

BETTY GRABLE - The Pin-Up Girl

That you may never have heard the name Frank Powolney is a forgone conclusion, so you can be excused for asking "Who was he?". Not an actor or supporting player, not a bit player or even an extra in a crowd scene, he was but one of the hundreds of people employed behind the scenes at the studios of 20th Century-Fox Films. Frank was a 'stills man' whose responsibilities included the setting up and taking publicity shots of the studio stars. It was early in 1943, at the end of a photo session with Betty Grable, that he created what some have described as a masterpiece by photographing the star wearing a white bathing-suit, back to the camera whilst looking saucily over her shoulder. It became the most famous pin-up of World War Two with millions of copies (estimated between two and five) being sent to servicemen around the globe. She adorned practically every barrack room, joined soldiers going into battle, accompanied every Marines assault, sailed the seven seas and flew on countless missions over enemy territory. For thousands of homesick enlisted men, that photo of "the girl with the million-dollar legs" represented the girl-back-home they longed to be with. The extent of the Services' admiration surprised both Betty and the studios, but it shouldn't have - in 1942, ranked just eighth at the box-office, she rated top billing in photo requests, reaching number one in both categories the following year. Her career had really taken off in 1940 when she starred in "**Down Argentine Way**" but it had taken 31 movies and ten years to attain real stardom. Always behind her was a driving force, her mother Lillian.

Ruth Elizabeth Grable was born in St. Louis on 18th December, 1916, to John Conn (always known as Conn) and Lillian, their third child. Marjorie had been born in 1909 and John Karl in 1914, but he died before reaching his second birthday. For reasons never fully explained, Lillian was determined to see a daughter in show-business and tried first, and failed, with Marjorie. The talent needed was just not there, so it fell to Betty to fulfil her mother's ambitions. Fortunately, she did have the necessary aptitude and enthusiasm so her early years were devoted to dancing lessons, learning to play the saxophone, and singing. After vacationing in California in 1929, Betty and her mother stayed on. Mother had her sights firmly set on the movies and was determined that her daughter would eventually get into one of the studios. Betty attended the Hollywood Professional School, took dancing lessons at the Ernest Belcher Academy and was coached in acting at the Albertina Rosch School. Soon after her thirteenth birthday and with false papers showing her age as fifteen (the minimum age for chorus work) she answered a call from Fox Films for singers and dancers and was accepted for the film "**Let's Go Places**". Betty was at last in the movies, even though it was only in the chorus and in blackface. Feeling her daughter was worthy of something better, Lillian made appropriate noises in the casting office and wheedled a chorus contract out of Fox. Assigned to the chorus line in "**Fox Movietone Follies Of 1930**" but this time without the blackface camouflage, the studios became aware of Betty's true age and cancelled her contract. Undaunted by this setback, mother presented her daughter at the casting offices of Samuel Goldwyn where she was signed to appear in the all-Technicolor movie "**Whoopee**" starring Eddie Cantor. In addition to appearing in dance routines directed by Busby Berkeley, making his Hollywood debut, Betty was the featured soloist in a few lines of the film's opening song "**Cowboy Number**", included in this collection. The film was shot early in 1930 and released in the autumn.

It was to be two years before Betty's name appeared on the screen when she received seventh billing in Columbia's "**Child Of Manhattan**". During the intervening period, she played bit parts or paraded along with the likes of Lucille Ball, Paulette Goddard and Virginia Bruce as a Goldwyn Girl in the Eddie Cantor pictures "**Palmy Days**" and "**The Kid From Spain**". She was in a crowd scene in "**Kiki**" and appeared as a model in "**The Greeks Had A Word For It**". Romance entered into Betty's life, albeit briefly, during the filming of "**Palmy Days**" when a member of the cast started dating her. His name was George Raft and he was twenty years her senior. Betty was still being chaperoned by her mother or elder sister, so it was not long before Raft decided to "give her back till she grows up" as he put it. There were two more films in 1932

featuring Betty in dramatic roles - "**Hold 'Em Jail**" from RKO, and "**Probation**" from Chesterfield Films. She also made a fleeting appearance in "**Cavalcade**", so fleeting that if you blinked, you missed her; it was released in 1933. Late in '32 Betty joined the cast of the Frank Fay musical "**Tattle Tales**", opening at the Belasco Theatre in Los Angeles on 29th December. It closed after just a few performances due to Fay's inability to remain sober. Betty also spent some time as vocalist with the Ted Fio Rito Orchestra, an engagement that lasted into the summer of 1933, Unfortunately, her voice was not considered suitable for their recording sessions and she was not included in the band's broadcasts, but she did make an appearance with the band in the film "**The Sweetheart Of Sigma Chi**". Around this time, too, Betty made some shorts for independent producers using the name Frances Dean. The remaining films shot in 1933 didn't add much to Miss Grable's reputation - a brief part in "**Melody Cruise**" and two straight roles, in "**What Price Innocence**" and "**By Your Leave**". With no further movie commitments, Betty joined Jay Whidden's Orchestra at San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel.

