

A STAR IS BORN



Sean Kinder

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SEAN KINDER IS WRITING A BOOK ON A KENTUCKY ACTRESS NAMED UNA MERKEL, WHO STARRED IN HOLLYWOOD MOVIES, ON TELEVISION AND RADIO, AND ON BROADWAY FROM THE 1920s TO THE 1960s. UNA'S ONCE-PROMINENT NAME HAS TOO OFTEN BEEN RELEGATED TO FOOTNOTES AND OCCASIONAL PHOTO CAPTIONS ALONGSIDE FAMOUS STARS. KINDER HOPES THAT HIS UPCOMING BOOK ON UNA WILL HELP BRING HER BACK INTO THE LIMELIGHT, WHERE THIS KENTUCKY NATIVE BELONGS.

Kinder says he started researching early Hollywood stars because, "I have a huge interest in silent films and 'The Golden Age' of Hollywood." Although not all are in agreement with what "The Golden Age" means, to Kinder it indicates films made in the 1930s and 1940s. Film scholars and enthusiasts often consider these decades to be the pinnacle of Hollywood filmmaking. The era produced what are arguably the most glamorous stars of all time: Joan Crawford, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Laurence Olivier, and Ingrid Bergman. But Kinder wanted to bring back to the public's attention stars who were famous, talented, and brilliant, but not quite as well known today.

BY AMY J. W. SLOWIK

Kinder did not settle on Una Merkel easily. "I was initially drawn to write about another actress named Ann Harding." But Kinder discovered mid-way into his research that two other biographers were already working on biographies of Ann Harding. Soon after, however, Una came to Kinder's attention. An avid early film viewer, Kinder had already noticed Una and soon realized that she was a native Kentuckian. Just as important, not much had been written about her. Kinder started collecting material about Una with a colleague, Associate Professor




UNA MERKEL

Terri Baker, coordinator for the Visual and Performing Arts Library at WKU. Although Baker eventually had to leave the project due to time constraints, she contributed significantly in the early stages of the research process, including gathering and organizing boxes of materials that can now be found under Kinder's desk.

Born in Covington, Kentucky, in 1903, Una Merkel always wanted to be an actress. She took acting lessons from the mother of famous actor Tyrone Power. Una left for New York City as a teenager and found work as a hand model. Building upon her Kentucky roots, she often appeared in photos in *True Story* magazine as "the country

girl" or "the young girl who comes to the city." Her golden curls and innocent face went perfectly with her (somewhat embellished) southern accent and graceful charms. She eventually made it to Broadway. Soon, she was invited to Hollywood by the great director D.W. Griffith, who wanted Una to appear in his film *Abraham Lincoln* with Walter Huston. Kinder says, "She was originally going to play Lincoln's wife, but [Griffith] decided to recast her as Ann Rutledge, Lincoln's ill-fated first love. It was a dramatic role and helped establish Una as a Hollywood actress, but she wouldn't hit her stride until later, when filmmakers discovered her natural flair for comedy."

Una moved to Hollywood with her mother and father, with whom she lived until the end of their lives. In Hollywood, Una established herself at Fox Studios, but when her contract went up for renewal, she signed a seven-year contract with the most illustrious motion picture studio of the day: MGM. It was an incredible coup for the young actress. At MGM, Una played in some of the era's most enduring films: *Private Lives*, *Red-Headed Woman*, *The Merry Widow*, and *On Borrowed Time*. She was also frequently loaned out to other studios, where she appeared in the original *Maltese Falcon*, *42nd Street*, and *Destry Rides Again*. She played alongside and became close friends with actors and actresses still known today: Jean Harlow, Ginger Rogers,



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Robert Taylor, Jimmy Stewart, Norma Shearer, Eleanor Powell, and Clark Gable — to name but a few. She even caught Helen Hayes' wedding bouquet. Although she played serious parts and was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar, Una became known for roles as, "the wise-cracking best friend of leading ladies," says Kinder. One of Hollywood's most prolific actresses, Una made thirteen films in 1933 alone.

