

VANITY FAIR

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Street Where They Lived

Lucille Ball handed out candy on Halloween at No. 1000, Jimmy Stewart grew sweet corn at No. 918, and at No. 1019 Rosemary Clooney and José Ferrer's kids sold lemonade to tourists. With the Ira Gershwins, Jack Bennys, and Oscar Levants, they made Roxbury Drive the starriest street in Beverly Hills—and a true American neighborhood.

by TODD S. PURDUM April 1999

One ordinary evening when the world was still young, the telephone rang at 1000 North Roxbury Drive in Beverly Hills, just as the family who lived there was sitting down to dinner. It was the next-door neighbor, wondering if the family was home, and asking the man of the house to leave the back door open.

A few minutes later, the unmistakable creaky sounds of America's most famous bad violinist came floating through the big white Colonial house, and Jack Benny strolled into the dining room in his trademark Gypsy scarf. The hostess, a redhead by the name of Lucille Ball, collapsed in laughter, and her husband, Gary Morton, offered the perennial 39-year-old a tip.

"Which he took, of course—totally straight-faced," Ball's daughter, Lucie Arnaz, recalls, laughing all over again at the retelling, nearly 40 years later. "And he runs out the front door, because he knows just how long he has before the next tour bus to get home. And the next thing we hear is this voice yelling, 'Mary ... oh, Maaaaaaaary,' because he's locked out. And the next bus comes up, and imagine what those people must have thought: Jack Benny locked out of his own house with his Gypsy violin."

It sounds like an episode of *I Love Lucy* or *The Jack Benny Show*, and it could have been. But it was just a regular real-life moment in the days when Beverly Hills still seemed more like Bedford Falls, and the two-block stretch of Roxbury Drive north of Sunset Boulevard was perhaps the starriest street in that small town. Ball and Benny were only the beginning of the gang that, at one time or another from the mid-30s through the 90s, lived the highest version of the California dream in this stately neighborhood, where the streets have the names of old English towns.

Just across Lexington Road from Lucy, on the same side of the street, the Jimmy Stewarts lived at No. 918, and across from them, on the west side of Roxbury, lived the Oscar Levants. Up from them were José Ferrer and Rosemary Clooney, who lived next to Ira and Leonore "Lee" Gershwin, who lived next to Agnes Moorehead, who played Stewart's mother in *The Stratton Story*. She was just down the way from Thomas Mitchell, who played Stewart's befuddled Uncle Billy in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Eddie Cantor, Jack Haley, Hedy Lamarr, and Polly Bergen all lived on Roxbury, and so did Pandro Berman, the producer of the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals at RKO. Diane Keaton, Peter Falk, and Clooney live there still.

It's almost impossible to scratch the surface of Hollywood history without revealing a ribbon of Roxbury underneath. It's the street where Russ Columbo, the 30s crooner who was Bing Crosby's only rival, was accidentally shot with an antique dueling pistol, in the house where George Gershwin wrote "Love Is Here to Stay"—the same house where George Clooney began his career as a gofer and driver for his aunt Rosemary. (Rosemary says that in the 50s, when she used to record radio shows with Crosby in the house, he never wanted

to set foot in the den, where Columbo had been shot.)

It's the street where Citizen Kane's mother and Cyrano de Bergerac lived on either side of the man who wrote "The Man That Got Away," whose goddaughter, Liza Minnelli, named for another of his lyrics, celebrated her earliest birthdays in his elegant backyard. It's the street where James Stewart grew sweet corn and tomatoes for the neighbors and walked the golden retrievers named for his twin daughters, Kelly and Judy.

"We had these Chinese people for our help," Lucie Arnaz recalls, "and one day Mr. Stewart came by with fresh corn and cabbages at the back door. And he got the cook yelling, 'She no home, she no home! No veg-e-table! We got veg-e-table man, come all the time!' and she slammed the door in his face and wouldn't take his present, and he had to go home and call and say, 'W-w-w-aaaaaal, L-l-l-ucy ...'"

