



Not Just Another Dirty Rat, James Cagney Reveals Soft Side

David Damroth *Thursday, May 17, 2012 - 2:00pm*

There has been much in the news recently about James Cagney. Like so many children of the fifties and sixties, I grew up closely acquainted with his many movie roles. My favorites were *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, the film in which Cagney portrayed George M. Cohan, the famous musical composer, playwright, actor, singer and amazing dancer, and *The Public Enemy*, where Cagney donned the mantle of the tough guy gangster Tom Powers during Prohibition. The first was a touching depiction of a man who was an artist to his core. By contrast, in *The Public Enemy*, Cagney's character was almost indifferent to humanity as he struggled to the top of his world of gangsters living in their warren of crime.

For me Cagney's dancing in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* was pure inspiration to reach for achievement in life, while *The Public Enemy* made clear the price paid when ignoring the greater good of a sound and supportive society.

I spent all my summers on the Vineyard where we focused on the natural world, the connectedness of a West Tisbury farm and a place where we knew so many fine people, many of whom had spent their entire lives cobbling together a living by hunting and fishing and other noble Island pursuits.

I was lucky enough to become a full-time resident in 1971, and for my first three years I worked for a Vineyard Haven contractor which led to a lifelong passion for woodworking.

I remember arriving at work on a Monday morning in the fall of 1971 or 1972, early as always, waiting to hear where I would be dispatched. The news of the morning that day was exciting. We would be going to James Cagney's Chilmark home which was in desperate need of a new roof. It never dawned on me that I would meet Mr. Cagney. All I heard about was how old the house was, and, as a lover of ancient things, my excitement mounted. Roofing is dangerous, tough work, and among other things entails staging the work area for safety. As we stripped the old shingles from the roof that day, we found boards so old they bore the handmade marks of the pit saws that had sliced each one from its mother log. I remember one short board that had the natural taper of a tree and was a stunning 39 inches wide. It had most likely been cut from a huge virgin

growth tree. While working on old houses, I have always felt a strong connection to those who worked on the same house centuries before me. Each mark of the saw or handmade nail driven hundreds of years before was my bond to the spirits of these long-gone men.

The crew I worked with was special. Some had been fishermen, others farmers. They were used to the rigors of Island life. A number of them were survivors of World War II. They told personal tales of the Battle of the Bulge, where men tied each other to trees to avoid falling asleep on the ground or simply to avoid freezing to death. Others had not gone to war but endured the difficulties of fishing in the unpredictable dangerous waters of Georges Bank or beyond. These men knew what tough was.

There was often nonstop chatter on the job as the work got done. On this day the chatter focused on James Cagney and his relationship to each one of those men even though none had ever met him. At 18 it was often hard for me to find a place of equal footing in a discussion; however, my exposure to Cagney through his movies gave me a leg up on that day and I chimed in. We all had an observation or meaningful connection to some aspect of Cagney's work and through that to his life. There was none more powerful than our common bonds and love of Martha's Vineyard.

It was near coffee time when I saw a person way across the field by the barn. Thinking we were working in the middle of nowhere, I was surprised to see anyone.

The chatter quickly died away as someone quietly said, "That is him." No one dared to get down off that roof — no one except me. In that moment I knew if I did not get down and walk across that field I would always harbor some regret. I climbed down from the roof and approached Mr. Cagney. He was much older than the images in my memory. I introduced myself and quite suddenly found myself immersed in the conversation of a lifetime. He asked about me and gave me an opportunity to talk about myself. I spoke about the tough daily routine of my work, often in extreme cold or heat. I recall the interest in his eyes as he began to share recollections of his own life, including his humble beginnings in the Lower East Side of New York city, never once mentioning his Hollywood stardom. He told me about how his mother had prepared a sandwich of chicken fat for his school lunch each day.

I was the low man on the work totem pole and was acutely aware that I needed to get back to the roofing job. He knew it too, and our conversation came to a close. I thanked him and turned to walk back to the house and the work of reshingling his roof. And then in a moment I will never forget, he called to me and I turned to look back at him. "Young man," James Cagney said, "all you need to get through this life is guts. Remember that!"

Sadly, I never saw him again.

David Damroth lives in Chilmark.

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