During the period 1934 through to 1939, Betty appeared in sixteen movies of which seven used campus locations in which she did her 'Betty Coed' routine. The first of this genre was MGM's "**Student Tour**" (1934) in which she was given eighth billing, but by the time of the last, Paramount's 1939 production "**Million Dollar Legs**", her name had reached the top of the cast list, Incidentally, the legs were not Betty's but those of a racehorse! Among the sixteen were two prestigious Astaire-Rogers movies, the first being "**The Gay Divorcee**" (1934), She partnered an unlikely Edward Everett Horton in a song-and-dance number called "**Let's K-nock K-nees**". The other, two years later, was "**Follow The Fleet**". Her participation in this film was somewhat of a comedown - as one of a trio harmonising along with Ginger Rogers' rendition of "**Let Yourself Go**" and a brief scene later in the picture. This was the pattern of Betty's rather erratic career during the late Thirties - substantial roles with good billing in some pictures, whilst in others, the studios seemingly not certain what to do with her, relegation to minor parts. Nevertheless, RKO were sufficiently impressed with her performance in "**The Gay Divorcee**" to sign her to a contract and put her in "**The Nitwits**" with Wheeler & Woolsey, a comedy murder mystery with Betty third billed. It was followed by "**Old Man Rhythm**", a campus caper starring Charles "Buddy" Rogers. Betty's long-time friend Lucille Ball was in there somewhere, but the film was most notable for a rare appearance by singer-songwriter Johnny Mercer.

In the summer of 1935, Betty met, fell in love with and became engaged to former child star Jackie Coogan, The resultant publicity made her a household name and the Fanchon & Marco booking agency offered the couple a tour across the country as MCs for a show called "**Hollywood Secrets**". Launched in December, one of the sketches had Grable and Coogan appearing as movie stars on an authentic set, showing the audience how it was all done. The audiences loved it and the reviews were all favourable. Had RKO been able to foresee this success they might have given Betty a better part in "**Follow The Fleet**" which had already been completed before she went on tour, However, they were still slow to capitalise on that success - she was given a dramatic role in "**Don't Turn 'Em Loose**", then loaned to 20th Century-Fox for another campus movie with little to do. "**Pigskin Parade**" featured Judy Garland in her first feature film and Betty was just decoration. Paramount signed Miss Grable for two years with an option.

Her first assignment under the new contract was female lead to Charles "Buddy" Rogers in "**This Way Please**", not particularly memorable slapstick. Then in a dramatic role in "**Thrill Of A Lifetime**", she was second billed under Judy Canova. Dorothy Lamour was also in the picture, and she and Betty became lifelong friends. 1937 ended with a big event when, on November 20th, she married Jackie Coogan. There were three releases in 1938. In two, "**College Swing**" and "**Give Me A Sailor**", she was teamed with Martha Raye and Bob Hope. For the third, she was given top billing for the first time in her career. "**Campus Confessions**" was only mildly entertaining and none of the supporting players were of sufficient stature to be billed over her, a rather backhanded compliment to Miss Grable.

Early in 1939, a few days into filming of **"Man About Town"** with Jack Benny, Betty collapsed on the set and was rushed to hospital with appendicitis. After a month's delay, production was resumed with Dorothy Lamour in her part, although Betty was well enough before the picture was completed to feature in a speciality number. But now another problem was beginning to trouble her - all was not well on the domestic scene. Whilst Coogan was involved in litigation to claim his share of earnings from his childhood career, he was spending Betty's money, and not always very wisely. There were many arguments, and the marriage was becoming very shaky. In spite of this, both she and Jackie started work on **"Million Dollar Legs"**. Betty's star was in the ascendancy but not quickly enough for Paramount who declined to pick up their option when the film was completed. Once again, it seemed, Miss Grable was going nowhere. When Jack Benny's radio programme came off the air for the summer vacation, Betty joined Phil Harris and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson on tour. At the same time, Jackie Coogan, having settled his claim to earlier earnings by accepting a considerably reduced amount, put the money into a car customising venture. It failed and Betty, not prepared to carry on any longer, filed for divorce. Back in Hollywood, she made one more film for RKO, a comedy called **"The Day The Bookies Wept"**. Then she and Jack Haley teamed up for a two-week variety act at the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco. It was to be a turning point in Betty's career.

