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Sandra Schackel
Boise State University

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Author(s): Sandra Schackel

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Barbara Stanwyck met many challenges in her career. She took on physically demanding stuntwork that was often dangerous, prompting *Union Pacific* co-star Joel McCrea to remark that Stanwyck "had more guts than most men." Stanwyck took other risks by challenging the stereotype of the western woman in film and portraying assertive characters who took charge of their own destinies. By breaking down such barriers, she provided a role model for other actresses of her time. Here she is pictured in *Forty Guns* (1957). Courtesy 20th Century Fox Film Corporation and Arts Special Collections, UCLA.

Barbara Stanwyck: Uncommon Heroine

by Sandra Schackel

“Barbara Stanwyck, an intrepid citizen who has shown no fear of man, terrain, or scripts over a long and illustrious career, is tackling all three in *Cattle Queen of Montana*,” reported the *New York Times* when the film opened in that city in 1954.¹ Thirty years into her movie career, Stanwyck indeed had demonstrated her ability as a versatile and accomplished actress, appearing in more than eighty roles by the late 1950s. Nominated for four Academy Awards in her career, none of them for Westerns, Stanwyck professed to love that genre best; she starred in ten Western movies during the 1940s and 1950s.² In these films, Stanwyck brought to the Western heroine a spunky determination and spirit of independence unusual for women in Westerns in this era. So successful was she, and so enamored of Westerns was the American public, that success followed her to the small screen as head of the Barkley clan in “The Big Valley” television series in the 1960s.

Stanwyck’s film and television roles contrast with her private life. These roles mirror, in part, her longstanding need for security and independence, hence the many portrayals of strong, assertive women. Yet behind this image she remained vulnerable and sensitive to the pressures of the profession as well as cultural expectations that limited the lives of most women. In many ways, Stanwyck lived out roles on the big screen that eluded ordinary women because society was not yet ready to allow women those kinds of freedoms. Through such acting, Stanwyck was ahead of her time in the 1940s and 1950s in Western films that allowed her to portray women who take charge of the ranch, the county, and the people around her.³

Roles for women in Westerns, and indeed much of cinema, traditionally have been limited to two stereotypes: the bad woman/prostitute and the good woman/civilizer. Variations on these themes include the saloon singer, the whore with a heart of gold, the spunky ranchwoman, the frontier schoolteacher, and the pioneer mother. Nearly always, the Western heroine depends on a man in some capacity, and if she rejects or otherwise denies male counsel, she is penalized for her “unnatural” behavior through death, banishment, or, at the least, loss of the hero’s love. These prescriptive roles for women were well fixed in Western cinema until the 1970s, when a third stereotype appeared, the strong, independent heroine who can take care of herself and expects to do so. Several actresses, including Candace Bergen in *Soldier Blue* (1970), Kathleen Lloyd in *The Missouri Breaks* (1970), and Jane Fonda in *Comes a Horseman* (1978), illustrate this image.⁴

Prior to the 1970s, Barbara Stanwyck frequently played a Western heroine who challenged the stereotypical female image. For example, in *Maverick Queen* (1956) and in *Forty Guns* (1957), Stanwyck moved beyond the civilizer role to play tough, take-charge women. As a result, part of her popularity in both movies and on television stemmed from her ability to carry out adventurous, demanding tasks not usually assigned to women in films prior to the 1970s. Although she starred in a wide variety of roles, including comedies, for the most part Stanwyck is remembered for her portrayals of strong, determined women who met men on even terms or dominated them from the onset.

Stanwyck’s treatment of strong-willed, independent women was not limited to Westerns but

dominated most of her other films as well. In Academy Award-nominated *Double Indemnity* (1944) Stanwyck is the mastermind behind both the seduction of insurance salesman Fred MacMurray and their bizarre plot to kill her husband. Similarly, in *The Lady Eve* (1940) and *Ball of Fire* (1941), Stanwyck remains the boss despite falling in love with the men she intends to trap. In time, Stanwyck's choice of roles came to reflect a tension between the narrow confines of female destiny and her drive to expand beyond those constrictions. Very much a product of the times when a woman was expected to put marriage before career, she nonetheless rose to stardom on the strength of roles that diverged from the traditional formula. In doing so, Stanwyck proved to be a role model for later actresses.⁵

