

Stanwyck's "Luck" of the Irish

Barbara Stanwyck's rise to prominence as an actor had nothing to do with luck and everything to do with hard work and determination. In honor of St. Patrick's Day, we explore a few of the Irish influences in Stanwyck's life – some lucky, some not . . .

Barbara was born Ruby Catherine Stevens in Brooklyn, New York in 1907. Her father, Byron, was of English descent and her mother, Catherine, was Scotch-Irish. Barbara was only four when her mother died and her father abandoned the family. She spent her early years bouncing from one foster home to another until an older sister, a dancer, introduced her to show business.

Barbara's next encounter with the Irish occurred when she met and married vaudevillian Frank Fay in New York City in 1928. Fay, born Francis Anthony Donner to Irish-Catholic parents, was fifteen years Barbara's senior. Fay was disliked by his contemporaries for his bigotry and alcoholism. The marriage was tempestuous and, despite Barbara's determination to make it work, the two divorced in 1935. The only "luck" from their union was that Frank's desire to pursue Talkies resulted in a move to Hollywood where Barbara's screen success soon eclipsed his own. Their troubled marriage was thought by some to be the basis for the 1937 movie "A Star Is Born" but their only film appearance together was a cameo in "The Stolen Jools" (1931).

A happier brush with the Blarney Stone took place when Barbara built her limestone clad Irish farmhouse at Marwyck Ranch in 1937. One wonders if the dormered upstairs windows traversing the wood shake roof were inspired by the roof-top chase in her 1936 Irish historical drama, "The Plough and the Stars". The Irish roles kept coming and in 1939 Stanwyck bet director Cecil B. DeMille \$50 that she wouldn't lose her Irish brogue playing Mollie Monahan in his film, "Union Pacific". Barbara furnished her Marwyck home with fine English antiques, Sheffield silver, copper kettles and chintz fabrics. The view towards the horse paddocks was as lush a green as the Emerald Isle itself and no doubt inspired the farm's racing silks, which were green with white diamonds on the sleeves topped by a green and white cap



Stanwyck in Marwyck living and dining room.

Perhaps the best insight into Barbara's Irish roots came from the actress herself in an interview with Los Angeles Times columnist Paul Rosenfield in 1987 on the occasion of her American Film Institute Life Achievement Award: "When I'm doing a role, a good role, I'm being someone other than me. See, I'm a true Irishman, and I glide with the leprechauns. They say the Irish are brash, but there's also a quietness. Sometimes I can sit a whole evening and say nothing – but I absorb everything. I happen to like being alone a lot. I'm called a little nuts. I call it concentration. So I have a shell I creep into. So? To my friends who don't like it, I say, 'That's too bad.'"

As Irish "luck" would have it, the AFI salute would be Barbara's final public appearance. She concluded her acceptance speech that evening with a nod to Eire: "And before I say goodnight, a tiny, tiny little line from an old Irish prayer: 'May the good Lord keep his arms around all of you, always.' Thank you."

To watch Stanwyck and Fay in "The Stolen Jools", please click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLpITvdZcg&feature=youtu.be&t=58s>

To view Barbara's entire AFI acceptance speech, please click here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGawA_3fldA&list=PL961B79BD99DB023B&index=2

To learn more about Barbara's life during her Marwyck years, read Victoria Wilson's biography, "A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907-1940, Simon & Schuster.

Did the Main Titles from "Union Pacific" inspire those of "Star Wars"? Judge for yourself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1V8t9pFcE0>