Darryl F. Zanuck was looking for new talent for his 20th Century-Fox Studios and seeing Paramount photos of Betty, offered her a contract. Soon, she would be back where it all started a decade ago. But not before she came to the attention of Buddy DeSylva who was casting for a Cole Porter musical for Broadway, As Zanuck did not have any specific project in mind for Betty at the time, he gladly released her for the show. She joined Ethel Merman, Bert Lahr and Benny Baker in **"Dubarry Was A Lady"**, opening on Broadway's 46th Street Theatre on 6th December, 1939. Betty was an overnight sensation, especially duetting with Charles Walters in a song that was later to become associated with Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, **"Well, Did You Evah"**. The show ran to the end of 1940 but Betty had to leave the cast in June when Zanuck summoned her back to Hollywood to replace Alice Faye, taken ill, in **"Down Argentine Way"**. It was to be her journey to movie stardom.

Betty was cast as leading lady opposite one of Zanuck's favourite actors, Don Ameche, and they were supported by J. Carroll Naish, Charlotte Greenwood and Leonid Kinskey. Fresh from her Broadway triumph and making her Hollywood debut was Carmen Miranda, and the whole production was filmed in the now considerably improved Technicolor, a process that served to enhance Betty's peaches and cream appearance to great effect. Then even before the film was released, she started work on her next assignment, playing Alice Faye's sister in **"Tin Pan Alley"**. Originally intended as a follow-up to the studio's successful **"Alexander's Ragtime Band"** (1938) and written for Faye, Tyrone Power and Don Ameche, the male leads were given to Jack Oakie and John Payne. Betty's part was written in when Zanuck realised he had signed someone very special. Ready for the first day of shooting, the crew were nervously anticipating a flare-up between the two ladies, as sometimes happened. It never came as Betty and Alice hit it off together from the word go and became lifelong friends. Betty never showed any temperament on the film-set, preferring always to get on with the job and do her very best, at the same time, helping others in whatever way she could. Surprisingly, in view of the importance shown to their new star, this film was shot in black-and-white.

"Down Argentine Way" opened in New York in October, **"Tin Pan Alley"** in December, both to excellent reviews. After filming on **"Tin Pan Alley"** was completed, she took a break and went to Chicago for a week's stint with Ken Murray at the Chicago Theatre. Travelling with her was Victor Mature, whom she had been dating, and together they went to the College Inn to hear Dick Haymes who introduced her to Harry James. Little did she know then that she had met a husband-to-be. After a few days in New York where Mature had gone to land a principal part in **"Lady In The Dark"**, it was back to Hollywood for Betty and her mother (she was always around, making sure her little girl was getting the best of everything) for her next movie **"Moon Over**

Miami". On 19th November her divorce from Coogan became final - she was legally free of husband-that-was.

The huge success of **"Down Argentine Way"** prompted Zanuck to pledge colour for all of Betty's pictures but he didn't live up to his promise. Certainly, **"Moon Over Miami"**, a box-office smash in which Grable, sister Carole Landis and aunt Charlotte Greenwood take off for Miami in search of rich husbands, played by Don Ameche, Robert Cummings and Jack Haley, was in colour, but her next three pictures were not. In 1941 there was **"A Yank In The R.A.F."** in which she sang two very short numbers, and **"I Wake Up Screaming"** which had no songs at all and received only lukewarm reviews. With John Payne and Victor Mature, **"Footlight Serenade"** was released in 1942. It was then decided there would be no more black-and-white for Betty - Fox wisely came to the conclusion that she was much better served by colour photography, even though it added a third to a film's budget, The improved box-office returns would make up for the extra cost, and a studio executive opined, "When Betty waves her hips in a colour film she does it a favour!". **"Song Of The Islands"**, a huge success with Victor Mature, Jack Oakie and Hilo Hattie was followed by **"Springtime In The Rockies"** featuring John Payne, Carmen Miranda, Cesar Romero and Charlotte Greenwood. Harry James was also in the film, enabling Betty to become better acquainted. With America now at war, she joined a host of Hollywood stars for a War Bond Rally tour through the western states before starting work on **"Coney Island"**, and when the Hollywood Canteen opened its doors in October, 1942 she was in there helping to entertain the servicemen. By the end of the year she ranked eighth among Hollywood's most popular stars and topped the list for photo requests.

