

The following article is greater in length than we normally publish in our Cypress Log. However, we felt this one deserved to be shared with our entire community. We receive many wonderful articles, and have to direct them elsewhere due to their length and/or appropriateness for the Cypress Log. We sincerely hope you enjoy this one!

Michalyn Palmer, Editor. Your responses are most welcome! Send to: cvlog@comcast.net

A TICKET TO TOMAHAWK

By Marijane Sipple

“Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

That quote from Benjamin Franklin was the sage advice I heard from my father countless times growing up. Who was I to doubt my father and Benjamin Franklin? It didn't work for me, but it did give me a love of being outside at daybreak to hear the birds chirping to welcome a new day and watch the magic of sunrise. The air was cool and fresh, and I was able to ride my bicycle before traffic and people got in the way.

In 1949 (when I was ten years old), I lived in the southwestern town of Durango, Colorado. During summer vacation I enjoyed my early morning biking explorations. One morning when I passed the fish hatchery and La Plata County Fairgrounds, I saw a lot of activity around a motel which was usually pretty quiet. I rode over to a unit where a man sat on a bench drinking a cup of coffee. I asked him what was going on so early in the morning.

He introduced himself as Walter Brennan and told me that 20th Century-Fox had rented the entire motel for the cast of a western movie they were filming. His name meant nothing to me, but as soon he mentioned western movies, I recognized his raspy voice as the sidekick in many western movies I had seen.

Peals of laughter came through the open door of the unit behind us, and Walter said, “Come on in and meet the dance hall girls.” He introduced me to four pretty, friendly girls dressed in fancy costumes who were busy fixing their hair and putting on make-up. In the corner of the room was a table with a large coffee pot and a tray piled high with an assortment of donuts. They offered me a donut and invited me to come back to see them the next time I was passing by.

Free donuts! That quickly became a favorite stop on my early morning tour of Durango. I loved watching the girls put on their makeup and fix their hair while I munched on a donut. They introduced me to any of the cast who came in for coffee and donuts. Sometimes a blonde girl would fix my hair in curls like hers.

I didn't know any of the actors until one morning Dan Dailey came in. I had seen him in many 20th Century-Fox musicals, several with Betty Grable. I was almost speechless when they introduced me to him. I think I blurted out that I loved his song and dance routines and was pleased to meet him.

Mom loved to hear about my visits (especially meeting Dan Dailey). She didn't approve of the “dance hall girl” makeup but liked my “Shirley Temple curls” that I sometimes came home with. She reminded me every day to stay out of their way and not make a pest of myself.

One Saturday I was with Mom while she looked at fabric at the local department store. A man's voice called out “Marijane, Marijane!” A tall (6'3”) dark and handsome man and his petite (4'11”) vivacious wife came over and introduced themselves to my mother. It was Rory Calhoun, who had a leading role in the movie, and his Spanish wife, Lita Baron.

They told my mother that they would finish filming the next week and if I came by on a Sunday afternoon, they would take me around to get the autographs of everyone acting in the movie. I was happy when she agreed. After they left, I looked up at Mom and said, “But I don't have an autograph book!” She took me to the Five and Dime and let me buy a small book that I guess cost a dime.

After church and lunch that Sunday, I put my new autograph book in my bicycle basket and rode to the motel. Rory Calhoun and his wife signed the first page of my new book and then escorted me around the complex. I already knew everyone except for the leading lady, Anne Baxter. I knew she was a famous actress, but I had never seen her in a movie. When we went to her unit she was talking on the phone and smoking a cigarette in a long holder. Acting annoyed she brusquely said, “Well, here's the Durango kid! I'll call you back.”

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I instantly disliked her, even though Rory Calhoun made a joke of her remark and said, "She's the Durango Kid, but she rides a bicycle instead of a white horse." That made me feel better because the Durango Kid was one of my favorite Saturday afternoon matinee westerns. The Durango Kid was from Durango, Mexico (which our Durango was named for). I thanked Anne Baxter for her autograph and bolted out the front door.

My family was eager to see my autograph book and hear about the people who had signed it. I told them that I was ready to tear out the last page with Anne Baxter's autograph because she was such a snob. My father laughed and said, "Why didn't you tell her that the real star of the show will be Emma Sweeny?" Emma Sweeny was the name of the steam locomotive used in the movie. The 100% coal fired, and steam-operated train of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad truly was the star of the town. Durango was founded in 1881 by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad Company to haul silver and gold by train to Durango from the mining town of Silverton, fifty miles north of town.

After the demand for gold and silver decreased, the 1880's train no longer carried ore but tourists eager to see the majestic San Juan mountains and explore the old mining town. Passengers have time to see the town and have lunch before boarding the train for the trip back to Durango. We often had company in the summertime and Dad put half of us on the train before driving the rest of the group there. We would meet for lunch in Silverton, then change places for the return trip, giving everyone the opportunity to see the beautiful views both by train and US 550.

Before leaving town, the movie cast treated the locals to a wonderful performance at the Durango theater. I learned a lot about my new summer friends from the introductions. Walter Brennan recited Robert Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Brennan had appeared in numerous movies and won a record number of three Academy Awards for "Best Supporting Actor."

I was eager to see Dan Dailey perform, but he fell off his horse and broke his leg the day before. He announced that "the show must go on" and I'll always remember him singing "On the Sunny Side of the Street" while attempting a partial tap dance with a cast on one leg. My next favorite was the routine Dan Dailey and the dance hall girls did of their number in the movie.

I was surprised when they introduced Rory Calhoun's wife, Lita Baron. I found out that she had been in many movies, and before that was the lead singer and dancer with Xavier Cugat's orchestra. She did a Spanish song and dance that was the hit of the evening. If Anne Baxter appeared, I don't remember.

Years later I was telling my college roommate about my experiences and the autograph book, and she asked if she could see it. I promised to bring it back to college after Thanksgiving vacation.

I was surprised because she was so interested in looking at each signature and hearing about the people, especially when she said, "Wow! You have Marilyn Monroe's autograph." I looked at the signature and said, "Oh, no. That was just one of the dance hall girls. She must have had the same name."

Not to be defeated, my roommate came back to the dorm the next day and said, "Yes! That IS the real Marilyn Monroe. I found a book at the library and it said A TICKET TO TOMAHAWK was her first movie." I couldn't wait to write home to let my folks know it was the famous Marilyn Monroe who fixed my hair in "the Shirley Temple curls" that wonderful summer in Durango.

