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Newport Life

BEST OF 2009

MAGAZINE

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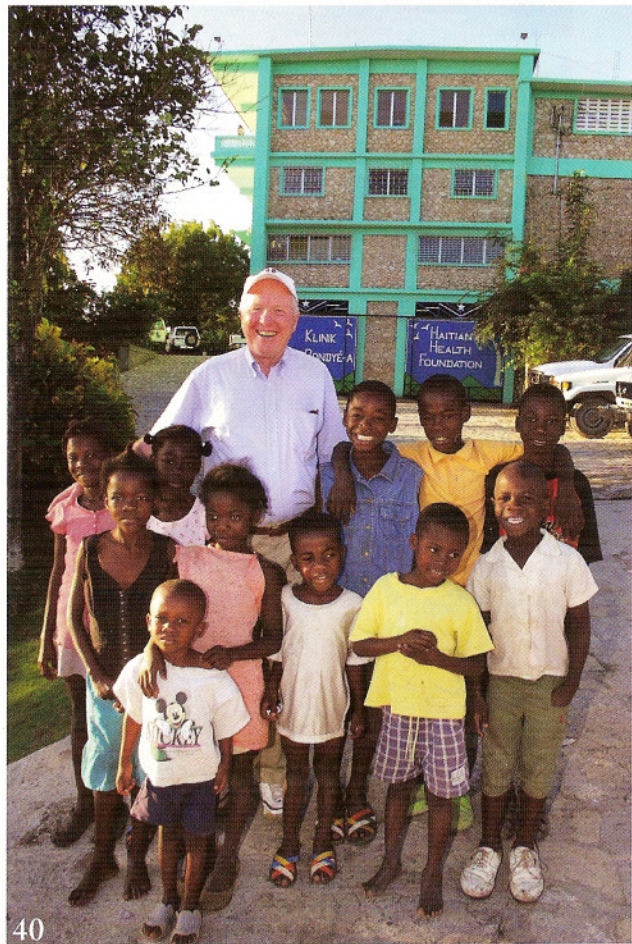
Newport Life

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Photos from top: Courtesy of the Betty Hutton Estate; Kathryn Whitney Lucey

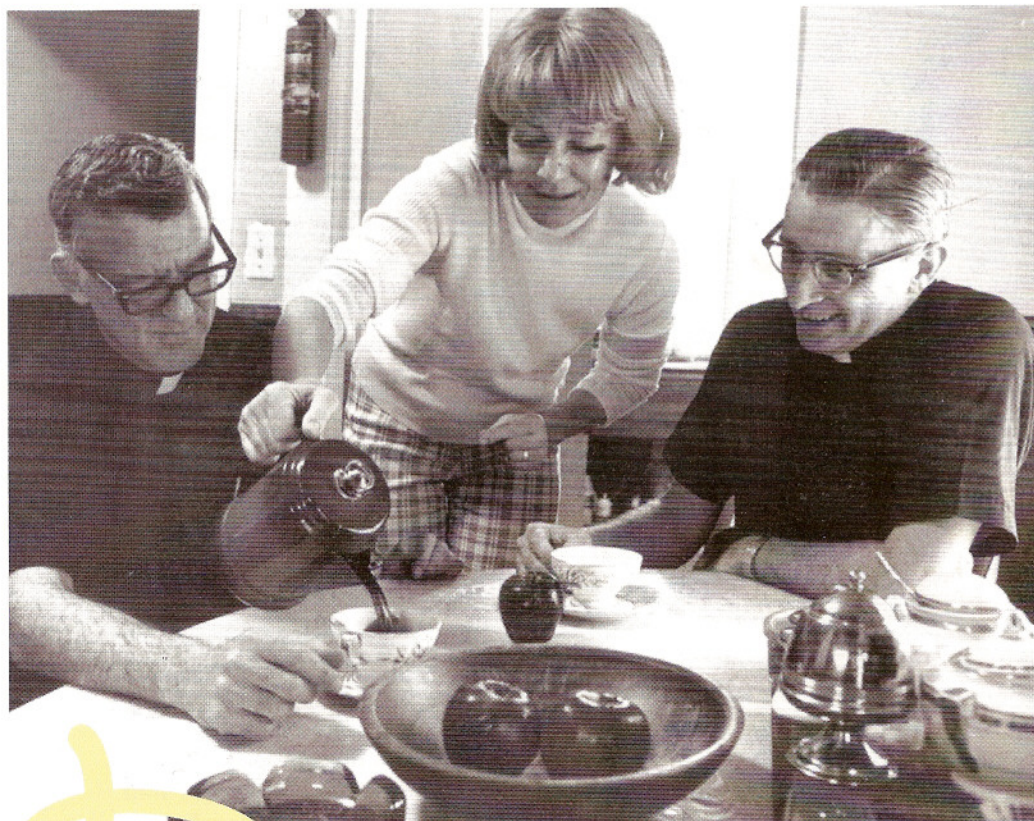
Being Beautiful



THIS PAGE Betty Hutton in a 1950 publicity photo for *Annie Get Your Gun*.