Art often imitated life. The Stewarts repeatedly played themselves on Benny's television show. Benny and Ball appeared as guests of each other's, Ferrer and Cantor as guests of Levant's. Benny began his 1951 television season with a tour bus driving through Beverly Hills. As the announcer calls out the stars' homes, the camera cuts to scenes of the stars themselves, until finally, 30 seconds before the show ends, the driver announces Benny's home and Benny himself pipes up from the back, "Driver, I get off here." In one 1955 episode of *I Love Lucy*, Lucy and Ethel bound off a tour bus and head toward what is supposed to be Richard Widmark's house for the episode in which Lucy winds up in a bearskin rug, but the second-unit shot is of Ball's own house.

"When I first visited Los Angeles before moving here, and took the obligatory movie-stars tour, I was struck by the fact that so many of the celebrities they mentioned were deceased," says Michael Feinstein, the pianist and cabaret singer, who arrived from Columbus, Ohio, in 1976 as a piano salesman but soon found himself working as Ira Gershwin's musical secretary. "And I realized that those tours really traded on nostalgia and memory, because that sort of glamour was long gone. *Except*, as it turned out, on Roxbury Drive, because such a collection of celebrities still lived there."

"It was an amazing two blocks," says Joan Benny, who grew up in the brick Georgian house that her parents built in 1937, complete with a mosaic octopus in the swimming pool, and who still dreams about "every inch of it. Jack Haley Jr. used to push me out of my carriage. He was a little brat. But then, so was I."

Some of the most famous faces in show business lived side by side on Roxbury—without fear—amid the constant rumble of groaning buses filled with tourists, who called to them and rang their doorbells. The Bennys kept 8-by-10 glossies in a drawer of the hall table, "and if my father happened to be in the vicinity, he'd answer the door," Joan Benny recalls. Kelly Stewart Harcourt remembers that to the end of her life her mother, Gloria, referred to the ritzy shopping area of Rodeo Drive just blocks away as "the village."

How friendly people were," Benny says, "and how open everything was." People left their doors unlocked, and the worst worry was being stopped, as Clooney and Ferrer once were, for violating the Beverly Hills curfew by walking home from a party at the Bennys' without ID. Lucy, dressed in full witch regalia with blacked-out teeth, handed out candy at her front door on Halloween, with a Desilu studio guard standing by, and Lee Gershwin made a daily pilgrimage to Nate 'n' Al's delicatessen in her Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud. Once, late in life, Mrs. G., as she was known to the Beverly Hills police, forgot where she'd parked, and a patrolman squired her around till she found the car.

"It was a rather small area, in which you lived very close to all of your friends," says Fred DeCordova, who was a producer of Benny's show and later of Johnny Carson's, and who at 88 is still a special consultant to *The Tonight Show*. "I know there are great stars and all of that today, but in those days it was a much more tightly knit community."

“It was an absolutely great time,” says the composer David Raksin, 86, who came to Hollywood in 1935 to help Charlie Chaplin write the score for *Modern Times*, and who knew the Gershwins and Levants. “There was an aliveness which was wonderful. There was not the situation one finds now, where you never see your colleagues unless there’s a board meeting.”

Today, many of the biggest stars live in gated enclaves or on private streets without sidewalks in Pacific Palisades, with security cameras and bodyguards and phalanxes of functionaries to fend off stray fans and stalkers.

“You know, they’re all, like, living in Attica,” says the screenwriter Leonard Gershe, 76, who regularly had Christmas dinner at the Stewarts’, was a pallbearer at Benny’s funeral, and played poker at the Gershwins’ with Angie Dickinson and director Richard Brooks. “I mean, Jimmy and Gloria, they never had a problem. People did come to their door, but it was all very friendly. I don’t think, well, Leonardo DiCaprio is going to get away with that. It doesn’t exist anymore.”

