

Zip! Zam! Wham!



Photographed exclusively for The New Movie Magazine by Clarence Sinclair Bull



What happens when a railroad man goes Hollywood

By FRANK J. McNELIS

A BRISK young man, still in his uniform of the World War, though he had been out of the service two months, threw open the door of a little bungalow in Shavertown, Pennsylvania, a village near Wilkes-Barre.

"Mother," he announced, "I've decided what I'm going to do."

"Certainly," said the mother. (Folks in Shavertown know her as Mrs. W. L. Tracy.) "You're going back to college."

"Nope," said son Lee, with a rather weak grin. "I'm going to be an actor!"

It all happened as simply as that. But Lee Tracy, the jaunty, rather cocksure young man, little realized the struggles and problems he was bringing upon himself. And had he been told that within

Bang! It's Lee Tracy!



When he got tired answering "No!" to the inevitable question, "Any experience?" Lee dug up a lot of résumés out of a book of clippings, and this time his answer was "Plenty." So he got the job.

A photograph of Lee Tracy taken when he was in high school.

Photo by H. Starr



ten years he was to be one of the most sought-after stars of motion pictures, he probably would have turned to you with his infectious grin and said, "Quit your kidding! This is a serious business with me!"

And it was!

BUT let's look first into the environment and antecedents of this young man without a drop of stage blood in his veins, who was to make veteran Hollywood producers sit up and take notice, and who was to give fan audiences more big, new thrills than any male star of recent years.

Lee's early life was a constant succession of changing background and location. His father, the late W. L. Tracy, was a railroad official, whose exploits in organizing and developing railroad centers will be remembered by many of the brotherhood, moved from town to town, in pursuit of his calling.

Lee attended school in Louisville, Kentucky; Kansas City, Kansas; St. Louis, Missouri, and the Western Military Academy at Alton, Illinois. From there he went to Union College at Schenectady, New York.

When the war broke out, Lee was sent to Camp Lee, Virginia, where, because of his early military training, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. He emerged from the war without a scratch, luckily enough, and still retains his commission as second lieutenant. He is a member (in good standing, let me add) of the Army and Navy Club of Philadelphia.

The war left Lee with nothing to do. He didn't want to continue his military career. He didn't want to continue his college plans to become a surgeon. In fact, like many of the disbanded soldiers, he didn't know, exactly, just what he wanted to do. But he had what he was afraid some people might think a crazy idea. So he went home to talk things over with his parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Tracy had moved to Shavertown, where Mr. Tracy was in charge of the Sayre, Pennsylvania, shops of the Lehigh Valley Railroad and Mrs. Tracy was near friends of her childhood.

Just why at this point he should sell himself the ambition to become an actor he is frank to say he cannot tell you. Perhaps, it was a boyhood ambition, which he had always secretly cherished, suddenly blossoming as an expression of rebellion against a life he wasn't interested in.

He knew he didn't want to study medicine, much as his family had always treasured the idea.

But to do them justice, they were willing to help—and did. They were (Please turn to page 88)

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Biff! Bang!

(Continued from page 51)

for the boy, right or wrong, and they showed it.

A SHORT time later Lee was enrolled in a dramatic school in New York City in preparation for his new career.

When he had finished his course he tried to get work. But young, inexperienced actors were not in demand. Everywhere he was met with the question, "Any experience?"

Several weeks of this was enough. So in desperation Lee manufactured an experience for himself. At the next place he tried the same old question came up. This time he was ready. He rattled off a list of roles he'd played, lifted from old theatrical notices. He got the job.

Then followed rôle after rôle in stock, in vaudeville and in traveling shows. He bounded all over the country; hit all the one-night stands and the ten-twenty-thirties. But his eyes were always on that mecca of the true stage devotee, Broadway.

It was years, however, before he got his real chance. It was only a "bit" in "The Show-Off," but he was playing on the "Street." He was scared and worried for fear he wouldn't make the

grade. But he acted his small part with a fervor and intuition that caused Alexander Woolcott, then critic for The New York Sun, to say, "There are so many theaters in this town that many a good and true performance in a minor rôle goes unsung, because no one has the time or the space to tell about minor rôles. And there comes to mind two such performances which achieve perfection—no less. One is that of Gerald Haman in 'Candida,' the other is Lee Tracy's embodiment of the inventive brother in 'The Show-Off.'"

Other rôles followed. Better rôles—and what was perhaps more important, better press notices.

Then Phillip Dunning and George Abbott picked Lee for the leading rôle of the little "hooper" in "Broadway." It was his big chance—and he gave to his characterization a robust precision and gusto that received "rave" notices from all the critics. The show ran for eight hundred and eighty performances, a record at that time. Lee had arrived.

SUCCESS on Broadway usually leads to Hollywood movie offers. Lee was no exception. He had had his chances

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Biff! Bang!

to enter the celluloids, but had just as steadfastly turned them down. He preferred to make his success on the stage before taking a chance in the movies.

Now, however, Fox made him an offer that he could not refuse. Lee went to Shavertown to talk it over with his mother. It might mean the breaking-up of his home in Shavertown. But Mrs. Tracy refused to let such a consideration affect her son's chances for screen success. Lee accepted.

At first he was frankly homesick for the stage. He didn't seem to get the right kind of rôles—nor could he give his parts the charm and the intensity that have characterized his later movies. Lee returned to Broadway, discouraged—but not beaten.

He secured the lead in "The Front Page," a newspaper play. Then "Louder, Please," another reporter rôle. To both of these he gave superlative performances. He became even more popular than he had been in "Broadway." This was his metier.

Hollywood was not long in seeing its mistake. Offer after offer was showered on the flip-talking actor. There were so many that Lee was able to pick and choose. One of the first reporter characterizations was in "The Strange Case of Molly Louvain," and another in "Love is a Racket."

It was his portrayal of the columnist in "Blessed Event" that made him a national favorite.

The vigor and the charm that he gave to his rôle as the representative in "Washington Merry-Go-Round" and as the lead in "Night Mayor" enhanced his popularity with the fans.

HERE was a new type of player. Dynamic, full of vigor, never silent or quiet on the screen during his scenes. And his hands were the most amazing hands the screen had seen, with the possible exception of the fluttering hands of ZaSu Pitts. In his early days Lee had the desire to become a magician and had trained for the part. The marvelous dexterity of his hands is probably a result of his early training.

After "Merry-Go-Round" Lee became the high-pressure circus press agent in "The Half-Naked Truth." Then the rowdy Private Jones in the film of the same name.

His picture, "Clear All Wires," won for him a long-term M-G-M contract.

As likeable off the screen as on, Lee is fast becoming one of Hollywood's best-loved citizens. Since his second and most successful trip to movieland last year, he has been almost too busy to mingle with the Hollywood groups. Thirteen pictures in ten months, all vital, moving characterizations, do not leave an actor much time in which to play.

And Lee is popular with the writing clan, too. Any one can approach him on the set during an idle moment between shots and angle an interview.

His five feet, ten inches of snap and aggressiveness are as fierce as his smile is disarming, yet he is intensely superstitious, and will cross the street rather than let a black cat cross his path.

Altogether, Lee has won a place for himself in the hearts of the fans, the producers and his Hollywood fellow-actors.

And he hasn't yet shown all that he is capable of doing. Lee Tracy is going places!

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