Early in 1943, Betty was on the set for one of her favourite movies, **"Sweet Rosie O'Grady"**. Her foot-prints were preserved for posterity in concrete in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard and, later in the year, her legs were insured at Lloyd's of London for a cool million dollars. She was in New York when **"Coney Island"** opened to good reviews in June, travelling the following month to Las Vegas for a very special date. There, she met Harry James and in the early hours of July 5th, they were married at a quiet ceremony, There was no time for a honeymoon as she had to report the next day for work on **"Pin-Up Girl"**. There was one other assignment that year, a cameo spot in **"Four Jills In A Jeep"**, then Betty was absent from the studios preparing for motherhood, Meanwhile, **"Sweet Rosie O'Grady"**, released in the autumn, turned out to be a smash hit with fans queuing for blocks to get into the theatre.

Daughter Victoria Elizabeth was born at home on 3rd March, 1944. It was not until late August that Betty returned to the studios to begin filming **"Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe"**. Meanwhile, in May, **"Pin-Up Girl"** was released to indifferent reviews although it did good business at the box-office. It was Betty's least favourite film. **"Diamond Horseshoe"**, featuring Dick Haymes, Phil Silvers and William Gaxton proved to be another winner, ensuring Betty's hold on the number one position. Zanuck then wanted to team her with Alice Faye in **"The Dolly Sisters"** but Alice couldn't be coaxed out of retirement, so the part was given to June Haver. Betty almost always got on well with everyone with whom she worked, but Haver was an exception - Betty just didn't like her. In spite of this, they worked well together and the movie turned out to be a smash hit. One of their duets was **"I Can't Begin To Tell You"**, the only song Betty ever released as a commercial recording. Fox discouraged their stars to work for recording companies, but she got away with it by using the name Ruth Haag as vocalist on a Harry James record (Ruth, her first name, and Haag, James' middle name). With Miss Grable riding high in popularity, Zanuck now considered his star should be seen in something meatier than the musical roles she had been playing and offered her the principal part in **"The Razor's Edge"**. He was so infuriated when she turned it down that he suspended her from the studios. Betty said, "I'm strictly a song-and-dance girl. I can act enough to get by. That's the limit of my talents."

She returned to the studio late in 1946 to film **"The Shocking Miss Pilgrim"** with Dick Haymes. Set in the Victorian era, the public were not enthusiastic about a film that did not display the Grable legs (about which there were thousands of letters of protest), yet the star's drawing

power ensured its success at the box-office, grossing some 2¹/₄ million dollars! Then it was back to the tried and trusted formula in **"Mother Wore Tights"** - with legs, in which she played a vaudevillian. Fox had tried to hire either James Cagney or Fred Astaire for her co-star but neither was available so the part was given to Fox's new signing Dan Dailey, He turned out to be an ideal partner for Betty - the right screen chemistry ensured a box-office smash grossing \$4 million. When shooting was completed, Betty took another break away from Fox for the birth of her second daughter, Jessica, who was born 20th May, 1947.

"That Lady In Ermine" was an assignment for which Betty was not enthusiastic until she learned that it would be directed by Ernest Lubitsch. Unfortunately, he died before the film was finished and what was a light, airy, operetta-like romance became a clodhopping shambles in the hands of Otto Preminger. Betty took an instant dislike to him as well as being unimpressed by her leading man Douglas Fairbanks Jr. The picture flopped at the box-office. Then it was back to what she did best when, with her favourite partner Dan Dailey, she starred in a third Hollywood adaptation of the successful 1927 Broadway play **"Burlesque"**, now titled **"When My Baby Smiles At Me"**. The next film was another she didn't want to make, and shouldn't have, for Betty was not at ease in the raucous **"The Beautiful Blonde From Bashful Bend"**. Her reluctance was well founded - the film was a flop. Then like the proverbial see-saw she was back at the top once again with Victor Mature and Phil Harris in a reworking of **"Coney Island"**, now titled **"Wabash Avenue"** (1950). It was the only time a star appeared in a remake of one of her own pictures, and for the same studio, Dailey and Grable were together for the third time in **"My Blue Heaven"**, but fearful that Betty's crown might soon slip, Zanuck brought in a new signing to bolster the film, Mitzi Gaynor, making her film debut. The studio boss was now scheming to ease Betty out of 20thCentury-Fox. Then for the fourth and last occasion, Betty and Dan teamed up for **"Call Me Mister"**. The contretemps between her and Zanuck intensified when, after completing **"Meet Me After The Show"** in which she performed some strenuous dance routines, the studio boss assigned her to start work immediately on another film, also with similar dancing sequences. Betty needed a rest but Zanuck insisted she carry on. She refused and was put on suspension for the second time.