Born Ruby Stevens on July 16, 1907, in Brooklyn, Stanwyck was orphaned at the age of four and spent the next ten years of her life in foster homes. Although Hollywood lore frequently capitalized on her waif-like early years, Stanwyck insisted it was not that grim: "Foster homes in those days weren't cruel—they were just impersonal."⁶ By her early teens, Stanwyck had discovered her love for entertaining by dancing to hurdy-gurdy music in city streets. At age fifteen she landed a job as a chorus girl and eventually appeared with the Ziegfield Follies and in other stage revues. She gradually worked her way up the show business ladder, securing the lead in a Broadway play in 1926. The following year she made her screen debut in a silent film, *Broadway Nights*, and in 1928 followed her vaudeville performer husband, Frank Fay, to Hollywood, where she signed contracts with both Columbia and Warner Brothers.⁷ By then, Ruby Stevens had become Barbara Stanwyck, but she would never lose the traits she had developed in her early years—a gritty determination, a strong sense of independence, and the desire to excel in her profession.⁸

Stanwyck starred in her first Western in 1935, playing the title role in *Annie Oakley*, but her interest in Westerns had been with her since childhood. As a youngster growing up in the tenements of Brooklyn, her idol was Pearl White, the silent heroine of the *Perils of Pauline* serials of the early movie

The Red Pony featured Maureen O'Hara and Henry Fonda in a story set in turn-of-the-century California about a poor family whose kind but rough father tries to understand his ten-year-old son's rebellion. O'Hara expands on the good woman civilizer role as a pioneer mother trying to hold her family together. Courtesy Phoenix Films, Inc., and Alameda Newspaper Group.

industry. Stanwyck explained in an interview in 1981, "I came from very poor surroundings and I had to work my tail off just to get a penny, a *penny*, so that I could see her. She's influenced me all my life."⁹ Stories of the West made an impression also. Stanwyck spoke warmly of the pioneers who opened the West to settlement. In her words, "all the immigrants coming over on the covered wagons and atop the trains, the little Jewish peddler with his calicos and gingham on his back, the good men, the bad men, they all made this country."¹⁰ To

The Tall Men featured Jane Russell—pictured with Robert Ryan—and Clark Gable in a tale about a cattle drive—with Indian fights, a blizzard, and the customary battle between the male characters over the woman. *Courtesy 20th Century Fox Film Corporation and Alameda Newspaper Group.*

In *High Noon* (1952), Grace Kelly played Amy Kane, a woman in conflict with her husband—a frontier peace officer played by Gary Cooper—because of his willingness to use violence in defense of public order and personal honor. Amy represented the domestic civilizer stereotype assigned to many women in films. Pictured with Kelly is Gary Cooper. *Courtesy United Artists Corporation and Pacific Film Archives.*

In *The Lady Eve*, Barbara Stanwyck played a con artist who, despite falling in love with the victim of her scheme, remains in charge of the situation at all times. This attribute of dominance was found in many of the roles Stanwyck played, and was a quality typically present in her characters. Here she is pictured with co-star Henry Fonda. *Courtesy Universal City Studios, Inc., and Pacific Film Archives.*

Stanwyck, westerners were America's aristocracy and the heroes and heroines America's royalty. Little wonder that Ruby Stevens, starting out with little but her natural talent, would aspire to become part of that royal western family.

Annie Oakley marked Stanwyck's first film in the genre of which she would someday be queen. Directed by George Stevens and cast opposite Preston Foster and Melvyn Douglas, Stanwyck played a winsome if accommodating tomboy sharpshooter signed on by the manager (Douglas) of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. A crack shot, Annie shows up world champion Toby Walker (Foster), who is "scornful of shooting against a half-baked kid, and a girl at that," until it is suggested that she should be the star of the show and Foster should

seek another job.¹¹ By now romance has blossomed between the two, but Foster's ego is on the line, and Annie backs down, deliberately missing her target during one of their performances.

Throughout this mildly amusing film, Stanwyck wavers between believing in her superior abilities and wanting to maintain a relationship with Foster, a relationship shaped by deference, not dominance. As Annie, Stanwyck is sweet, vulnerable, charming, and agreeable, hardly the strong, assertive woman she would become in future Western roles. At the same time she was shooting the film, she was undergoing a difficult period in her personal life because of her divorce from Frank Fay. Always a private person, the actress endeavored to keep her private life separate from her public life.

To cope with her personal disappointment, she diverted her energy to her career.