If the street has a psychic center, it is the big Spanish-style pile at No. 1019, and the warmhearted woman who lives there is the neighborhood’s emotional guardian and oral historian. Rosemary Clooney moved into the house in 1953, just after her marriage to José Ferrer, and through two divorces from him, drug dependence, and a 1968 nervous breakdown, it has been her anchor. Today she lives there with Dante DiPaolo, a former Hollywood hoofer whom she married in 1997 after 24 years as his “roommate,” and the sprawling five-bedroom house still rings with visits from her five children with Ferrer, and their children.

“I never expected to live in a house like this,” says Clooney, who grew up in Kentucky and started out as a band singer with Tony Pastor, and whose sunken living room is filled with affectionately autographed pictures from friends such as John F. Kennedy and Dean Martin. “This was the first house I ever had. I’d lived with relatives and in apartments.”

No. 1019 is central to Roxbury lore because it’s the place that George and Ira Gershwin rented when they came to Hollywood in 1936 to write the score for *Shall We Dance?*, with Astaire and Rogers. “They All Laughed,” “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” “Nice Work if You Can Get It,” and “Love Walked In” all came to life in that sunken living room, as did the last song George wrote before his death from a brain tumor in 1937, “Love Is Here to Stay.” For the urban-bred Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths of the era—from the Gershwins to Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and Harold Arlen, who lived nearby—the land of lemon trees and swimming pools was an unexpected paradise, and to this day night-blooming jasmine planted for the Gershwins at 1019 by Fanny Brice still thrives.

“It was like Dorothy landing in Munchkinland,” says Ernie Harburg, the son of Arlen’s *Wizard of Oz* writing partner E. Y. “Yip” Harburg, who came from Brooklyn to Beverly Hills as a child in the mid-30s to visit his father. “Ira had a tennis court and swimming pool, and we used to go over there, and Yip and Ira and Harold and George all used to work at night. During the day, they would play golf or go to the beach, and then at night they would sit down and get serious. Living in that environment, you see, and playing and partying, helped create that kind of incredible collaborative process. They played the scores that they wrote for each other, and you couldn’t come up with crappy stuff, because they’d throw you out. It was competitive, but it was also incredibly cooperative at the same time.”

As it happened, the woman who owned the house next door, No. 1021, was an elderly invalid who would lie awake at night and take pleasure in hearing George picking out tunes. After George’s death, Ira was disconsolate and reluctant to leave the neighborhood, so the woman sold him her house for \$25,500, and he lived there until the end of his life.

For Clooney, an acknowledged master of the American popular song, the two houses are a living link with her

life's work. "You know what I feel an architectural connection with?" she asks over cocktails in her cozy den. "'A Foggy Day,' because I once played a tape of it that I'd done on a television show for Ira, and he said he was working in the living room one night, and their piano was in the same place where mine is now, and George came bounding in from a dinner party that he'd left early, dropped his coat, and said, 'Ira! It can't be "a foggy day in London." It's gotta be "a foggy day in London town!"' And now that's with me every time I sing that song: he thought of it in the middle of a dinner party and didn't even stay to finish the dinner."

When the lights were on in the front of 1021, it was the sign that the Ferrers and a handful of other neighbors and friends were free to drop in for a drink or a game of poker with Ira and Lee, sometimes with Judy Garland singing and, later, Angie Dickinson acting as bartender. "And you know, my God, just to have her walk around was a pretty good idea," Clooney says.

"I walked in there once in my first maternity clothes. I was really happy—you know, 'La, la, la, la, I'm pregnant,'" Clooney continues. "And Humphrey Bogart was there, and he said, 'Oh, look at Miss Clowney. She's pregnant. She's got her clothes on.' And so he said, 'Look, I've never won a bet with a pregnant woman in my life, so what kind of kid do you want, a boy or a girl?' I said, 'I'd like to have a boy,' and he said, 'All right, I bet you have a girl.' So the first flowers that I got were from Bogie, and he said, 'O.K., you win. Love, Bogie.' And then came the letter with the check: 'Dear Miguel, Your parents are rich. They don't need the 50 bucks. Put it in the bank and let it stay there until you need it. Bogart.'"

