

Jean Harlow (1911-1937)

Harlean Carpentier, who was later to become Jean Harlow, was born in Kansas City, Missouri on March 3, 1911. She was the daughter of a successful dentist and his wife. In 1927, at the age of 16, Jean ran away from home and married a young business man named Charles McGrew who was 23. The couple pulled up stakes and moved to Los Angeles, California, not long after they were wedded, and it was there Jean found work as an extra in films.

In 1928, Jean had a bit part in the film MORAN OF THE MARINES. From that point on she would try to find casting calls whenever she could. In 1929, Jean had bit parts in no less than eleven movies. She played everything from a passing woman on the street to a winged ballerina. The marriage she had with McGrew turned out to be a disaster, so she divorced him. The union lasted barely two years. The divorce enabled Jean to put more of her efforts into finding roles in the film world.

While Jean was having trouble finding roles in feature movies, she had more luck in film shorts. She had a fairly prominent role in Hal Roach's film short, DOUBLE WHOOPEE in 1928, with the famed Laurel and Hardy comedy team. Jean's big break came in 1930, when Howard Hughes was involved in a remake of his World War I epic, HELL'S ANGELS. It was the appearance of Jean that helped the movie to become a big smash. Not long after the film's debut, Hughes sold her contract to MGM, for \$60,000, where her career took off to unprecedented heights.

In 1931, Jean's appearance in PLATINUM BLONDE solidified her role as America's new sex symbol. 1932 saw Jean paired with Clark Gable for the filming of RED DUST. It would be the second of six films with the dashing Mr. Gable, the first being THE SECRET SIX in 1931. During the filming, word came that Jean's new husband, Paul Bern, had committed suicide. The film was released late in 1932 and immediately became a hit. She was becoming a superstar.

In DINNER AT EIGHT (1933), Jean was at her comedic best as the wife of a business tycoon (Wallace Beery) trying to take over another man's failing business played by Lionel Barrymore. Later that year, Jean portrayed Lola Burns in Victor Fleming's hit BOMBSHELL. It was a Hollywood parody loosely based on Jean's real life experience, right down to her greedy stepfather. Later in '33, Jean married Hal Rossen in a union that would only last eight months. In 1935, Jean was again teamed with Clark Gable for the production of CHINA SEAS. The other two were WIFE VS SECRETARY (1936) and SARATOGA (1937). It was her films with Gable that created her lasting legacy in the film world. Unfortunately, during the filming of SARATOGA, Jean was hospitalized for uremic poisoning.

On June 7, 1937, Jean died from the disease. She was only 26. The film had to be finished by long angle shots using a double. Gable said he felt like he was in the arms of a ghost during the final touches of the film. Because of the death of Jean, the film was a hit. Record numbers of fans poured into America's movie theaters to see the film. Other sex symbols/blonde bombshells have followed, but it is Jean Harlow who all are measured up to, and that includes, yes, even Marilyn Monroe.