Four years and her first Academy Award nomination later, Stanwyck starred as Molly Monahan, the Irish “spitfire” daughter of a railroad engineer in Cecil B. DeMille’s epic, *Union Pacific* (1939). In this saga of the struggle to build the transcontinental railroad, Stanwyck is the postmistress of “End of Track,” the town that moves westward with the railroad’s progress. Serving as the spunky, good woman stereotype, she is pursued by two competing suitors: Joel McCrea, the troubleshooter sent out from Washington; and Robert Preston, the gambler determined to stop him. Stanwyck is the mediator, the facilitator who unites East and West, and in the process, herself with McCrea. Despite her sauciness, Molly is still “tamed enough” to be a suitable match for the hero, and as mediator further fulfills the civilizer role.

One of the most popular hits of a blockbuster year in films that saw the release of *Stagecoach*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, *Union Pacific* marked the beginning of Stanwyck’s career as a stuntwoman. Though filmed in black and white, the movie had plenty of color—and action. The list of DeMille-style events included two spectacular train wrecks, a mail-car robbery, an Indian massacre, and numerous saloon brawls and horseback chases through wild Wyoming. “That makes *Union Pacific* the largest conglomeration of thrills and cold-blooded murder since *Pauline was in Peril*,” reported the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.¹² “Pauline,” however, held her own, leaping off and on box-cars, chasing (and catching) a wagon, and battling attacking Indians, prompting her co-star McCrea to note that Stanwyck was involved “in everything. She is fearless and has more guts than most men.”¹³ Unlike many other female stars, Stanwyck prided herself on doing her own stuntwork and continued to do so during the filming of “The Big Valley” in the 1960s. For her courage and bravery, the actress gained the admiration and respect of film crews and co-stars alike throughout her career.

Stanwyck’s next Western, *The Great Man’s Lady* (1942), allowed her much latitude in her stunts. This Western was one of Stanwyck’s favorites because of the challenge the role presented. Physically demanding, the script called for her to slide

down bannisters, elope on horseback, get married on the prairie in a rainstorm, shoot and dress rabbits, throw crockery, and survive a flood in which her twin babies drowned. Stanwyck thrived on action and always welcomed it in her work.

Sometimes this determination on her part caused unexpected consequences for other cast members. For example, while working with veteran actor Walter Huston on the set of *The Furies* in Tucson in 1950, Stanwyck decided to do a dangerous riding scene herself although a double was available. Although not eager to do so, Huston agreed to do his own riding as well, because he was not going to be outdone by a woman.¹⁴ Actor and actress became close while making this movie, and Huston’s

Barbara Stanwyck, dressed as a frontier heroine, dances with newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst at a costume party hosted by Hearst at his beach house in 1938. Courtesy Marc Wanamaker, *Bison Archives, Hollywood*.

death shortly after filming was completed deeply saddened all the cast and crew.

Stanwyck's doing her own stunt work frequently made directors nervous. In *The Moonlighter* (1953), a poorly received, low-budget, 3-D Western, director Roy Rowland recounted a scene in which the heroine tumbled down a waterfall into a fast-moving river in the High Sierra: "She was capable of doing her own stunt work and completely unafraid. She always wanted to do her stunts, but we could not risk the possibility of an accident. Barbara understood this, but she still pleaded."¹⁵ She got her opportunity when her stunt woman was not available to shoot the waterfall scene. Although bruised from the many rocks she encountered on her plunge into the river—on her back, on her side, on her stomach—Stanwyck never complained or held up the film. This air of professionalism and dedication characterized her entire career.

One other dramatic action scene, one in which she traded bullets with Ward Bond, helped "save" this film for Stanwyck. The reaction of a reviewer to this scene revealed gender expectations in the 1950s: "Stanwyck, stylishly thin and looking mighty small beside a horse, fights it out with rifles with Ward Bond and wins." The reviewer also noted that, "This, as anyone who has ever seen a Western knows, is practically impossible. Bond may lose a screen battle here and there but never to a wisp of a woman with rifles at fifty yards."¹⁶ Such action was unexpected to moviegoers because it exceeded cultural prescriptions for women in Western film. Although Stanwyck carried it off well, this scene apparently caused audiences to "fidget a bit."¹⁷

