

HOW ANNIE GOT HER GUN

THE DUSTY TRAIL TO STARDOM THAT LANDED NATIVE ARKANSAN GAIL DAVIS ON THE HOLLYWOOD WALK OF FAME

BY ZOIE CLIFT

A BEAUTIFUL COWGIRL rides at full gallop, leaving a trail of desert dust in her wake. In one smooth, effortless move, she side-stands in her saddle, aiming a pistol in front of her. In the distance, a cowboy stands on the side of the trail. She fires in his direction as she rides by. The cowboy looks over at the playing card raised in his hand ... a bull's-eye has been shot straight through the card. Her trick accomplished, the woman stops riding, pulls her horse around and greets the cowboy, and viewers, with a sunny smile.

That pistol-wielding, horse-riding phenom is none other than native Arkansan Gail Davis, though she was known to the world as the namesake star of the 1950s television hit "Annie Oakley." The show, which ran for 81 episodes from 1954 to 1957, holds a place in history as the first Western to star a woman. That woman—Davis—held her own against leading male actors and heroes of the day who fired a gun or wore a badge.

"So many of her character traits were so similar to the real Annie [Oakley] that it was almost like she wasn't acting," says Davis' daughter Terrie Davis, who lives in Hot Springs Village. "She fit into the character so naturally."

Terrie's mother, who has a star on Hollywood Boulevard and was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, will be among those featured in "Lights! Camera! Arkansas!"—a new exhibition that highlights the state's ties to Hollywood. The goal of the exhibition, opening June 8 at Little Rock's Old State House Museum, is to spread the appreciation of Arkansas' role in American film history.

"Maybe the biggest surprise will be how early it started," says exhibition curator Robert Cochran. "The very first cowboy movie star, 'Bronco Billy,' was an Arkansan."

Nearly three years of planning, artifact-searching and research went into the exhibition, which includes five galleries of film memorabilia, including scripts, film footage, awards, photographs, theater posters, documentary videos and costumes, such as Gail Davis' rhinestone outfit made by Nudie Cohn.



Before she sported her signature white Stetson hat, Gail Davis called Arkansas home. Born Betty Jeanne Grayson in 1925, Davis was born in McGehee and raised in Little Rock. Her good looks and talent were noticed so early on that she was named "Most Beautiful Baby in Arkansas" when she was 2.

Prior to her turn as Annie Oakley, Davis had already appeared in many feature films and television shows from 1949 to 1953. Gene Autry, the legendary recording artist, movie star and popular image-maker of the American West, even called her a "perfect Western actress." Davis went on to appear in 14 of his features and 14 of his television show episodes. After years of honing her skills on film sets, she had become an accomplished rider, trick shooter and singer.

The "perfect" Western actress she might have been, but it took gumption to get cast as Oakley. Autry wanted to cast an unknown as the star, but Davis couldn't be deterred.

"She walked into the producer's office wearing blues jeans, her hair in pigtailed, freckles on her nose and a gingham shirt and went to the cattle call," says Terrie. "Gene and the producer, Mandy Shaefer, were sitting in there and just laughed. They said, 'If you have the guts to come in after we said no and you still want to try out, we can't help but audition you.' And she won hands down. She was proud of the character. She wanted to uphold the high standards the real Oakley lived by. It's my favorite story about my mother because it shows the strength of her character."

The series debuted at a time in postwar America when cowboys and the Old West were all the rage. Davis' Oakley easily fit in. Her character was tough and fought off the bad guys, all without her sacrificing her femininity.

In the role, donning her trademark pigtailed and befringed outfits (some of which were designed by her sister), Davis showcased not only Wild West skills but a kind heart, too. "I remember mother spending hours in the backyard shooting targets," says Terrie. "But she made sure her contract read that she would not kill anybody on her show. She wounded them, and the bad guys were led away by the sheriff. She refused to kill any people or wildlife."

Davis was a star during the Golden Age of television, when Westerns became the most popular of kids' shows. Many children learned about ethics and the "Code of the West" from characters such as Oakley, Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger, as well as actors like Gene Autry.

Davis' wholesome image as Oakley was broadcast via commercials and radio spots for outlets such as Canada Dry, Wonder Bread and Hostess. Her picture also appeared

on the side of milk cartons and on trucks for local company Coleman Dairy (now Hiland Dairy).

"For me, she wasn't Gail Davis; she was Annie Oakley. That was just the way it was for that age," says Bob Coleman of the Coleman Dairy family, who grew up watching the show. "Kind of like how Fess Parker was Davy Crockett. At that age, you don't differentiate between the real person and the character."

However, it was the adults who helped make the series an overall favorite. When production for the series ended in 1956, reruns were syndicated through 1963, while Davis continued to appear as Annie Oakley in traveling shows and rodeos. When Davis died in 1997, she was still answering fan mail.

That her mother continues to be connected to the character, nationwide and beyond, is a source of pride for Terrie.

"She would be honored and excited about this exhibit," says Terrie. "She, of course, would be talking about all the other wonderful actors in the exhibit and taking the limelight away from herself. That would be my mother. She was so proud of Arkansas. And I am happy I was able to bring her home."

"Lights! Camera! Arkansas!" will be on display at the Old State House Museum in Little Rock from June 8 through February 2015. Visit oldstatehouse.com for details.



More artifacts await curious film buffs at the exhibition, like Natalie Canerday's director's chair from "Sling Blade."



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FACED WITH A LACK of space, organization is an art carefully mastered. You economize. You discard. You pitch Hallmark cards, old university binders, clothes and books, with ferocity typically unheard outside of extreme sports or reality television. It's a skill that naturally develops when living in major metro areas or in dormitory settings. It is not one typically associated with country living. Or wasn't, anyway.

On an acre of land outside of Dover is a house that is 128 square feet. (For the sake of contrast, the storage shed next door is about 20 square feet larger.) Contrary to the thinking of many folks who've called realtor John Newton, this is not a typo. A standout example of the tiny-house movement, everything about it is based on that economy of space, from the ceramic Chinese garden stools that can double as outdoor furniture to the antique airline and restaurant dishes and utensils owner Jamie Teal found after scouring the Internet.

As Teal says in a note from Saudi Arabia, where she and her family of seven now live, "I think for a single person or for two people who like each other well enough to not mind constantly being in each other's space, it's an ideal way to live full time. For a larger family like mine, it's a great way to live for shorter amounts of time."

For those interested, the house is listed by Russellville's River Valley Realty Inc. (rivervalleyrealty.com; (479) 968-6260) for an asking price of \$22,900. —jph