There was remarkably little competitiveness, and Clooney recalls no one comparing grosses or percentage deals. But there were a few neighborly tensions. Agnes Moorehead once infuriated Ira Gershwin by proposing to cut down the eucalyptus trees that abutted his yard, and Lee Gershwin complained about the bare lightbulb on the Ferrer family's garage. Clooney's daughter Monsita Botwick recalls how Lee would "send the cops over, saying, 'The music's too loud. Turn it down.' Compliments of Mrs. Gershwin. Thanks so much!"

"She used to yell at your father because he played tennis before he went to work," Clooney tells her. "He had to be on the set at 7:30, so he'd be hitting the tennis ball as soon as it would be daylight, and she'd say, 'I'm tired of that *plup, plup, plup.*' And I'd say, 'Well, I don't know what you can do about that.'"

Ira Gershwin's love for loud music was as great as his wife's loathing of it. When Clooney's daughter-in-law Debbie Boone came back from Japan with one of the first Walkmans, Clooney gave it to Michael Feinstein to give to Ira, "so he could crank it in his ears, you know. And he said, 'This is absolutely wonderful!' And he called his broker and bought Sony stock!"

The Gershwins were indirectly responsible for the presence of the street's celebrated misanthrope, Oscar Levant, the pianist, composer, and manic-depressive wit. As a young composer in the 30s, Levant idolized George Gershwin, and he would often come to visit from his quarters on the less flossy south end of Roxbury Drive. In the late 1940s, when he finally settled in Hollywood for good, Levant bought the house at No. 905, just a block away from 1019. For the rest of his life, though, when visiting Ira at 1021, he would drive the long way around Lexington Road and Benedict Canyon rather than pass the scene of George's final illness.

"He clung on to so many phobias that as time progressed he became worse and worse, until his brain was so cluttered with fears and things to avoid that he just couldn't function," says Feinstein, who met the Gershwins because he had helped Levant's widow, June, catalogue his records. "He would not drive past a place that gave him a bad memory, so when he drove around town he would always make you turn here and turn there. It took him forever to get anywhere."

Levant's youngest daughter, Amanda Carmel, recalled recently discussing her childhood with a neighborhood friend, who fondly remembered meeting Liza Minnelli and Fred Astaire at Levant-family parties. "And I said, 'But

it was so crazy and chaotic,’” Carmel said. “And she said, ‘We never thought of you guys as crazy.’”

Though Levant wrote the haunting melody for “Blame It on My Youth,” in 1934, and became one of the leading interpreters of Gershwin’s piano works, he was overcome with grief and survivor guilt after George’s death. He stopped composing and, eventually, even playing. Once, David Raksin dropped by to play part of his new dramatic score for *Force of Evil*, only to be greeted with a farrago of invective and abuse. Raksin recalls, “That night he called and said, ‘I don’t apologize, but I’m apologizing tonight. You made me think of what I should have been doing with my life.’”

A legendary wit (he once said he “knew Doris Day before she became a virgin”) who essentially played himself in such movies as *The Band Wagon* and *An American in Paris*, Levant, who was addicted to an arsenal of prescription drugs and subject to violent outbursts, eventually became so desperate and depressed that he’d pay a doctor to shoot him up with phenobarbital or Demerol in a car parked on Roxbury Drive in the middle of the night. “He drank 40 cups of coffee a day, smoked—I don’t know—four or five packs of cigarettes a day, and he was always trying to kill June,” recalled the late Marcella Rabwin, who had lived on Roxbury and who, as David O. Selznick’s executive assistant and the wife of a prominent doctor, had been one of the doyennes of Beverly Hills civic life. “But he really depended on her.”

