

News from

# The Monterey County Historical Society

May 2007



## Edgar Kennedy — Monterey County's First Movie Star

by Bill Cassara

- He is the only Monterey County *native* with his name on the Hollywood Walk of Fame
- His replica stands next to Laurel & Hardy figures at the Movieland Wax Museum
- He was the star of his own film series for 17 years
- He appeared in over 400 movies
- He was an original Keystone Cop

Who is this film actor? If you said Clint Eastwood, go to the end of the line. Monterey County's *first* movie star was Edgar Kennedy, born on the family homestead on April 26, 1890.

Edgar's parents, Neil and Annie, were very prominent citizens of south Monterey County. They owned 160 acres of land between Bradley and Pleyto and were educators at the Veratina School.

The Veratina School was named after Edgar's sister who died as a young baby. The Nacimiento Post Office serviced the community's needs, but it was also renamed the Veratina Post Office around 1888. According to the book *Monterey County Place Names*, Annie Kennedy became the Postmaster until it closed in 1895.

Little has been known over the years about

this pioneering family and the impact they made on southern Monterey County. A request to the National Archives achieved some remarkable results; it contained a document with a copy of Neil Kennedy's homestead application. There



Edgar Kennedy with Florence Lake



“Keystone Kops” (1914)

was also a replica of a legal document describing five years of improvements to the land. This included a description of the farmhouse and landscaping, with inventories of cattle and poultry.

The legalities required the posting of Neil’s application into a local newspaper publication. This was done in the *Bradley Mercury*, and is quite a revelation; for even the San Antonio Valley Historical Association did not realize that Bradley ever had its own newspaper.

Neil Kennedy died in the late 1890s; unfortunately no death certificates were necessary then. Without a man around the homestead, Annie sold her cattle and leased out her land. In 1900, Annie and Edgar moved to San Francisco.

When the famous 1906 San Francisco

Earthquake hit, there was impetuous Edgar helping to man the “Bucket Brigade.” Little did he know that 30 years later he would be appearing in a moving and talking picture show called “San Francisco.” Edgar was cast as the Sheriff serving a summons for Clark Gable and was promptly socked in the jaw.

Edgar became a professional boxer in 1911 after winning the local amateur heavyweight title. He had numerous bouts that year until he was soundly defeated in Taft, Ca. Edgar sought an easier way to make a living at the fledgling movie studios in Los Angeles.

In early 1913, Mack Sennett hired him for his Keystone Comedies and made him a charter member of the original Keystone Kops. Legend has it that Edgar had to fight his way into the job.



Edgar Kennedy with Doris Day

Edgar was a stock player on the lot and saw Charlie Chaplin, then Fatty Arbuckle, rise to fame. Edgar also tried his hand at directing to supplement his film acting. It wasn't until Hal Roach hired him (in 1927) that Edgar started being noticed for the comedian he was.

Laurel and Hardy's "Leave 'Em Laughing," served as Edgar's debut with the famous comedy team. He played a cranky Irish policeman, "Kennedy the Cop." Born was the victimized public servant. He continued to play cop roles and other support for Our Gang ("The Little Rascals"), Charley Chase and others on the lot.

In 1931 he was hired by RKO to star in his own comedy series called "The Average Man." He was cast as the beleaguered head of the family and had to endure a chattering wife, a meddling mother-in-law and a lazy brother-in-

law, all living in his house.

These two-reelers (20 minutes in length) were the forerunner of television's situation comedies. Many actors who later became famous appeared in those shorts; among them were Lucille Ball and Walter Brennan. Irene Ryan played Edgar's wife for a few episodes, but didn't make her mark in television until she characterized "Granny" in the "Beverly Hillbillies." Hugh Beaumont, who later portrayed the "dad" in television's "Leave it to Beaver," also had a plum role in the series.

Perpetually perturbed Edgar always portrayed the much put upon victim of others in his series. He would protest loudly but was always defeated at the conclusion by his trademark "Slow Burn." For this gesture, Edgar would bring his left hand up to his baldhead and emphatically wiped it down across his face



Left: The “Slow Burn” — Edgar Kennedy’s trademark (1936).

Right: Laurel & Hardy.

Lower right: Our Gang.

and chin. It was like a squeegee wiping glass.

The slow burn mannerism made him one of America’s most recognizable faces; he was much sought after throughout the ‘30s and ‘40s as comic relief or in character parts. He worked with all of the mega stars of the day: John Wayne’s side-kick in “Old California,” with Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful World,” the Marx Brothers in “Duck Soup,” Eddie Cantor, Ginger Rogers, W.C. Fields, Harold Lloyd, etc.

