffered in whatever genre, be it high drama, sultry noir, or raucous comedy. She was both larger-than-life and someone you would like to be friends with. And, as one reviewer put it, she was "the screen's mistress in the art of telling the world where to get off."

The fun began for me on page one, line two of Wilson's biography when I learned that Ruby Stevens's, aka Barbara Stanwyck's, mother was named Catherine Ann McPhee. Sadly, Catherine dies in the same line, Ruby just four years old. Her father soon takes off for Panama, and Ruby spends her childhood either living with her much older sisters in Brooklyn or in foster homes. As for her heritage, Stanwyck knew only that she was "Scotch-Irish" and that "my grandparents on both sides were probably horse-thieves."

Ruby adored her sister Millie, an actress, and often accompanied her to the theater, watching her perform from the stage wings. When Ruby was fourteen and dreaming of becoming a dancer like Isadora Duncan, she worked at the Vogue Pattern Company where she began to read everything she could put her hands on: "I read lurid stuff about ladies who smelled sweet and looked like flowers and were betrayed. I read about gardens and ballrooms and moonlight trysts and murders. I felt a sense of doors opening." Eventually, she moved on to the weightier works of Conrad, Hardy, Walpole, Wharton, and Kipling. Reading remained a life-long passion, comfort, and escape, and she accumulated an impressive collection of first editions.

Ruby began her career dancing in a revue at a supper club on Broadway. She danced and sang in many more revues, including J.J. Shubert's *Gay Paree*, but it was her dramatic role in

Bill Mack's play *The Noose* that got her talent noticed. *The Noose's* producer, theatrical manager, designer, and technical director Renée Harris had recognized Ruby's ability and got Mack to rework his play to significantly enhanced Ruby's part. Though competing with Anita Loos's stage adaptation of *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* and Mae West's *Sex*, the play was a hit, Ruby Stevens' performance singled out by the critics and given the highest praise. Mack and Ruby became great friends and he took her to meet the renowned theater maestro David Belasco, who purportedly rechristened her with a name derived from the title of a play, *Barbara Frietchie*, and the actress who played her, Jane Stanwyck.

In 1927, with her new name, Stanwyck starred in the hit revue *Burlesque*, bought her first mink coat (on credit), and met her future first husband, Frank Fay, the renowned vaudeville comedian and "Broadway's favorite son." She was to be his fourth wife. In 1929, just before the stock market crash, a reluctant Barbara and an eager Fay headed west to Hollywood at the invitation of Joe Schenck, who in 1924 together with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and D.W. Griffiths had founded United Artists. He wanted Stanwyck for a remake of his 1921 picture *The Locked Door* that had starred his wife Norma Talmadge.

Over the following four years, Stanwyck made the first fourteen films of her eighty-eight total, four of them with the director Frank Capra who recognized her extraordinary talent and figured out how to get the best performance possible out of her. Hailed by the press as "astonishing... she has the spirit of a great artist" and "a new sensation in the world of pictures... A Star's been born," Stanwyck's film career was launched. But, as Wilson asserts, "Barbara had no illusions about the art of moving pictures; to her it was 'a racket,' and she had every intention of getting to the top of it." Stanwyck studied her "racket" assiduously, and was keenly interested in the technical side of things such as camera angles and "how the lights were placed to get a certain effect on this or that player's face." What interested her wasn't "what's going to happen, but *how* it's going to happen. You instinctively know the what of the situation but the how of presenting it becomes of terrific importance." A consummate professional on set, she was a director's dream, and often memorized the entire script helping the other actors with their lines.

Barbara notoriously hated Hollywood, calling it "the papier-mâché town" where she'd "never seen people so artificial and insincere." She and Fay rarely entertained and refused most invitations. She was, however, devoted to her work and never felt truly at ease unless she was on set. As Barbara's star rose, however, Fay's steady declined over their seven-year marriage, exacerbated by his severe alcoholism and violent behavior. Their marriage would provide material for the 1936 Hollywood insider film *A Star is Born*.

In 1931, after the successes of *Night Nurse* and *The Miracle Woman*, the twenty-four-year-old Stanwyck took on the Hollywood establishment. She demanded she be paid \$50,000 a picture and would no longer agree to be under exclusive contract to any one studio. Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Pictures, with whom she was under contract, refused. Stanwyck, due to shoot Capra's *Forbidden*, stayed home. A huge and public legal battle ensued with Harry Cohn getting affidavits from all the studio heads to help his case against Stanwyck. Still, she refused to concede. In the end, the court ruled in Columbia's favor, but Stanwyck had set a precedent.

It was a courageous act, one that belied her famous quip, "I'm only brave when I'm being paid for it." In the short term, the fracas cost her dearly, but in time it led to her being the highest paid actress in Hollywood.

As her marriage was finally nearing its end, she became intimate friends with Marion and Zeppo Marx, the latter her new agent. With Marion she bought a horse-breeding ranch they called Marwyck. Her closest friends included Joan Crawford, Joel McCrea, Jack Benny, Fred MacMurray, Clark Gable, and Carole Lombard. In 1936, she met Robert Taylor, the budding heartthrob and screen idol several years her junior, who was to become her second husband and the "love of her life."

In 1937, Stanwyck and Taylor attended a preview of *Stella Dallas*. For the picture, Stanwyck had given the performance of her career to date. The opening would be the most lucrative for a film yet and Stanwyck would be nominated for an Academy Award. At the Warner Bros. Hollywood Theatre, a crowd of 2,000 fans had gathered to catch a glimpse of the glamorous couple on their way into the screening. Stanwyck, hating the attention, turned up her collar and pulled down her hat to cover her eyes. They were thronged and for a moment got separated. Stanwyck made her way back to Taylor and grabbed onto his coat. A cop, thinking she was a fan, shoved her out of the theater on to the street, bruising her considerably. Later, a friend said to her, "Are you crazy? Why didn't you tell him who you were?"

"Well, who am I?" she said.

Like all of us, as a human being Barbara Stanwyck is ultimately unknowable. As a movie star, she is someone different in each of our imaginations. Victoria Wilson's *Steel-True* allows our imaginations to flourish.

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