The actress's physical endurance on the set brought high praise from both Ronald Reagan, Stanwyck's co-star in *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954), and the Blackfeet Indians who appeared in the movie filmed in their homeland near Glacier National Park. Reagan recounted a bathing scene in a mountain lake where the water temperature was in the mid-forties. Although there was a double available, Stanwyck knew that her face should be seen, rather than that of her double, shot from a distance. "She came out blue, but did not hesitate to do another take," reported the cameraman.¹⁸ The Indians were so impressed with Stanwyck's

While Barbara Stanwyck is perhaps best remembered for her portrayal of tough, strong-minded ranchwomen clad in hat and boots, she was able to carry that independent spirit over into non-western roles as well. Here she is pictured in *The Lady Eve* (1940). Courtesy ABC Visual Communication and Alameda Newspaper Group.

stamina and bravery that they gave her their tribe's most revered name, "Princess Many Victories," and made her a member of their Brave Dog Society, citing her "very hard work—rare for a white woman."¹⁹ Stanwyck followed this experience with other demanding riding scenes and stunt work in *The Maverick Queen* (1956) and *Forty Guns* (1957).

Although Stanwyck was one of the few major female stars to risk injury in action scenes, some B Western actresses were doing similar stunts. Betty Miles, for example, wrestled a gun away from her co-star in *The Return of Daniel Boone* (1941) and climbed onto a runaway stage in *Sonora Stagecoach* (1944).²⁰ But Stanwyck's developing reputation

included more than stunt work; her choice of roles clearly shaped her style. She went beyond the heroines in B movies who, in the 1940s, gradually were moving away from dependent daughters and submissive ranchwives. Stanwyck became the prototype of the spunky ranchwoman who could ride the range and run the ranch as well as the wranglers, predating Jane Fonda's various Western roles in the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ As a result, a great part of Stanwyck's appeal came from her ability to engage in adventures usually assigned to men. Equally appealing were her grit and determination, the result of having grown up independently. This strong sense of independence is apparent in many of her Western roles, including Molly Monahan in *Union Pacific*, Sierra Nevada Jones in *Cattle Queen of Montana*, and Kit Banion in *The Maverick Queen*.

Yet this public image is frequently in conflict with the private Barbara Stanwyck, who placed great value on the traditional roles of wife and mother. Perhaps because her formative years lacked a fully functioning family situation, Stanwyck developed an urgent need to create a stable family in her adult years. She was deeply disappointed when her marriage to Frank Fay failed in 1935, leaving her with recurring custody battles over their adopted son Dion, then three years old. Her second marriage, to actor Robert Taylor in 1939, also ended in divorce after thirteen years of struggle to maintain a marriage as well as two thriving movie careers. Like many women in later decades, Stanwyck found herself caught between the worlds of domesticity and career. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Stanwyck credited her work, not her private world, with providing meaning to her life. "My work is responsible for all the good things that have come into my life . . .," she remarked late in the 1950s. "I feel most completely alive when I'm starting a new picture."²²

Quite in contrast to her personal life is the "stand-by-your-man" role she played in *The Great Man's Lady* (1942), made during her marriage to Taylor. As Hannah Semplar, the thirty-three-year-old actress ages from sixteen to 109. Told in a series of flashbacks over a one-hundred-year period, the movie is a classic paean to the theme of woman's self-sacrifice. Devoted to her husband Ethan Hoyt (Joel McCrea) and to his dream of building a city in

the wilderness, Hannah places his needs before hers, sublimating her desires to his. As a pioneer bride, she fiercely protects her husband and shields him from those who would interfere with his goals. But when he attempts to manipulate the townspeople over the coming of the railroad, Hannah sadly recognizes his moneygrubbing ways and leaves him. Thinking her dead, Hoyt remarries, and rather than blemish his career by reappearing in his life, Hannah sacrifices herself to obscurity.²³

Stanwyck's personal life did not mirror Hannah Semplar's self-sacrifices. Instead, the Stanwyck-Taylor marriage underwent difficult times during the 1940s, when Stanwyck's popularity seemed to decline. Still, she and Taylor, to all appearances, remained the happy Hollywood couple despite frequent separations because of professional requirements. Fan magazines touted the stars' seeming devotion to one another and their "perfect" Hollywood-style marriage, much as they would the Janet Leigh-Tony Curtis marriage in the 1950s. In reality, great differences separated the two stars that apparently could not be reconciled. For example, although Taylor loved to fly airplanes and ride motorcycles, Stanwyck disliked both and preferred to spend what little time they had together at home. More serious problems included rumors of Taylor's dalliances away from home and Stanwyck's need for control in the marriage. Finally unable to deny their unhappiness, the couple announced their divorce late in 1950.