FACING PAGE Hutton lived and worked at the St. Anthony's Church rectory in Portsmouth for five years in the 1970s. Seated at right is Father Peter Maguire, the priest whom she credits with saving her life.

Betty



Courtesy of the Betty Hutton Estate

BETTY HUTTON was a renowned Hollywood star who embodied the can-do spirit of World War II. Addictions to prescription drugs changed all that, making the star a shadow of her former self. In her later years she **CAME TO NEWPORT** to recoup and rekindle her taste for life. It was here that the **BLONDE BOMBSHELL** earned a degree from Salve Regina University and an opportunity to become someone – *herself*.



BORN BETTY JUNE THORNBURG, February 26, 1921, in Battle Creek, Michigan, Betty Hutton was a screen legend, who, from 1941 to 1952, stood front and center in 20 feature films, bringing a vitality to song and dance few could match. Hutton's roles included "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek," an American Film Institute favorite, "The Perils of Pauline," where she portrayed the rise of silent screen star Pearl White, and her most celebrated role as Annie Oakley in the 1950 MGM musical "Annie Get Your Gun," for which Hutton earned a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress.

Dubbed "America's #1 Jitterbug" at age 18 for her dazzling nightclub performances, the girl "with a voice that could sound like a fire alarm" one critic wrote, signed with Paramount Pictures at just 20, though her youth belied the fact she was already a seasoned pro, singing and dancing since the age of 4.

As Hutton's billing climbed and her name became more brightly lit, Hutton slipped into the other side of her profession; the stuff of salacious biopics. "She was a lady who had torments, but tremendous talents ... And they all showed up on the screen," says her good friend A.C. Lyles, 81-year Paramount veteran, then Director of Publicity. She was "much beloved," says Lyles, if "sometimes ... a little difficult."

Hutton's problems with prescription drugs escalated around the time she injured her arm filming the 1952 Cecil B. DeMille drama "The Greatest Show on Earth." Contract disagreements at the time between the star and Paramount

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be super great here."*

-BETTY HUTTON, 1978



Courtesy of Salve Regina University

FACING PAGE Betty Hutton in 1925 with her mother and sister; as Annie Oakley at the height of her fame in 1950. AT RIGHT Hutton graduating from Salve Regina University on May 18, 1986.

virtually ended her career at her insistence that her then-husband, Charles O'Curran, direct her next film. The studio said no, so Hutton gave back her contract. Now, from the summit of her career staring down, addiction gradually consumed Hutton the way alcoholism had gripped her mother.

In 1970, after losing her singing voice, Hutton nearly died of a sleeping pill overdose. Her breakdown was triggered in 1965 when she learned of the impending nuptials of her fourth husband, jazz trumpeter Pete Candoli, from a Hollywood television show. Married since 1960, the couple had one child, Carolyn; their divorce was finalized in 1967, a few years after Hutton's mother, Mabel, died in a house fire. The actress hit rock bottom in 1972 while performing in a Framingham dinner theater, losing custody of Carolyn. "I was on so many uppers and downers, there

weren't enough pills to put me up or bring me down," said Hutton. "I wanted to die." When she entered the hospital, the 5' 4" star recalled, "I weighed only 85 pounds and looked more dead than alive."

It was while recuperating in a Massachusetts rehabilitation facility that Hutton looked out of the window one day and noticed someone she instinctively knew would help start the next chapter of her life. "I'm going to meet that man," she said during an interview. "He's going to save my life."

That man was Fr. Peter Maguire, pastor of St. Anthony's Church on East Main Road in Portsmouth. He was checking his cook, Pearl, into the same facility, oblivious of the impression he had made on the bed-ridden woman, who found his gentleness and compassion deeply moving. Befriending Pearl, Hutton finagled an invitation to the rectory.

Newport was as far from Hollywood as anywhere, which is exactly what Hutton craved. "... if I hadn't gotten [to Newport], I wouldn't have made it," said Hutton on *Good Morning America* in 1978. "They didn't expect me to be super great here. These people ... took me in their homes, their little homes, and held me in their arms and kissed me and hugged me back to life. And, that's New England, boy."

Living at the rectory during her five-year recovery, Hutton cooked, washed dishes, made beds and cleaned, taking on the lowly role with the same vigor with which she confronted other challenges. As most performers come to find, unearthing their true selves is a road fraught with let downs and bad breaks. "I (was) the product," she said of her life up to this point, "like hamburgers, hot dogs ... Father said, 'Betty you're just a hurt child.'" Consideration of

this kind was new to Hutton, even as a woman in her 50s. The only other father she had known had abandoned the family for another woman when she was two. In 1939 a telegram arrived informing the family of his suicide. It was the only information they had received since he had abandoned them 18 years earlier.