In 1949, Jimmy Stewart ended his long run as one of Hollywood’s most eligible bachelors and married Gloria Hatrick McLean, an elegant onetime model who was divorced from the socialite Edward McLean Jr., whose mother, Evelyn Walsh McLean, owned the Hope diamond. Stewart, who majored in architecture at Princeton before being drawn by the theatrical lure of the school’s Triangle Club, had wanted to design a home in Pacific Palisades, but Gloria decided that such a hilly neighborhood was no place to raise children, and by then she already had two sons from her first marriage. So the newlyweds bought a big Tudor-style house at 918 North Roxbury, which had been built by the director King Vidor and which Stewart described as “belonging to a style of Mediterranean Ugly.”

The Stewarts made the big house into a comfortable home, and soon twin daughters arrived. From the beginning, Gloria Stewart was determined to raise her children as far as possible from the head-turning customs of Hollywood. The girls had a French-speaking governess and spent a year at school in Switzerland, while the boys boarded at Black Fox, a military academy in Los Angeles. Summers were spent on family ranches—first near Elko, Nevada, then in the Santa Ynez Valley north of Santa Barbara—and later on African safaris.

“I never had the feeling growing up that this was a really wow, super-duper place to live,” says Kelly Stewart Harcourt, who went on to study gorillas with Dian Fossey and is now a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Davis. “It was just our home. I remember once reading an article somewhere, and our house was described as a mansion, and it struck me as ridiculous.”

One day Stewart came home from work early to find a sight-seeing bus stopped in front of the house. The young twins were in their double stroller, and their nurse was “giving the spiel” to the tourists for money, Harcourt recalls.

“Every so often, my sister and I would be walking by, and we would answer the door instead of the housekeeper,” Harcourt continues. “And usually it would be ‘Mr. Stewart is resting,’ or ‘Mr. Stewart is away.’ But other times—and this happened very rarely—people were just, you know, they’d come all the way from Iowa and they were so sweet and seemed so innocent, and Judy and I would take the piece of paper and get Dad and just beg him to sign it. And if he was having a nap, I must admit, and you probably shouldn’t write this down, a couple of times I forged his signature.”

he Ferrer children were more frankly mercenary, running a lemonade stand and retailing Clooney’s head shots to

The tourist trade. “My son Gabri used to take my pictures, that I paid like, maybe, 35 cents apiece for, and he’d sell them for a dime. I’m paying more than he’s selling them for! And he’d steal them from the house and take them to my daughter Maria, who had a little seat behind a bush somewhere, and she had my signature down perfectly. They cleaned up.”

Desi Arnaz Jr. also had a lemonade stand, but added an even more enterprising twist after his family, tired of the trafficky commute to the studio from their ranch in Chatsworth, in the San Fernando Valley, moved to Roxbury in 1955. “Desi used to take advantage of the fact that those movie-star maps are not very accurate,” Lucie Arnaz recalls. “He must have been 10 or 11 at the time, and he would lean in the car to hand the lemonade and cookies, and he’d say, ‘Oh, I see you’ve got the map. A lot of those people have moved. I can show you who does live here.’ And he’d charge a buck and get into the car with these people and tell them a bunch of stuff that was completely made up. My mother never knew till years later.”

The tourists could be so pesky that the family who lived at No. 1000 before the Arnazes felt compelled to put up a big sign, with an arrow pointing to No. 1002: JACK BENNY DOES NOT LIVE HERE. HE LIVES THERE.