Coincidentally, *The Furies*, released the same year, mirrored some of the emotions Stanwyck had experienced in her marriage. Ambition, revenge, jealousy, and passion color this dark, moody Western set on a New Mexico ranch. Walter Huston plays a self-made cattle baron; Stanwyck is his iron-willed daughter. The two actors are well matched in principles, capabilities, and drive. Having no intention of sharing her father's affections with her new rival, Judith Anderson, Stanwyck throws a pair of scissors at her during her first visit to the ranch. Initially, Huston admires his daughter's pluck and accedes to her wishes, reinforcing the stereotype of the manipulative, dominant female. In time, however, the love between father and daughter turns to hatred after the cattle baron hangs her friend, a leader of a group of squatters

Barbara Stanwyck was quick to credit acting as the source of stability and happiness in her life. "My work is responsible for all the good things that have come into my life," she commented in the late 1950s. This *Los Angeles Examiner* photograph was taken in October 1937. Courtesy Hearst Newspaper Collection, University of Southern California Library.

on their ranch, appropriately named "The Furies." Stanwyck then teams up with a gambler (Wendell Corey), though she "admits that she doesn't like being in love but capitulates when that man does come around," and together they attempt to force her father into bankruptcy.²⁴ Despite the viciousness of Stanwyck's character in this film, she is brimming with energy, her riding is strong, and she is comfortable in her western surroundings.²⁵

Stanwyck completed six westerns in the 1950s, and in each she portrayed a clear-headed, hard-driven woman intent on keeping either her land,

her child, her saloon, or her man. Sometimes she must become the villain to do so, as in *The Violent Man* (1954). In this film, she plays a scheming ranchwife in love with her disabled husband's brother. She is unable to save her land or be with the man she wants in this violent melodrama, but that does not stop her from trying.²⁶

As Sierra Nevada Jones in *Cattle Queen of Montana*, Stanwyck is a rancher's daughter who is determined to file on her deceased father's land. After trailing a herd of cattle from Texas to Montana, she runs into competition from a land-grabbing local villain. Overcoming a weak script, Stanwyck holds her own against both the villain and local Blackfeet Indians who side with the villain. Here she goes beyond the traditional woman-as-civilizer role; she can take care of herself more than adequately, and when she uses a gun, she is doing what the first men on the frontier did—establishing order. But in this film she is not acting entirely on her own, for she received her mission from a man, her father, who filed the claim in her name and then brought her to Montana the following year. Frequently in Westerns, the female provides the motivation for the action rather than initiates it. In this film, her father's death sanctions her actions in retaining the family land. Still, she does not accomplish her goal alone. Ronald Reagan is the mysterious gunman and government undercover agent who helps her recover the land and vanquish the Indians. After the last battle he remarks, "You have all you want now," to which she replies, "Including you?" This simple ending reflects the mores of the 1950s, when the heroine, even one as competent as Sierra Nevada Jones, is not fulfilled without a man/husband to complete her life.

In 1956, Stanwyck starred opposite Barry Sullivan in *The Maverick Queen*, a title she earned by rounding up stray cattle—mavericks—and branding them as her own. As Kit Banion, Stanwyck also owns the Maverick Saloon, most of the town, and works closely with the Wild Bunch—very closely, since she is in love with Sundance (Scott Brady). A love triangle soon develops, however, when she falls in love with a new faro dealer (Sullivan) she has hired. But he proves to be a Pinkerton detective on the

trail of the Wild Bunch. The climax to this weak Western comes when Kit dies in Sullivan's arms after an earlier speech in which she tells him that, despite her Virginia upbringing, she is not "fit" for him. By the standards of the day, the bad woman cannot have the hero, and she has become the bad woman by virtue of her maverick business dealings, although she "did what she had to do to get where she is."²⁷

Stanwyck and Sullivan co-starred in another Western in the 1950s, *Forty Guns* (1957). Samuel Fuller wrote, produced, and directed this violent film, initially called *Woman with a Whip*—a title that symbolized Stanwyck's determination to be her own master. Again, Stanwyck plays an outlaw woman, a "stallion-riding leader of a band of hired

gunmen" who go everywhere with her. And, as the movie's title song reveals, "There was something about her since she was sixteen that attracted the men to the Maverick Queen, most dangerous woman the West's ever seen!"²⁸ When the U.S. Marshal (Sullivan) and his brother (Gene Barry) arrive to establish law and order in Cochise County, Arizona, Stanwyck is less than friendly. Soon, however, an attraction develops, based on opposition to one another, and this attraction dooms their lives and leads to the film's final dramatic confrontation.²⁹