There were two more pictures for Fox, **"The Farmer Takes A Wife"** and **"How To Marry A Millionaire"** (with Marilyn Monroe) before Betty was suspended for a third time for refusing Zanuck's loan-out to Columbia for **"The Pleasure Is All Mine"**. She had had enough, and on 1st July, 1953, marched into Zanuck's office with her contract, tore it up, gave him the pieces and quietly told him, "I'm leaving." Ironically, when **"Millionaire"** was released in November, it was Betty who got the best notices. She didn't care, it was all over with Fox - well, not quite. Columbia approached her directly to appear with Jack Lemmon in the film she had earlier turned down, now re-titled **"Three For The Show"**. Then much to her surprise, a call came from Zanuck. Marilyn Monroe had refused to do **"How To Be Very Very Popular"** and would she (Betty) return to take her part. "Yes, for a price" was the answer, and terms were agreed. She also would receive top billing over Sheree North. Betty didn't like the film, neither did the critics when it was released in July 1955. It didn't do much at the box-office, but Miss Grable was not all that concerned, The love affair between her and Hollywood was over.

From the big screen to the small one, Betty Grable appeared on various TV shows during the latter Fifties. On a number of occasions, she and Harry played the El Rancho Vegas, and in 1959 she opened in her night-club act at New York's Latin Quarter. At Dan Dailey's bidding, they opened in **"Guys And Dolls"** at the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas in December 1962. Playing to packed houses, the show ran until mid-summer the following year. With her marriage to Harry James now running into trouble, she sued for divorce in October 1965. After rehearsing in New York, she opened in the touring company of **"Hello Dolly"** in November in Chattanooga, followed by performances in several cities before arriving in Las Vegas for the Riviera Hotel opening on December 23rd. With two shows a night, it ran until the autumn of 1966, then it was Chicago's turn at the Shubert Theatre for two months. Via a circuitous route through the south and east, then Baltimore, it closed in Wilmington, Delaware. On 12th June, 1967, Betty replaced Martha Raye on

Broadway in *"Hello Dolly"*, staying in the cast until November. In August 1968, she played in *"Born Yesterday"*, in Chicago for three weeks and Houston for two. She came to Britain in 1969 to play in a musical entitled *"Belle Starr"*, first in Scotland then at the Palace in London where it opened to poor reviews on April 30th. The show lasted for 16 performances, a dismal failure. Back in the States, she again toured in *"Born Yesterday"*, opening in Illinois in late 1969. It was a year and a half before the show finally closed, a triumph for Betty.

In 1972, she accepted an invitation to participate in the Academy Awards ceremonies. Held on April 10th at the Los Angeles Music Center, Jack Lemmon was master of ceremonies and Betty, along with old friend Dick Haymes, opened the envelope for the Best Musical Score. During the proceedings she became aware of a ponderous feeling in her chest, then whilst on the way to the airport, suddenly had difficulty breathing. At St John's Hospital in Los Angeles, lung cancer was diagnosed. After extensive treatment, she felt well enough to go back to work and opened in *"Born Yesterday"* on 24th January, 1973, at the Alhambra Theater in Jacksonville, Florida. What should have been a short term run proved so successful that a four weeks extension took the show into mid-March, when it closed. Betty would have accepted a booking in Tampa but recurring pains necessitated her return to hospital where it was found the cancer had moved. Following surgery, she was able to spend some time at her own home in Las Vegas but her condition deteriorated to such an extent that she was re-admitted to St John's.

Late in the afternoon of 2nd July, 1973, Betty Grable was no longer with us. In a taxi on her way to the airport for her last flight home, the driver was silent. Arriving at their destination, he turned to her and said, "Miss Grable, I have to say this. You've given me some of the greatest joys of my life - God bless you." The thousands of fans she left behind would surely second that!

Geoff Milne, 1997