

Hollywood chronicler James Bacon dies Saturday at age 96

September 20, 2010

NORTHRIDGE, Calif. - James Bacon, last of the colorful chroniclers of Hollywood's Golden Era and formerly of Lock Haven, died Saturday, Sept. 18, 2010. He died in his sleep at his Northridge, Calif., home of congestive heart failure. He was 96.

In his 75 years as a journalist, columnist and author, Bacon traded cigars with Winston Churchill, was acquainted with eight U.S. presidents, traveled Vietnam battlefields with Bob Hope, sipped Jack Daniels with Frank Sinatra, hung out with John Wayne and was a confidant of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor.

He was a reporter and Hollywood columnist for the Associated Press for 23 years and a Hollywood columnist for Hearst's now defunct Los Angeles Herald Examiner for 18 years. His last Hollywood column appeared on June 6 in Beverly Hills 213, a glossy publication for which he had written for 10 years.

He was the author of three best-selling books, two chronicling his Hollywood years, "Hollywood Is A Four Letter Town" (Henry Regnery, 1976); "Made In Hollywood" (Contemporary Books, 1970), and of comedian Jackie Gleason's autobiography, "How Sweet It Is" (St. Martin's Press, 1985).

He received his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on April 6, 2007.

It was his debunking of a phony "autobiography" of billionaire Howard Hughes by Clifford Irving which became one of his biggest stories. On Dec. 7, 1971, McGraw Hill announced it would publish "The Autobiography of Howard Hughes," allegedly based on 100 hours of secret interviews conducted by its author, Clifford Irving. Hughes' spokesmen declared the book a hoax and agreed to a telephonic press conference with the reclusive billionaire. NBC gathered a panel of newsmen to determine if the man on the phone was Hughes. Only Bacon, who had known Hughes for some 20 years, was able to authenticate his voice.

Speaking directly to Hughes, Bacon said, "I have heard your voice so many times, and the minute you started talking, I knew it was Howard Hughes." The other reporters came to agree with Bacon. Later, Bacon would explain he knew it was the reclusive Hughes "because he used to telephone me all the time at my home and at the Associated Press' (Los Angeles) bureau."

Bacon broke many major stories of Hollywood's Golden Era. He was the only reporter in actress Lana Turner's bedroom as she detailed the fatal stabbing of her lover, Johnny Stompanato, by her daughter, Cheryl Crane. A longtime friend of Turner's, he'd palmed himself off as the coroner to get past the police barricade.

It was Bacon who accompanied Elizabeth Taylor's physician to her home to break the news of the death of her third husband, impresario Mike Todd, in a plane crash in New Mexico. Bacon had declined Todd's invitation to accompany him on the flight to New York and was on the plane's manifest when it crashed. After filing his story with the Associated Press, Bacon, the only reporter in the house, briefed the mob of reporters outside.

Years later Elizabeth Taylor told a television interviewer, "He has always been one of the most forthcoming, honest, true, un-bitchy...a dear, dear friend."

Bacon confessed in his book, "Hollywood Is A Four-Letter Town" that he, too, enjoyed a lot of fun in Hollywood, recounting his own longtime friendship and months-long affair with Marilyn Monroe. It ended, he wrote, when Monroe telephoned him on New Year's Eve, asking him to escort her to a party. He turned her down, he wrote, explaining that his wife would object.

Bacon's wit, his capacity for Dom Perignon champagne and whiskey as well as the accuracy and world-wide reach of the Associated Press made him a favorite companion of many of Hollywood's legendary stars.

Clint Eastwood, in a 1999 "E! True Hollywood Story", said of him: "Jim always made you feel like he was a pal looking to hang out."

At the end of a day and night long St. Patrick's Day lunch with John Wayne, the pair hired a taxi to take them to see the famed swallows return to Capistrano. After a three-hour early morning drive to the storied Southern California mission, a priest told them they were a week early. The pair took the taxi back home.

Years later, Wayne confided his battle with cancer to Bacon, who broke the story.

Bacon filled in the wee small hours with Frank Sinatra after the singer's performances in Las Vegas showrooms, at intimate star-studded parties, as well as before the pyramids of Egypt, a South African casino and among 200,000 fans who sang along with Sinatra in Rio de Janeiro's Maracana soccer stadium.

