Mrs. William S. Hart's Wedding Mementoes, Baby Clothes Donated

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Bill and Winifred Hart's wedding cake toppers — a tiny bride, groom, and minister — have come home to Newhall, possibly for the first time, along with Winifred's childhood wardrobe and a few items from their son William S. Hart Jr.'s early days, through the generosity of a silent-film aficionado in Los Angeles.

# Lost and Found.

William S. Hart and Winifred Westover were married one night in December 1921 and lived in Hart's house in Los Angeles (now West Hollywood). The marriage was over almost as soon as it started. Bill had turned 57 the day before, and Winifred, a budding actress, was freshly 23. (Winifred was born in 1898, not 1899 as widely reported.) They formally separated the following May.

By that time, Winfred was showing. Nine months after their wedding night, she bore the only child either of them would ever have. Bill Sr. sent monthly checks to a Santa Monica address and rarely saw his issue.

Dial up the clock. Bill Jr. graduated from UCLA and served as a cryptographer for the OSS (forerunner of the CIA) during World War II. Afterward he returned to Santa Monica, earned a master's degree in environmental planning, and had a successful career as a real estate appraiser.

Dad died in 1946, leaving his Newhall and (West) Hollywood properties to the county and city of Los Angeles, respectively. Winifred and Bill Jr. fought unsuccessfully for control of the estate — but that's another story.

Winifred died in 1978. Bill Jr. retired in 1989 and moved to Bainbridge Island, near Seattle.

Following Bill Jr.'s death in 2004, his estate — including a lifetime of William S. Hart memorabilia his mother had saved — was put up for sale.

Local historians found out after the fact, and Bill Jr.'s mementoes were considered gone for good — until May 2018, when they turned up in another estate sale in Washington State. Apparently, a Western collector had purchased them in 2004 and kept them together.

Last June, the *pièce de résistance* from that collection, a 1922 oil painting of Bill Sr.'s favorite pinto pony, Fritz, by the American illustrator James Montgomery Flagg, came back home to Newhall.

But there was more. The estate handler in Seattle consigned several items — autographed books, photos, written correspondence, a brown leather lunchbox — to Bonhams Auction House. Grouped into two auction lots, the items were sold in a Bonhams New York auction on November 20, 2018, to person(s) unknown.

The consigner had sent at least one other item to Bonhams that didn't go on the auction block. Maybe it was just too odd or cumbersome or simply not something that would attract a wide audience.

The sort of thing only a museum dedicated to William S. Hart would want.

Or a silent movie historian with a keen eye, such as Tracey Goessel, M.D.

# Winifred's Trunk.

Tracey Goessel is arguably Douglas Fairbanks Sr.'s greatest fan. She got hooked on silent movies when she was 11, and when she retired from a career as a medical doctor with Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, she followed her early passion. (She keeps herself in the medical game as president of a Florida-based company she started to help hospitals receive proper reimbursement.)

She started collecting Fairbanks material. One thing led to another, and before long, Goessel and her husband, film historian and documentary producer Robert S. Bader, found a house in Westwood with ample wall space for her massive collection of original Fairbanks movie posters from around the world, including two giant, one-of-a-kind Triangle Film Corp. six-sheets. Furniture from Pickfair greets visitors in the parlor, Fairbanks' boots from "Robin Hood" (1922) grace the mantle, Theda Bara's headdress from "Cleopatra" (1917) is displayed in the library alongside Shirley Temple's favorite Shirley Temple doll, and the list goes on.

Goessel's acquisition of a set of love letters from Fairbanks to Mary Pickford inspired her to author a 581-page biography, "The First King of Hollywood: The Life of Douglas Fairbanks" (Chicago Review Press: 2016).

She's got another book in her, she says, but the raw data aren't ready yet. As founder and president of the L.A.-based Film Preservation Society, she's the driving force behind The Biograph Project, whose objective is to restore and share some 465 short films made by director D.W. Griffith from 1908-1913. Some exist only on paper prints in the Library of Congress, others only as negatives in the Museum of Modern Art. The book will follow the restoration and reconstruction.

It wasn't Bill Hart or Winifred Westover that found Goessel at Bonhams in Los Angeles last fall, where some of the "Hollywood" material for the New York auction was being held.

"I had been invited to review their collection of stills from what had originally been in Mary Pickford's possession," Goessel said.

"As I was tiptoeing past costumes from 'Thriller' and William Powell's furniture" — she ultimately purchased the latter — "I noticed a low, flat steamer trunk.

"'That was Winifred Westover's,' (Bonhams cataloguer) Caren Roberts-Frenzel told me. 'It is full of her baby clothes. It won't be in the main auction.'"

The trunk wasn't terribly unlike the hard-sided, locking steamer trunk that had gone on the road with Pickford and now serves as a side table in Goessel's Westwood living room. This one had Winifred's name and address painted on the side in yellow.

