

Anita Loos: A Hollywood legend with roots in the small Siskiyou County town of Etna

By Jon Lewis

The gravestone is rather unassuming, as is its location in the Etna Cemetery. What's not unassuming, however, is the story of the diminutive woman whose final resting place is in Siskiyou County's Scott Valley.

Anita Loos, who stood an inch short of five feet and weighed in at 90 pounds, was a giant in early 20th-century Hollywood and Broadway. In a career spanning 60 years, she wrote some 200 screenplays and played a key role in advancing the acting careers of Douglas Fairbanks, Jean Harlow and Audrey Hepburn.

She's best known for "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," a best-selling comic novel published in 1925 that introduced the world to Lorelei Lee, a gold-digging flapper. The first edition of the book sold out overnight and it was ultimately printed in 13 different languages in some 85 editions. It garnered praise from literary stalwarts William Faulkner and Aldous Huxley while Edith Horton called it "the great American novel."

The influential director D.W. Griffith dubbed Loos "the most brilliant young woman in the world." Helen Gurley Brown, editor-in-chief of Cosmopolitan magazine, would later remark that the prescient and pioneering Loos had managed the twin goals of "being sexy and having a fantastic career at the same time before anybody."

Loos's roots in Siskiyou County can be traced to her mother's side of the family. Loos's maternal grandparents, George and Cleopatra "Cleo" Smith were among Etna's early pioneers, having arrived in the area in 1849.



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Anita Loos, right, and Jean Harlow in a publicity still for the 1932 movie "Red-Headed Woman," which Loos wrote the screenplay for and Harlow starred, in one of the more famous pre-code era films.

Loos's mother, Minerva Ellen "Minnie" Smith, was born in Etna in 1869. Her father was Richard Beers Loos, a newspaperman and theatre manager who was described in the

New York Times as a "charming, feckless person, often away from home with pretty women and often short of money."

Richard and Cleo were married in 1881 and Anita Loos was born in 1889 in Sisson (now Mount Shasta). Richard Loos, who was publisher of the Sisson Mascot newspaper, apparently developed some wanderlust and by Anita's third year, the family had relocated to San Francisco where Richard Loos purchased The Dramatic Event, a tabloid that focused on theater doings.

A curious sort, Loos would accompany her father to San Francisco's pier where she had her first brushes with the city's underbelly and some of its more unsavory characters. Those associations are credited with sparking her "lifelong fascination with lowlifes and loose women," according to the Times.

Theater was ever-present in Loos's life, and even as a young girl her father had Loos and her sister, Gladys, performing on stage in San Francisco. (Gladys died at age 8 from appendicitis, an attack that

occurred while her father was away on business.)

Loos continued performing after her father moved the family to San Diego in 1903. Richard Loos had taken a job managing a theater company and had his daughter on stage there as well. The precocious Loos soon became the family breadwinner. It also was in San Diego, and later in Los Angeles, that Loos began to expand her writing.

Loos's foray into writing was a natural progression, suggested Jennifer Bryan, a Yreka native and a board member of the Siskiyou County Historical Society.

"Her father was involved in theater and writing throughout her childhood," she said. "It was all around her."

"The Ink Well" was one of Loos's first published plays, after which she turned her attention to screenplays. Her third effort, "The New York Hat," starred Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore and became a hit for director D.W. Griffith in 1911. The script showcased what the Times described as "the Anita Loos aesthetic: sharp, wit-driven, female-



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Loos, right, and her friend, actress Helen Hayes, left, co-wrote the 1972 book "Twice Over Lightly: New York Then and Now."



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Loos started her career writing for silent films, including as one of the co-writers for D.W. Griffith's 1916 movie "Intolerance."

centric plots, with barbs pointed at Puritanical humorlessness and hypocrisy. From the beginning, she embodied the modern woman to millions of readers — a work-driven, glamorous female success story in a man's world."

Between 1912 and 1915, Loos wrote 105 scripts and only four of them went unproduced. She became the first-ever female staff scriptwriter when Griffith hired her at his Triangle Film Corporation. Loos went on to write for Paramount, United Artists and MGM, easily making the transition from silent to sound films.

Loos joined director John Emerson for a series of successful Douglas Fairbanks swashbuckling adventure films and later married Emerson (her second husband), who was 15 years her senior.

Loos would later complain that the bulk of the pair's successful scripts were primarily her own work. Emerson's infidelity and jealousy over his wife's accomplishments strained the marriage, while also providing Loos with the opportunity to mingle with fellow writers like Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Elisabeth Marbury and Elsie De Wolfe.

William Randolph Hearst contracted with Loos to write a film for his mistress, Marion Davies, and the resulting "Getting Mary Married" became one of the few Marion Davies films that didn't lose money.

Loos and Emerson collaborated on two well-received industry books, "How to Write Photoplays" and "Breaking Into the Movies." The films "Red-Headed Woman" and "The Women" were two examples of Loos's success in the sound era. Loos also adapted "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" for a successful Broadway production that starred Carol Channing. That production would later be adapted by screenwriter Charles Lederer for the popular 1953 film starring Marilyn



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John Emerson and Anita Loos in a photo taken one minute after their wedding in Bayside Long Island in 1919.



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The 1953 film "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, with the screenplay by Charles Lederer, was adapted from the Broadway musical written by Loos and Joseph Fields, which was based on the novel by Loos.

Monroe and Jane Russell.

A young Audrey Hepburn performed the lead in Colette's "Gigi," another successful show Loos adapted for Broadway.

In her later years, Loos began a volume of memoirs starting with "A Girl Like I," in 1966. Her 1972 book, "Twice Over Lightly: New York Then and Now," was written in collaboration with friend and actress Helen Hayes, while "Kiss Hollywood Goodbye" from 1974 was a Hollywood memoir about her MGM years.

Famous relatives

Loos's older brother, H. Clifford Loos, also was born in Mount Shasta and grew up in the Scott Valley. He attended medical school at Stanford University and practiced medicine and surgery in San Diego from 1906 to 1917.

In 1929, with fellow physician Don Ross, Clifford Loos formed the Ross-Loos Medical Group and became the first group to collect monthly payments from its members (initially Los Angeles County employees) in exchange for health care with small or

zero copayments. The group became the country's first health maintenance organization (HMO) in the United States. The HMO concept has since been used by Anthem Blue Cross and other large insurers.

Clifford's daughter Mary became a writer who published under the name Anita Loos. She married Richard Sale, a screenwriter and novelist, and together they wrote 17 films, including "Gentlemen Marry Brunettes," "The Wackiest Ship in the Army" and "Please Don't Eat the Daisies."

Clifford Loos and his sister Gladys, along with his parents, are buried alongside Loos at the Etna Cemetery.

"I kind of think the land and the family roots drew them," said Bryan, who also does research for the Genealogical Society of Siskiyou County. "They felt at home here. My current generation, even though they left to make a living, they still come back to be buried with the family."

Jennifer Bryan of the Siskiyou County Historical Society provided a significant amount of help for this article.