When the marshal jails Stanwyck's brother (John Ericson), she and her forty gunmen ride into town to free him. Ericson then kills Barry on his wedding day, provoking Sullivan to kill him. In the closing

Barbara Stanwyck, center, discusses preparations for an awards program with attorney Bernard S. Jefferson, Urban League board president, left, and Wesley R. Brazier, Urban League executive director. Stanwyck was a presenter at the April 1956 ceremony. *Courtesy Hearst Newspaper Collection, University of Southern California Library.*

While filming *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954), Barbara Stanwyck braved the icy waters of a mountain lake during a bathing scene, foregoing a stunt double so that the cameraman could shoot her at close range. Such professionalism and determination not only won the admiration of co-star Ronald Reagan but also earned her the respect of the Blackfeet Indians who appeared in the movie. They were so impressed by her tenacity that they made her a member of their Brave Dog Society, citing her "very hard work—rare for a white woman." Courtesy RKO Radio Pictures, Inc., and Arts Special Collections, UCLA.

battle, Ericson uses his sister as a shield, but Sullivan, ignoring his personal feelings toward Stanwyck, shoots them both, killing Ericson. The original script called for Sullivan to kill both Stanwyck and Ericson, but the studio objected, and she was only wounded instead. The final scene finds Sullivan leaving town and Stanwyck, humbled, running after him. Again, because of stringent cultural prescriptions for acceptable female behavior,

the bad woman cannot win the good man, so despite her prowess, this heroine is left loveless. American film critics denounced this picture but Europeans applauded it, and it possibly served as an inspiration for the violence of the Sergio Leone-style "spaghetti Westerns" of the 1960s.³⁰

Stanwyck's next Western took the form of a captivity narrative that explored the sensitive issue of racial mixing. "Go ahead and hate me, Hook" ran

ABC's "The Big Valley," which debuted in 1965, featured Barbara Stanwyck as Victoria Barkley, the matriarch of a wealthy San Joaquin Valley family in 1870s California. The role allowed Stanwyck to bring her characterization of the independent western woman from films to television, while rejecting the notion that she was trying to be female version of Ben Cartwright, patriarch of the "Bonanza" clan. *Courtesy ABC Visual Communication and Alameda Newspaper Group.*

the storyline on posters for *Trooper Hook*, released in 1957. "Hate me because I saved myself from Apache torture . . . because I gave their chief a son!"³¹ In this film, her last Western on the big screen, Stanwyck moved away from the dominating, villainous female role and played a woman whom whites scorned because she was captured by Apache Indians and subsequently gave birth to a son. As Cora Sutliff, Stanwyck is a brave, determined woman whose love for her son gives her the strength to face, and live down, the disapproval of a prejudice-driven community. Joel McCrea, her leading man for the sixth time in her movie career, plays Hook, a cavalry sergeant who "rescues" her and returns her to her husband. Upon her return, both her husband and the townspeople shun her for becoming the sexual partner of the Apache

chief rather than killing herself. Her only hope for compassion and understanding comes from the tolerant Hook, with whom, after her husband's death, she eventually finds love. Although she clearly deserved the community's respect for enduring her captivity, the climate of the 1950s was not conducive to sympathy or understanding of the issue of miscegenation.³²

Although *Trooper Hook* was Stanwyck's last feature-length Western film, she did not forsake her favorite genre. Then over fifty years old, she was well aware of the liability, in American culture, of aging, but was adamant that she still had something to contribute to her profession. Mindful by the mid-1950s of the possibilities of acting for television, she conceived the idea of a Western series starring a woman, but she could not convince the networks to offer one. "They want action shows and have a theory that women don't do action," Stanwyck angrily retorted. "The fact is, I'm the best action actress in the world. I can do horse drags and jump off buildings, and I have the scars to prove it."³³ By the fall of 1965, Stanwyck's lobbying for a Western series finally bore fruit, and she debuted as Victoria Barkley in ABC's "The Big Valley."