Where others saw an old trunk, Goessel saw a future coffee table. After the auction she negotiated to buy it.

It's a good match for Goessel's primary interests, with far fewer than six degrees of separation. William S. Hart and Douglas Fairbanks were at Triangle together, and they moved to Paramount together. Hart was going to be one of the five people to form United Artists, along with Fairbanks, Pickford, Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, until he backed out.

Winifred also was under contract with Triangle and made her film debut in three Griffith pictures including the 1916 blockbuster, "Intolerance." That same year she appeared in the Fairbanks vehicle, "The Half-Breed."

Goessel sent the trunk to a fine leather craftsman for restoration — but not before removing its contents.

"I discovered that it not only had Victorian baby clothes and boots, but memorabilia from Westover's ill-fated marriage to William S. Hart. Wedding cake toppers and a champagne cork had been kept in a little box for almost a century. It was very poignant," she said.

On Sunday, April 7, 2019, she donated the clothes and other contents to the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society.

"It was a no brainer. The trunk's contents belong in a museum."

# Booties and Barf Blankets.

The main attraction, in Goessel's opinion, is a trio of miniature Kewpie-doll wedding cake toppers that stand just 2¼ inches tall and are made of celluloid or a similar composition introduced in the 1920s. Any earlier and they would have been made out of bisque, a type of porcelain.

The dolls, along with the champagne cork and five little 1¼ inch celluloid rattling toys that may have been strung together at one time, were kept in a small, etched-leather-covered cardboard box, 5¾ x 1½ inches. The lid of the box bears the stamp of C.P. Bottelet, a Danish silver smithy founded in 1904.

The champagne cork is stamped "V. Clicquot P" for Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin. The French champagne house was founded in 1772.

Without written information in the trunk, we can't know with absolute certainty the cork came from the first bottle of bubbly on the movie-star couple's wedding night — but why else keep it?

Nor can we be 100 percent certain that the articles of clothing were worn by Winifred and Bill Jr. However, we know Winifred kept them all those years and that her only child likewise kept them.

It is the totality and context that provide the provenance. A loose champagne cork could never be proven to have been Bill and Winifred's any more than an isolated pacifier could be traced back to Junior without a DNA sample. But together as a group, in a trunk with a clear chain of ownership and Winifred's name on the outside and photographs of her son dressed up as his dad inside, they can be attributed.

Guided solely by what we see, most of the apparel was Winifred's. Four dozen under- and outer garments comprise a complete Victorian baby and young girl's wardrobe, from a sheer pink robe and white sleepers to warm crocheted sweaters. Maybe Winifred held onto them with the idea she'd have a little girl of her own who could re-wear them one day. (She didn't.)

There are approximately 10 pair of store-bought leather baby girl shoes including a pair of reddish Victorian button-up baby shoes styled after the standard women's shoes of the 1890s. Pink knit and crocheted socks and a tiny woven mitten would have been Winifred's and not her son's.

A dozen lacy bonnets and another dozen bibs and feeding blankets also were Winifred's. Which of the two spit up on the feeding blankets is anyone's guess, although they were made by Novelty Knitting Co. of Albany, N.Y., which existed before Winifred was born. Rounding out the Winifred material are several baby blankets, one in embroidered silk and another with a "W" monogram — which would have to stand for "Winifred," as her birth name wasn't Westover.

The girl's apparel paints a picture of a family of some affluence — and that is a puzzle. The history doesn't suggest they ever had money. Winifred's father, a Danish immigrant named Thomas Christian von Heide, was a streetcar conductor when Winifred came along. When she was about 7, her mother, Sophie, from Sweden, sued him for divorce on grounds of desertion. In 1913, Sophie married a scenario (screenplay) writer named Clyde Westover. Winifred, now in high school, took his surname.

Later, during her separation from William S. Hart, Winifred's natural father resurfaced. The separation was tabloid fodder; here was a chance for him to sell his story. The papers described the ex-streetcar conductor as a onetime soldier of fortune and former mining engineer who was now destitute.

A baby boy's first booties, a plain celluloid or Bakelite pacifier and an older boy's moccasins and boys' size 10½-D cowboy boots are more clearly Bill Jr.'s.

In a 1925 book, the artist Flagg, after a visit, wrote that Bill Sr. kept a "tiny pair of moccasins" and a photo of his baby boy in his bedroom (in Hollywood) and explained, "That's all I have of my son." The same moccasins and photo now sit next to his bed in Newhall. The moccasins from Winifred's trunk are those of an older child, maybe age 6 or 8.

Several photographic negatives were secreted in the trunk, showing Bill Jr. as a young man. In some he's dressed up in the type of cowboy attire his father wore, and in a couple of them, he mimics his father's distinctive pose.

Could some of the clothing be from Bill Jr.'s widow, stepdaughter and two natural daughters? No. Bill Jr. was a bachelor until 1980, two years after his mother's death, when he married a woman born in 1948. The contents of the trunk are too old.

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