Amanda Levant Carmel remembers making faces and throwing leaves at the tour buses, which were unrelenting—“every five minutes in the summer, stopping at whatever was owned by somebody, used to be owned by somebody, used to be owned by somebody who knew somebody,” according to Lucie Arnaz—and the announcers’ drone was inescapable. Clooney had just come back from the hospital with her son Gabriel, who was born prematurely; she was resting with the upstairs windows open when she heard a person on a loudspeaker saying, “‘Yes, Rosemary’s home from the hospital and she’s fine, but the baby—we don’t really know yet. It was four pounds at birth. He’s a little boy, but he’s still in the hospital at St. John’s, and Joe and Rosemary go down and see him.’ The story of my life’s going by on a loudspeaker and I’m thinking, Shut up!”

Even Albert Hoxie, 86, a retired U.C.L.A. history professor who has lived in the house just south of Stewart’s since 1929, had to contend with the sound of announcers declaring when they reached his front yard, “And *no one* lives there!”

The city of Beverly Hills banned big tour buses in favor of minivans in 1984, but not before one especially presumptuous group of tourists sat down and spread out their lunch on the Stewart lawn. “They wouldn’t do this to their next-door neighbors at home,” Clooney says, “but they put down a cloth and a basket and had a picnic. And Jimmy just turned on the sprinklers.”

In part to create a refuge from such shenanigans, in the late 60s Stewart bought the corner house next to his, just across from Ball’s, tore it down, and built a brick-walled garden, where he grew vegetables. At a buffet lawn party at the Stewarts’ shortly after it was finished, Leonard Gershe found Ball’s place card next to his at the table, but no sign of the star during cocktails or the beginning of dinner.

“She finally arrived, gave kind of a cursory greeting to everybody, and then sat down next to me and kissed me, and I said, ‘Why are you so late? You live right across the street.’ She said, ‘I wasn’t going to come at all. I’m so furious with the Stewarts!’ And I said, ‘Why?’ And she said, ‘When they tore that house down next door, all the rats came running over to my house, and I’ve been with exterminators for three weeks!’ She finally relaxed, and they never even knew, but it cracked me up.”

In 1965, Jack Benny’s wife, Mary Livingstone, decided to sell the Roxbury house, decamping first to a penthouse apartment in Century City and later to the house in Holmby Hills where Benny died in 1974. In *Sunday Nights at Seven*, her 1990 memoir, Joan Benny recalled that her father missed the house and the old friends terribly, and for the rest of his life, “in a sweet, kind of melancholy way,” would ask Mary, “Doll, why did we have to sell that house?” Joan Benny herself had hoped to buy it, but couldn’t afford to, and her parents,

despite their initial promise to help her with a second mortgage so that she could, ultimately decided against it because Livingstone had spent so much on decorating the new penthouse. Joan got the word from her father's lawyer.

"For years it was something I couldn't think about or talk about," Benny wrote. "It would just make me cry. For a very long time I couldn't even drive by the house. I would go out of my way, rather than pass 1002 North Roxbury. Sometimes when I glance at a digital clock or wristwatch and it says 10:02, I feel it—not a pang, not even a twinge anymore, but it's there." (The house, for which Benny paid \$250,000 in 1937, was recently put on the market for \$7.5 million.)

Levant descended deeper into depression and addiction, emerging most famously for a party that Walter and Carol Matthau held in honor of Charlie Chaplin when he won his special Academy Award in the spring of 1972. Candice Bergen, then moonlighting as a journalist and photographer, began a profile of him for *Esquire*. In their interview, Levant spewed epigrams, fretted when she did not take notes at all times, and finally sat down at the piano and began playing and softly singing the third verse of the Gershwins' "But Not for Me," which goes: "It all began so well / But what an end / This is the time a fell- / Er needs a friend."

"I don't think there's ever been anything to equal it," Bergen recalls of that moment in a life full of rich moments. "It was him in his pajamas and slippers, and he was really the most neurasthenic-looking man I'd ever seen. His ankles were a road map of veins, and he was so fiercely urban, you could tell it was a real principle of his never to expose himself to the daylight hours. He really had almost a pale-blue tinge."

A few days later, when Bergen arrived for a follow-up interview on August 15, she learned that he had just died.