His last feature role was that of Doris Day’s uncle in “My Dream is Yours.” It was Doris’ second movie and Edgar’s 400th something. Doris has strong memories of working with Edgar; “You can imagine how I felt, it was only

my second movie, he was so warm, dear and everything dear, I respected him so much. Everyone in the business knew he was a genius.”

Bing Crosby invited his old golf mate to the very first two Crosby Pro-Ams in Pebble Beach during 1947 and 1948. The tournament was covered by the San Francisco Call Bulletin with a series of photos showing Edgar cutting up the golf course. Unfortunately, there was no ensuing story about the local boy who made good.

When Edgar died of throat cancer on November 9, 1948, the news hit the wire services. Newspaper obituaries across the country announced his death, and all mentioned the fact that Edgar was born in Monterey County. Alas, there were no first hand stories about the man



in any of the Monterey County newspapers of the day.

Monterey County is starting to take notice of its long forgotten native son.

Arts Habitat hosted a fundraiser at the Golden State Theatre in Monterey last year with a screen showing of "Duck Soup," the classic Marx Brothers farce. Edgar's battles with the bros. helped make the film one of the top rated comedies of all time. Since 2002, Access Monterey Peninsula (A.M.C., the local television cable station) annually honors its local filmmakers with the prestigious "Edgar Kennedy Awards." Like the Oscar statuette at the Academy Awards, the Edgar Award also features a male figure void of hair.

...Eat your heart out Clint!

Bill Cassara is the author of *Edgar Kennedy: Master of the Slow Burn*. To order a copy, go to any bookstore, or order on line at:

<http://bearmanormedia.bizland.com/>

Bill is a retired 26-year veteran of the Monterey County Sheriff's Department. He is an avid film writer and history buff. His website is: [www.edgarkennedy.org](http://www.edgarkennedy.org).

### WANTED

We are seeking anyone who is interested in giving tours of the Boronda Adobe on Sundays between 1 & 4 pm. If you are interested please contact Mona at our office (831/757-8085).

### THIS NEWSLETTER IS DEDICATED TO JANET RUTH BRANDES

This Newsletter is dedicated to Janet Ruth (Ruzicka) Brandes who passed away in early May. Janet, a Boronda descendant, was a major contributor of the life and times of the Boronda family. Her genealogy research of the family is extensive and used constantly by researchers. She will be missed.

### FUTURE PLANS

Now that our landscaping is completed, we will be developing plans for Phase III on the museum. This will consist of enlarging our archival vault and building our storage facilities. We have totally outgrown our vault with the many collections we have recently received and continue to receive.

Our storage is critical for the physical artifacts we have acquired, including the massive archaeological collections we are housing. The archaeological collections will be of major interest to researchers in coming years. Once this is completed, we will start Phase IV, working on the interior rooms of the museum.

### WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

- Kareen Morgan
- Dusty Jo Rossi
- Roy & Lorraine Diaz
- Christy Lens
- Gary Karnes
- Herbert Burquez
- Steve Anderson
- Pamela Huckins
- Verona Flint
- William & Gail James

### MEMORIALS

- Donor .....In Memory Of
- Clay Daulton .....Sam Avila
- Nick Cominos .....Rusty Cochetti
- Burton Anderson .....Alva Andrus
- Joanne Nissen .....Alva Andrus
- Mr. & Mrs. Boggiatto .....Frank Muther
- Mr. & Mrs. Boggiatto .....Augie Gillis
- Burton Anderson .....Edith Putford
- Burton Anderson .....Arlene Works

### WEBSITE

Don't forget our website at:

<http://www.mchsmuseum.com>

## FALL BBQ

Our BBQ last fall was a great success. Thank you to all of you who attended. The day was beautiful, the food was excellent, and our entertainment was superb.

Corey Sanchez, a seventeen year old, received a special award for the time he has donated to the Society. He started volunteering at the age of 10 years old assisting with BBQs. As he became older he worked in the archives processing materials and doing research for patrons. He continues to donate his time and is a great asset to the Society.



A warm thank you to the Alta California Dancers who brought to life the times of the early settlers through their dance and music.

(Photographs on this page by Peggie Rosner.)

A special thank you to Dreampower Horsemanship who were well received by both children and adults.

And last but not least thanks to our BBQ team Joe Gudgel, Charles Young, and Corey Sanchez.



EDGAR  
KENNEDY



MUTINY  
IN THE  
COUNTY



STORY BY  
ARTHUR V. JONES  
and HARRY O'ARCY

DIRECTED BY HARRY O'ARCY  
PRODUCED BY LOU BROCK

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