After forty years in film, often portraying the self-willed heroine, Stanwyck had a clear idea of how she wanted to play Victoria, the heroic matriarch of the Barkley clan. And it was not in velvet and lace but as "a real frontier woman, not one of those crinoline-covered things you see in most Westerns."³⁴ Before she accepted the role, she made sure that the producers understood her interpretation of the lead character. "I'm a tough old broad from Brooklyn," she told them. "Don't try to make me into something I'm not. If you want someone to tiptoe down the Barkley staircase in crinoline and politely ask where the cattle went, get another girl. That's not me." Nor was Barkley a "mother knows best" character; she was a woman who was willing to argue and disagree with her children. Despite her sexist language, Stanwyck's feminist leanings were clear in her interpretation of the script. As a result, in "The Big Valley" Stanwyck transferred to television the strong, independent Western heroine she had developed on the silver screen.

Set in the 1870s in California's San Joaquin Valley, the series centered on the powerful and wealthy Barkley family and their interactions with settlers in the surrounding area. Although initial reviews were lukewarm, the show improved and soon gained an enthusiastic following. As the widowed matriarch with three sons and one daughter, Stanwyck appeared in all but seven of 112 episodes. She either completely carried the segment, shared it with a variety of talented guest stars or some member of the family, or appeared briefly when someone else starred. Linda Evans appeared as Audra, the only Barkley daughter; Richard Long played Jarrod, the oldest son and a lawyer; Peter Breck played Nick; and Lee Majors was Heath, the illegitimate son of Victoria's late husband. Again ahead of the times, Stanwyck wanted Majors to play the widow's illegitimate son, but the network was horrified at the idea and retained the original casting of Majors as his father's bastard child.³⁵

A close family relationship developed among the cast. As Stanwyck had done with others throughout her career, she made a special effort to help the less-experienced Evans and Majors. Under the actress's nurturing guidance, both novices improved their acting skills and came to love and respect their mentor. Evans, who would become a television superstar for her role in "Dynasty" in the 1980s, grew especially fond of Stanwyck. She said of Stanwyck's effect on her career: "She taught me the most important thing in my career, which is to be a professional . . . and when I work with people, they always say 'you can tell who taught you about the business because you're very professional.' I'm very grateful to her for that."³⁶ The special affection that developed among "The Big Valley" cast members was important to Stanwyck. Here, late in her life, was the sense of family that had eluded her. Understandably, her disappointment was keen when the series was canceled in 1969, and "The Big Valley" set no longer served as her surrogate home.

The Barkley heroine was a significant role for Stanwyck. It was the first and only adult Western featuring a woman who went beyond the limited roles of saloon singer, prostitute, spunky ranchwoman, pioneer wife, or some other variation of the good woman/bad woman dichotomy.³⁷

Victoria Barkley was Stanwyck at her strongest—clear-headed, capable, loving, and strong. She loved the role and gave it her utmost, winning an Emmy for her performances in 1966 and additional nominations in 1967 and 1968. But she insisted that she was no "female Ben Cartwright" and took exception to reviewers who frequently compared the Barkley clan to the Cartwrights of NBC's equally popular "Bonanza" series. "Our family is much stronger," she insisted. "Our family behaves like any normal family. We fight, argue, discuss things. . . . The woman I'm playing has plenty of battles with her boys. She's a very vital person. So are her sons. They have minds of their own."³⁸ Despite Stanwyck's protestations, the two series were indeed similar, since both starred lone parents who were ready with advice and guidance for their grown children and occasionally enjoyed an adventure or romance on their own.³⁹

Stanwyck's role in "The Big Valley" was her last as a Western heroine. The series was dropped in 1969 as a result of weak Nielsen ratings and the decline in popularity of the Western genre, although the program continued to air in syndication during the 1970s and can still be seen. The actress continued to perform in television specials into the 1980s and was nominated in 1983 for an Emmy for her outstanding performance as the wealthy, domineering matron, Mary Carson, in the mini-series "The Thorn Birds." Because she looked younger than her years, Stanwyck needed special makeup to "age" her appropriately for the role. Once again on horseback, Stanwyck kept up with the rest of the cast, despite her seventy-five years.⁴⁰ Her final TV appearance came in 1985, as Constance Colby Patterson in "Dynasty II: The Colbys," a weekly series that made its debut that November and reunited Stanwyck with her "Big Valley" daughter, Linda Evans.