Ira Gershwin, immersed in memories of his late brother, worked less and less, and grew prematurely frail. His last public outing was for the wedding of Angie Dickinson and Burt Bachrach in the 1960s, and eventually even his walks around the neighborhood stopped completely. He did draw pleasure from his work with the young Feinstein, who helped him organize decades of music and memorabilia, much of which is now preserved in the Library of Congress, and he continued to receive a handful of visitors, such as Angie Dickinson, who took him exquisite silk flowers, because he kept the drapes in his bedroom closed and real plants could not live there.

Finally, one morning in 1983, Clooney saw an ambulance in Gershwin's driveway and later called Feinstein to tell him the worst. Fred Astaire, arriving to pay his respects, wandered into Clooney's foyer by mistake, remembering his visits to 1019 a half-century earlier. Lee Gershwin ordered Feinstein upstairs to kiss the corpse, and then made him play the slow movement of George's Piano Concerto in F as the undertakers carried Ira's body out. Feinstein recalls, "As they were going through the living room, I turned my head, and Lee said, 'Don't look!' So I turned my head back to the piano and finished playing. And that was the end of the golden days at what Ira always called the Gershwin plantation."

After years of feuding over Desi's drinking and philandering, Ball and Arnaz divorced in 1960, and Clooney and Ferrer split up for good in 1964. "We'd laugh about our troubles until it got not so happy for both of us, you know," Clooney says. "I said to little Lucie once, 'There wasn't a chance on this block.' We had a Cuban on one end and a Puerto Rican on the other, for God's sake. But Desi was funny, and fine, you know, and Lucy really respected the way he handled the business part of it."

Ball married Gary Morton, a former nightclub comic, and carried on with two other successful "Lucy" series. But her retirement years were restless and lonely, and she was deeply hurt by the failure of a 1986 comeback attempt, *Life with Lucy*, which was canceled after eight episodes. She died in 1989, and a few years later the house's new owners, tired of nosy tourists, rebuilt the façade of the house with a new Italianate stucco overlay so as to make it

almost unrecognizable.

Meantime, to Clooney's chagrin, house after house on the street was remodeled or demolished in favor of bigger, ritzier mansions. Stewart's double lot, with its towering pine trees and graceful silver birches, remained an island of calm as he aged into America's most beloved movie hero, recipient of countless awards and tributes. But he, too, grew increasingly frail, and after Gloria's death from cancer in 1994, he rarely left his house. He died at home on July 2, 1997, and Kelly Stewart Harcourt, borrowing a line from *It's a Wonderful Life*, eulogized him as "the richest man in town."

The following spring, Stewart's children, none of whom lives in L.A. any longer, sold the house for \$5.6 million to Steven Wallace, the founder of Pacific Brokerage Services, an on-line discount brokerage, who pronounced it "just a dump" and tore it down last summer to build what he calls "kind of an Italian villa—it'll look old, but be new."

Kelly Stewart Harcourt found herself unable to cut the cord to Beverly Hills entirely. She took a small apartment in an old courtyard building near the Beverly Wilshire hotel to use on visits, installing some of her parents' leftover furniture, including the bar, complete with Princeton highball glasses.

"For a while, I thought I'd rather have it torn down than drive past it and have somebody else in it," she says. "That actually isn't true. Once it was down, I realized I wished it were still there, just so I could drive by and see it, because it was so much a part of that street. I have a best friend in Mandeville Canyon, and when I'm coming back at night from visiting her I always turn left on Roxbury by mistake, still.

"I miss it. I remember, right before it was completely torn down, I went past and it was just ground zero, practically. I mean, all dirt, and everything had been ripped up, and the only thing left was the hallway—the front door and the walls of the hallway, still with their wallpaper. So in the midst of all this dust and destruction there was this familiar wallpaper, this little patch in what looked like a battlefield, this poignant image I just can't get rid of."

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