Unlike many other actresses, Una never let fame and fortune go to her head. Says Kinder, "She was a very sweet, down-to-earth person who had absolutely no ego whatsoever. She was not your typical Hollywood diva by any stretch of the imagination. She never looked at herself as a big star. Family always came first to her. She never really bought into the whole glamorous, condescending attitude that some people did." Una married only once (to an aviation engineer) and the couple lived with her parents. After they divorced, Una never remarried. She never left her parents and never had any children. She worked hard, long hours at MGM. Kinder says, "They worked her to death, but she loved it."

During World War II, Una traveled to Australia and New Guinea to entertain U.S. troops with comedy sketches alongside Gary Cooper and actress Phyllis Brooks. "Una and Phyllis were the first white women that some of the indigenous New Guineans had ever seen. Gary got over there and was awestruck by the whole experience. Una was a seasoned pro, so she was in her element. She was very good at ad-libbing, and she really helped Gary hold things together. He was used to having a script and working in front of a camera, but working live on a stage was very different," Kinder reports. After the war, Una returned to the United States to resume her film career and take up Broadway again in New York City.

Soon after returning from abroad, a life-changing tragedy struck Una. For the sensational details, the reader will have to wait for Kinder's book. For now, Kinder is only willing to say that, "I look at her as a Hollywood survival story. She

went through so much, but when people think about her, they don't realize how rich and eventful her life was. She wasn't one to go out and party. She liked to stay home with her family and friends. She was extremely humble, yet she was a star. Nevertheless, there are elements of her life that played out like a Greek tragedy in the headlines."

After several years of recovery, Una returned to Broadway. In 1956, she received a Tony Award for her performance in *The Ponder Heart*. In between, she appeared in dozens of television and radio shows such as *I Spy*, *Burke's Law*, and *The Red Skelton Hour*. Finally, she returned to Hollywood, playing matronly roles like the housekeeper in *The Parent Trap* with Hayley Mills. In 1962, she won a nomination for Best Supporting Actress in *Summer and Smoke*. She worked until 1968, when she retired to a quiet life.

Kinder has spent years tracking down and interviewing surviving friends, family, and colleagues of Una Merkel, and he is in constant correspondence with people who may hold key information about Una's life. He says, "I've communicated with fans and friends who had some connection with Una, and I continue to write to her former Hollywood colleagues in the hopes that they will share with me their experiences with her." He also traveled to Una's birthplace in Covington, Kentucky, where she and her parents rest side-by-side. The Kenton County Public Library in Covington also holds materials on Una's life that Kinder used.

Like all Hollywood biographers and film scholars, Kinder had to travel to California to visit the official archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, housed in the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills. "When I went to the Margaret Herrick Library, I was armed with a lengthy list of citations, mostly movie magazine articles about Una. The library had most of them, but some of the more obscure ones remain elusive, especially those from British publications. However, while at the library, I was able to use a fantastic

database that is only available in-house. It seems the librarians there have gone through many of their movie magazines and created an index of the articles in them. This tool was an absolute treasure trove of information, and I have to thank Lea Whittington, a librarian there, who fulfilled request after request for me, always graciously and with a smile!" While in the area, Kinder also went to the Cinematic Arts Library at the University of Southern California. He did so with a grant from the Kentucky Library Association.

Kinder has left no stone unturned, "I first searched for every bibliography and index I could find pertaining to Hollywood, Broadway, motion pictures, cinema, theater, and radio that might have references to Una. My next step was getting these items — usually with help from WKU's Interlibrary loan staff — which included microfilm, articles, books, and audio-visual materials. In addition, I have spent hours skimming through newspaper archives, databases, websites, messages boards, blogs, genealogical records websites — all to find other nuggets of information about her." In going through all these materials, Kinder says his wife, Valérie Kinder, has been invaluable. In libraries where materials are too fragile to be photocopied, Valérie painstakingly hand-copied or typed entire articles for the project.

Kinder continues searching, scouring, and discovering items and information about Una Merkel. Traveling across the country from rural Kentucky to Los Angeles, Kinder has compiled a wealth of information on Una Merkel that will be available to the world for the first time. He now owns a veritable archive of Una Merkel resources, including vintage photos, lobby cards, letters, and rare magazines in which she appears. This labor of love is scheduled to be published by the University Press of Kentucky, allowing the world the opportunity to finally learn about and appreciate Una Merkel's rich life and career. Thanks to Sean Kinder, Una Merkel will be immortalized. ■