Stanwyck lived out the few remaining years of her life quietly in her long-time Beverly Hills home. Just as she had refused to conceal either her age or her graying hair, the actress had come to terms with the inevitability of aging in youth-obsessed southern California. "You have to know when you've had your hour, your place in the sun," she advised. "To be old is death here. I think it's kind of silly. Be glad you're healthy. Be glad you

The cast of "The Big Valley" may have provided Barbara Stanwyck with a surrogate family during a time of personal sadness. A close relationship developed between Stanwyck and her fellow actors, and she made it a point to provide guidance for novices Linda Evans and Lee Majors, teaching them about professionalism in Hollywood. Pictured left to right are Peter Breck, Stanwyck, Evans, Majors, and Richard Long. *Copyright Four Star International, Inc. Courtesy Alameda Newspaper Group.*

can get out of bed on your own." Finally, at age eighty-two, Stanwyck followed longtime friends and sometime rivals, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, in death, succumbing to congestive heart failure on January 20, 1990. At her request, no funeral service was held, and the actress was buried quietly and without fanfare.⁴¹

Throughout her long and illustrious career, Barbara Stanwyck maintained a public persona that masked a complex, private person. She became one of Hollywood's greatest stars although she failed to win the profession's highest accolade, an Oscar. In her own inimitable fashion, Stanwyck explained away her disappointment. "I've had my time and it was lovely. I'm grateful for it. Now I have to move aside and make room for somebody else. I'm not jealous of anybody. Well, I take it back. Maybe Miss Hepburn because she won three academy awards. But sing no sad songs for Barbara Stanwyck. What the hell! Whatever I had, it worked, didn't it?"⁴² From a street-tough city kid, she grew into a versatile and accomplished

actress on the strength of her roles as aggressive, determined women. In many ways, Stanwyck lived out roles on the big screen that ordinary women might have emulated but for cultural constraints that prevented them from doing so.

Throughout her career, a tension existed between the strong Western women she so often portrayed in film and her private life. Her film roles mirror, in great part, her longstanding need for security and independence. Two divorces and a continually unhappy relationship with her son Dion Fay seemed to reinforce her determination to succeed.⁴³ How much of this personal unhappiness accounts for the strong roles she chose is unclear, but the parallels are suggestive.

Like many women of today, Barbara Stanwyck struggled to balance her private and professional life, to come to a place where domestic and career responsibilities could peacefully coexist. On the one hand, Stanwyck's roles mirrored her apparent need for security and independence. On the other, her roles hid a vulnerability to the demands of her work and the cultural limitations placed on the lives of most women of her time. The photo is from *The Lady Eve* (1940). Courtesy Universal City Studios, Inc., and Pacific Film Archives.

Barbara Stanwyck, nominated for four Academy Awards during her career, was passed over for the honor each time. She never expressed any regrets publicly, however. In 1982, the the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gave her a special Oscar as a tribute to her lifelong achievements in film. *Courtesy ABC Visual Communication and Alameda Newspaper Group.*

In her Western roles, then, Stanwyck was far more than a faint-hearted heroine waiting for the hero to rescue her. Although she was not quite the totally independent woman who appeared in the 1970s, personified in the films of Jane Fonda such as *Comes a Horseman* and *The Electric Horseman*, she represented the necessary bridge between the submissive good woman stereotype and Fonda's assertive women. Clearly, she was a forerunner to Fonda and as such, served as an important role model for other actresses. One of the many interpreters of Western heroines—Maureen O'Hara, Joanne Dru, and Jean Arthur are others—Stanwyck took the civilizer role and expanded it beyond the standard approach. Also contributing to her success was her ability as a stuntwoman, for in this activity she directed her energies and determination into physically demanding and sometimes dangerous scenes that commanded the respect of the public as well as of her co-stars and film crews. Doing her own stuntwork further enhanced her roles as strong, assertive women. Equally important was her contribution to television as the "founding mother"

of this image on the small screen, a role that contrasted sharply with the traditional wife and mother portrayed by such actresses as Harriet Nelson and Donna Reed. In "The Big Valley," Stanwyck pioneered the role she had developed in films, thus fulfilling one of her long-held dreams and illustrating the essence of her career as an uncommon heroine.

CHS

See notes beginning on page 96.

Sandra Schackel, assistant professor of history at Boise State University, is the author of the award-winning Social Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico, 1920–1940 (University of New Mexico Press, 1992). Her teaching and research fields include the history of American women and the American West, with special interest in popular culture. She contributed "Images of Women in Western Film" to Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines in Western Film (Indiana University Press, 1987).