In 1958, former actress Grace Kelly, then newly-named Princess Grace of Monaco, invited Bacon to attend her first Red Cross gala at which Sinatra would perform. Afterward, Sinatra kept the party going in his suite at the Hotel de Paris while playwright Noel Coward played piano and famed British novelist Somerset Maugham cheered. Bacon recalled that he countered Sinatra with his own version of the singer's "Come Fly With Me," at 3 a.m., which Sinatra applauded and awarded Bacon his famed straw pork-pie hat.

By then, Bacon was an "honorary mouse" in Humphrey Bogart's Holmby Hills Rat Pack whose partying membership included Sinatra, Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey, David Niven, restaurateur "Prince" Mike Romanoff, novelist John O'Hara, New Yorker cartoonist Charles Addams and Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson.

James Richard Hughes Bacon was born May 12, 1914, in Buffalo, N.Y., to printer-journalist Thomas Conley Bacon and Margaret Hughes. Thomas Bacon had worked for newspaper titans William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer in New York during the era of the Great White Way at beginning of the 20th century. James Bacon told family members that his father often dined at the famed Delmonico's restaurant with diva Lillian Russell and her escort "Diamond Jim" Brady.

Some 50 years later, Hearst's mistress Marion Davies introduced Bacon to the elderly Hearst, who asked him, "Are you Tom Bacon's boy? I hired your father from Pulitzer in Steve Broidy's saloon at double his salary." Bacon's father later confirmed the story.

It was his father's career, Bacon told family members, that inspired him to become a journalist.

James Bacon grew up in the small central Pennsylvania towns of Jersey Shore (population 2,000) and Lock Haven (population 15,000). He would write that he began his fascination with motion pictures at age 6 at the lone Jersey Shore movie house where the bill would change every day. Admission was 6 cents.

"The first movie I saw was an Art Accord two-reeler Western directed by a young William Wyler, freshly arrived from Germany," Bacon once recalled. "About 35 years later, Wyler, by then a top Hollywood director, told me he not only had a shaky knowledge of English back then, but also had no idea what a Western was."

Bacon's childhood movie-going introduced him to pioneer Hollywood directors and performers whom he would meet during his reporting years. He recalled sight-seeing shortly after his arrival in Hollywood and meeting director D.W. Griffith sitting on a Sunset Boulevard bus bench. A few minutes later, he encountered early comedy director Max Sennet walking down nearby Hollywood Boulevard.

A star quarterback on the Lock Haven High School football team, Bacon was recruited to play on the University of Notre Dame football team. He hitchhiked to Notre Dame in 1933 and arrived with 20 cents in his pocket. But a summer job after his freshman year in a broiling Indiana steel mill caused Bacon to lose so much weight he lost his football scholarship. He nonetheless worked his way through Notre Dame and remained a life-long fan. He would later graduate from Syracuse University.

Bacon's first newspaper job was as a summer intern on the South Bend (Indiana) News-Times. After a stint on the Clinton County Times, he became a reporter for the daily Laporte, Indiana, Herald Argus, from 1939 to 1942. In 1942, he moved to the Syracuse Herald Journal as night city editor. Eight months later, he joined the Associated

Press in Albany, N.Y., as a general assignment reporter covering New York state politics under then Gov. Thomas E. Dewey.

During that tenure, Bacon accompanied President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on the train ride that carried them from Roosevelt's Hyde Park, N.Y., home to the historic Quebec (Canada) Conference on World War II strategy. During the journey, Churchill, puffing on a prize Cuban stogie, sniffed the 29-year-old reporter's cheap White Owl cigar and told him to throw it out.

"Churchill handed me one of his own cigars - and I smoked it," Bacon would later relate. "Now I wish I'd saved it as a souvenir."

Soon afterward, Bacon joined the U.S. Navy as an ensign for the remainder of the war, serving in Panama breaking Japanese codes. Bacon rejoined the Associated Press in 1946 in its Chicago bureau. It was still the era of Chicago's crime reporters immortalized in Ben Hecht's drama, "The Front Page," Bacon recounted. He became friendly with members of the Capone mob at their favorite Italian restaurant, Henrici's. He gained their respect in part by keeping quiet about the secret lives their wives and children led under assumed names in suburban Chicago mansions.

Bacon's reporting skills and colorful writing style won him a berth in the Associated Press' Los Angeles bureau in 1948. But it was in his earlier years that he had already met some of the legendary entertainers and mobsters he would write about in Hollywood.