In 1974, after newspapers broke the story that a former Hollywood star was indeed staying at the rectory, Hutton became ill again and was hospitalized. The turning point in her recovery was when she discovered "Christ is in my heart" and converted to Catholicism.

Media rumours that she wanted to become a nun were quashed by Fr. Maguire. "She's been married four times. It would seem rather difficult for her to become a nun at this point." Her devotion to her new faith, however, was evidenced by the amount of time she spent volunteering to help troubled souls within the community. "That is my niche in life," she told TCM's Robert Osbourne. "If I can take a soul nobody wants any part of and pull them up by their bootstraps, that is a joy; now I mean a joy."

In the early 1980s, she settled into an estate overlooking Newport Harbor. Professor James Hersh, Salve Regina University's Philosophy Chair, who came to know Hutton, explained that Hutton's private life "had been the source of so much pain that she was setting it right." For the first time in her life, Betty Hutton, speak-easy darling at just age four and star of stage and screen, could enjoy just being "Betty."

If turning her life around weren't enough, or because in order to do so the necessary change must be radical, the high school dropout enrolled as a student at Salve Regina University. "Father [Maguire] was a teacher," she said. "[He] taught me from the 9th grade to the 12th ... put books in my hands and when I felt I was ready, I said, 'Father, I want to go to college.'" This she

did at age 62, and just as in her films, Hutton applied the same childlike energy to learning as she did to being a singing, dancing and film star.

Her university experience was as painful as it was rewarding. For one of Hersh's class presentations, Hutton dressed in tights with a top hat and cane and proceeded to do what Hersh recalls as a "little soft shoe," singing "Me and My Shadow" a cappella. "It was so tender," recalls her professor, "because she was singing with tears just streaming down her cheeks." Her classmates, he says, were confounded. "But, I knew who she was and I knew what she had been through and then to see her in this situation was an extraordinary experience." Hutton described for Hersh that when the lights went down, the shadows were utterly debilitating, as there was a "wall between

her show biz experience [where she found happiness on stage] and the real world."

"People loved her," said Hersh. "They really appreciated what she was as herself." Some of those fans included her fellow students, whom Hutton did her best to engage despite the difference in age and their ignorance of her past. One such student was Professor Hersh's own daughter, Kristin, who had just formed her own band Throwing Muses. The two

women's connection had the potential to be more than academic. For Kristin Hersh, the 62-year-old became, as she puts it, her "best friend." For Hutton, the 18-year-old girl who was the frontman of the local alt-rock band, Kristin was a star-in-the-making.

"Betty did live in a bona fide mansion, though, or at least it seems that way," tells Kristin Hersh of her time with Hutton. "Right on the ocean and decorated entirely in white: white furniture, walls, carpet, piano. She'd sit at the piano with her friends, singing show tunes. Really. I mean, I assumed they were show tunes. When the singing was over, she'd wipe tears away and

hug whoever had been accompanying her. Then, glistening, she'd call me over and say to her friend, 'Krissy's in a band. A band called Throwing Mu-ses. Krissy's gonna be the new me.'"

Alas, all of Hutton's experience and desire to help her reluctant protégé failed. Showbiz had changed beyond recognition from the days of the screen star to the young rocker. Though the one piece of advice Hutton offered was as perennial in its value as it was a commentary of Hutton's former life. "There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about," she told Hersh one day at school. "... don't ever let them feed you pills. Whoever tries to do it! They'll want to wake you up and knock you out because they make more money when they can control you physically and emotionally. Stay clean, Krissy. And you won't end up like me."

In September 1984, Hutton was awarded an honorary doctorate degree, and graduated cum laude with a Masters Degree in Liberal Studies two years later. After graduating, she taught drama at Salve as well as Boston's Emerson College. She loved teaching because she felt finally she could give her students more than just the "commodity," she could give them "Betty."

In many ways, Newport was the ideal location for Hutton's rebirth. As one friend describes, "Betty loved the coming and going; the yachts, conjuring up images of her Hollywood days, the Canada geese, the serenity of the water and Newport Bridge in the distance." She also loved to cook and would whip up marvelous dishes from the *Time-Life Good Cook* series for dinner parties with close friends such as Dr. Hersh and his family as well as Father Maguire and others, that led one participant to describe her soirees as "Cecil B. DeMille productions."

On July 8, 1996, the father Hutton never had, Fr. Maguire, died. The man who had indeed proved the ailing actress right when she put so much faith into her first impression of him succumbed to diabetes and heart disease. Hutton could not bear the thought of his absence. Soon after, she moved to Palm Springs to be near family and friends, and lived there until her death on March 11, 2007, leaving as a person who had finally found peace in just "being beautiful Betty." ❀

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