

# Gary Cooper's daughter proudly preserves legacy

By Ruthe Stein

Maria Cooper Janis is the flip side of Christina Crawford, a daughter whose love and admiration for her movie star parent has only grown with the passing years.

As Gary Cooper's only child, Janis takes her role as keeper of his flame seriously. If Cooper's image remains crystal clear in the public's eye more than 50 years after his death, it is in part because Janis has worked behind the scenes of several documentaries about him (a new one about his relationship with Hemingway is in the works) and has published a captivating memoir, "Gary Cooper Off Camera: A Daughter Remembers," crammed with family photos, including a fetching one of her studly father wearing a woman's hat decorated with Hawaiian flowers.

Janis' latest endeavor on behalf of her dad is to disentangle one of his last movies, "The Hanging Tree," from a legal morass preventing its availability on DVD. Cooper was back in the saddle again for this 1959 psychological Western, in which he plays a doctor who ministers to residents of a Montana gold camp. A stellar supporting cast includes Karl Malden and, in his first role, George C. Scott.

A legal issue with the

estate of the author of the book on which the movie is based kept it from the public. After this was settled, it took a couple of years to locate a good print or negative to make a new version from. Just as they despaired of ever finding one, a print turned up.

**The Hanging Tree:** DVD of 1959 film starring Gary Cooper is available from Warner Archive. \$19.98. [www.wbshop.com](http://www.wbshop.com).  
 "When it first comes onscreen, I was taken aback by how beautiful it looks," Janis said of the DVD. Speaking from the New York home she shares with her husband, concert pianist Byron Janis, she talked about the icon she calls Dad and why she has happily taken on the responsibility of protecting his name and image.

**Q: The doctor in "The Hanging Tree" is a complicated character, different from the unabashed good guys your father usually played. Did that make the part more or less desirable for him?**

**A:** More desirable, definitely. The part of the good guy got to bore him. He was always wanting to throw his net further afield. But it was hard for the public to accept him not being the hero all the time.

**Q: Watching him ride, it's hard to think of**

**another actor who looks more comfortable on a horse. Did that come naturally to him?**

**A:** That just shows how good an actor he was because, particularly as he got older, he was less than physically comfortable in the saddle. He had an old hip injury from when he was a teenager. If you look at him, you'll see he sits slightly sideways, on an angle. To actually spread his legs and sit completely straight wasn't easy. He had special saddles built for him where the seat part was built slightly higher and more narrow. But he loved horses. It made him very angry when he saw people abusing them by using really heavy reins. He was very upset at the way Will Rogers used the reins and pulled the horse's mouth around and was rough on him.

**Q: When did you realize your father was a famous person?**

**A:** It was at my birthday party when I turned 7. I had never seen a film of my father's until they showed "The Plainsman" that night. My father was the projectionist, and he was standing in back of the living room. It was fine except for the scene where he is captured by Indian torturers and held up over a bonfire. When

they're lowering him into the fire was just the scariest scene. I saw my father's body going into a big long campfire. I remember turning around and looking at him behind the machine, and he winked at me and smiled and gave me a thumbs-up. From that moment I knew that is fantasy up on the screen and being with my father is reality, and I don't mix them up.

**Q: Actors were shielded by the studios much more than happens today. Were you privy to inside Hollywood stories?**

**A:** My closest friends were Lucille Capra (daughter of director Frank Capra) and Pia Lindström (daughter of Ingrid Bergman) but it was sort of an unspoken code that we didn't talk about our parents' lives. But my parents did tell me that my classmate Judy Lewis was the daughter of Loretta Young and Clark Gable and that it would have ended both their careers if that had gotten out. I never knew that Judy didn't know about her father until she was engaged.

**Q: Your father also was involved in a scandal that was kept from the press — when while he was still married to your mother, he had an affair with Patricia**



**Neal, his "Fountain-head" co-star. You reveal in your book that your father developed ulcers from the upheaval. There's a story that you spat on Neal. True?**

**A:** Look, when you are 11 or 12 years old and someone intervenes in your family life, she is not your favorite person.

**Q: Here is the amazing part. Long after your father's death, you reconciled with his mistress. Is it true that you helped her get back into the Roman Catho-**

**lic Church?**

**A:** I introduced Patricia to Dolores Hart, a Benedictine nun (and former Hollywood starlet) and to an abbey when she was going through a difficult time. Her husband (Roald Dahl, author of "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory") had run off with someone. Patricia was in a very bad way. And the end of it was that Patricia and I became very good friends, and that my mother reconciled with her, too. She and my mother had a very touching relationship.

I think so much of life

is about forgiveness. We all have a lot to be forgiven for, and to forgive frees you up to be the best person you can be.

**Q: From what you tell me of your father, he would have liked the way things turned out.**

**A:** I like to think maybe he choreographed the whole thing. ■

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Warner Bros. 1959

**Gary Cooper plays a doctor in "The Hanging Tree," which his daughter has helped release on DVD.**



Warner Archive

**Maria Cooper Janis protects her father's image.**