He first met a teenage Betty Grable in 1933, when she appeared at Notre Dame. She later introduced him to Frank Sinatra when the singer appeared at the College Inn nightclub of the Hotel Sherman, across the street from the AP Chicago bureau. That same year he hitch-hiked from Notre Dame to the Chicago World's Fair to see a hot young comedian named Milton Berle. Bacon happened to sit next to Berle's mother, Sadie, whom he joined in laughter. She invited him backstage and introduced him to her son. Bacon and Berle would become lifelong friends.

On Bacon's 80th birthday, both Berle and Bob Hope traded gags during an intimate birthday celebration at famed Jimmy's restaurant in Beverly Hills. "They were all at the center table and everyone in the room was trying to listen in," recalled owner Jimmy Murphy.

Bacon also met the hoodlums Mickey Cohn and Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel during the Chicago years, later catching up with them in Las Vegas and Hollywood.

It was Marilyn Monroe, Bacon wrote, who introduced him to Howard Hughes. Bacon spotted them at a secluded table at the famed Coconut Grove nightclub of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Hughes asked Bacon to refrain from disclosing their date, to which he agreed.

"I wouldn't have written about them anyway," Bacon later recounted. "The AP didn't carry stories about 'twosomes' and wouldn't have run it without confirmation from Hughes or Marilyn, which they wouldn't have given."

Convinced of Bacon's discretion, Hughes from then on telephoned him frequently, Bacon related, and eventually agreed to cooperate in a multi-part AP series on the reclusive billionaire.

During his career Bacon would become acquainted with several U.S. presidents, strolling with Harry Truman in the south of France and obliging President Dwight D. Eisenhower's request for an autographed photo of the singing Lennon Sisters. Bacon told friends Bob Hope had often marveled at the number of young soldiers from Pennsylvania who would greet the newsman during their Vietnam tours. But Hope was astonished when Bacon was warmly greeted by President Jimmy Carter at a White House reception.

Afterward, Hope grabbed Bacon by the shoulders and exclaimed, "You're gas-lighting me!"

Bacon explained he had reminded Carter that as a young missionary, Carter helped establish a church in Bacon's Lock Haven hometown.

Upon first arriving in Los Angeles, Bacon met a young oil supply salesman named George H. W. Bush who was staying at the same motel with his wife, Barbara, and their three-year-old son, George W. Bush. The elder Bush and Bacon remained friends over the years.

Bacon wrote he first met Ronald Reagan in the early 1950s after the actor complained to a Warner Brothers publicist that the reporter continually passed up his dressing room on the way to interview beautiful actress Virginia Mayo.

"One of the Warner Brothers publicists asked me to give Ronnie a 'mercy' interview, which I did," Bacon recounted.

That interview grew into a lifelong friendship with the future president and, later, First Lady Nancy Reagan.

Bacon first met John F. Kennedy when then-Congressman Kennedy visited his sisters Patricia and Eunice at Father Patrick Peyton's Hollywood radio headquarters of his popular Roman Catholic weekly show, "Family Theater." Fr. Peyton had been a classmate of Bacon's at Notre Dame.

Bacon's friendship with Kennedy endured until his assassination in November 1963. Two months earlier, Bacon told his wife, Kennedy had debarked in Palm Springs, Calif., for a vacation stop at the desert resort accompanied by his dark-suited phalanx of White House reporters and Secret Service agents. Spotting Bacon on the tarmac wearing yellow shorts and a blue and white checked sports shirt, a grinning Kennedy strolled over and quipped:

"Only a Hollywood reporter would meet the President dressed like that."

Angie Dickinson, on the "E! True Hollywood Story" summed up Bacon's career saying:

"I would like to be James Bacon because he had one of the greatest lives there ever was."

Bacon's first marriage to Thelma Love ended in divorce. A daughter of that marriage, Carol Stermer, and a granddaughter, Larkin Brooks, are deceased.

Bacon is survived by his wife of 44 years (married Feb. 11, 1966) the former Doris Klein; their children James B. Bacon of Granada Hills, Calif., Thomas C. Bacon of Manhattan Beach, Calif., and Margaret Bacon Smith of Los Angeles; two children of his first marriage, Roger Bacon and Kathleen Brooks, both of Ventura, Calif.; 15 grandchildren, 7 great grandchildren and a sister, Patricia Wilt of Lock Haven.

Funeral services will be private. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests contributions to the undergraduate scholarship fund of the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Ind.