

A.P.O.V.*

*Alumni Point of View

Cheesecake and Apple Pie

The short career and troubled life of Bettie Page.
By JOHN BLOOM, BA'75 (A.K.A. JOE BOB BRIGGS)

“LET’S GO GET SOME PEABODY girls,” we would say, on dateless nights in Barnard Hall, and what we meant by that was, “Let’s go raiding across 21st Avenue, where they aren’t so stuck up and won’t treat us like freshmen.” The concept of the Peabody Girl, as it took shape in our imagination, was a sweet fresh-faced thing, all sandals and sweaters, apple cheeks and giggles ... who would have wild animal sex with us. This was in stark contrast to the Vanderbilt Coed, who wouldn’t have any kind of sex with us or, for that matter, talk to us.

Like most freshman illusions, this one was based on grossly exaggerated conclusions from highly unreliable evidence. As far as I know, no one ever encountered the archetypal Peabody Girl, and if he did, he kept all knowledge of her to himself.

But Bettie Page, BA’44, was the mythic Peabody Girl. Unfortunately, she’d already come and gone 30 years before my time at Vanderbilt. Bettie had passed through Peabody in the early 1940s. She was known for being sweet, shy, beautiful and studious, and then within six years of graduation, she had become the hottest nude model in the history of sleazy photography. The men in the “amateur camera clubs” who paid \$10 each to photograph her in high heels and nothing else wouldn’t have known what a Peabody Girl was, but she was the per-



PAUL HARRING

sonification of what we’d been looking for—all cheery smiles and playfulness, offering a perfect body packaged in killer stiletto heels and a naughty bustier, with an attitude that said “whenever you’re ready, boys.”

The original “wink wink” girl actually had her heart set on attending the mostly male Vanderbilt, which at the time offered few full scholarships for which women could compete. One of those was always awarded to the valedictorian at Nashville’s Hume-Fogg High School, and Bettie had labored assiduously to make straight A’s so she could land the top

spot. A cruel art teacher changed the course of history when she penalized Bettie for skipping a two-hour lab in order to attend a rehearsal for the senior play, and Bettie’s only B resulted in a grade point average of 97.19—just .25 short of her goal. She was salutatorian instead, which entitled her to the \$100 Daughters of the American Revolution schol-

arship ... to Peabody. Her commencement address was titled “Looking Forward,” and although no text of the original speech has survived, I must assume that her gaze into the future did *not* include bondage fetish films and a subpoena from Sen. Estes Kefauver’s congressional committee investigating obscenity. (A Tennessee senator persecuting a Peabody Girl! Scandalous! Actually, I have an explanation for this: The man went to UT.)

But Vanderbilt’s loss was soft-core pornography’s gain. Bettie was a blue-eyed brunette, 5-foot-5, 36-23-35, and she’d been teaching herself how to dress like a movie star ever since she was a pre-teen.

She thrived under the radar at the mostly female Peabody, commuting to campus, working on the yearbook, acting in school plays, and assisting Professor Alfred Leland Crabb, who taught in the education department. Her hopes of teaching were dashed at her first student-teaching assignment. When she arrived in the classroom, the high school boys assailed her with wolf whistles and catcalls and became so uncontrollable that she realized she had a handicap she’d never be able to overcome. She was just too damned sexy.

Today Bettie Page is equaled only by Marilyn Monroe in her status as a sex symbol, and she’s arguably even more popular among women than men. Since the year 2000, the official Bettie Page Web site (www.bettiepage.com) has received 626 million hits.

Bettie also has attracted a ton of academic attention. Madeleine Hamilton of the University of Melbourne has gone so far as to say that she’s at “the crux of the porn debate” among feminists. That debate breaks down on familiar lines—Bettie is either a tool of male exploitation or a symbol of female empowerment—but what’s interesting is that Bettie Deconstruction splits about 50/50 along those lines, with a slight edge toward empowerment, even among critics of porn. The same women who see Marilyn as a child-woman fashioned into a playtoy for men regard Bettie as the mis-



tress of her own universe—odd, since the uneducated Marilyn made millions and roamed among the literati, while studious bibliophile Bettie worked on the cheap for the raincoat crowd, never received a royalty, and labored in obscurity. Obviously, the academics are looking at the iconography of her persona more than the details of her life.

Bettie loved to take her clothes off—years later she reminisced about it as liberating and joyful—and that exuberance quickly attracted the attention of Richard Harrison, the publishing impresario who turned out cheesecake magazines with names like *Wink*, *Flirt*, *Beauty Parade*, *Gaze*, *Eyeful* and *Titter*. Bettie’s “coming out” was on Harrison’s arm at

Bettie Page is equaled only by Marilyn Monroe in her status as a sex symbol. Since the year 2000, the official Bettie Page Web site has received 626 million hits.

New York’s Beaux Arts Ball in 1951, where she appeared in fishnet stockings, impossibly high heels, twin telephone dials over her breasts—and little else.

In the same city where Marilyn was making liaisons with Elia Kazan, Joe Dimaggio and Arthur Miller, Bettie’s father confessor became Irving Klaw, publisher of *Movie Star News*, who specialized in nude photos distributed by subscription to “camera club” members, thereby eluding the obscenity laws of the day. The only place Bettie and Marilyn appeared on an equal level was in the pages of *Playboy* magazine, where both were Playmates of the Month. Bettie’s issue, in which she’s clad only in a Santa

cap, is second only to the Marilyn inaugural issue among collectors.

But the *Playboy* spread turned out to be the classiest job Bettie ever landed. Eventually, Irving Klaw and his sister Paula found a lucrative market in made-to-order fetish photos, most of them involving whips, ropes and black leather, that could fetch a premium when properly packaged. Bettie would end up making 50 stag loops and posing for thousands of pictures, most of them taken by Paula Klaw or Bunny Yeager. Today they are among the most downloaded images on the World-Wide Web.

But like Truman Capote’s protagonist in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, this Holly Golightly had both a dark secret past and a fear of public exposure. The sweet Peabody Girl had a childhood full of Tobacco Road drama, as her philandering redneck father moved the family from small town to small town through Tennessee, Texas and Oklahoma. He stole a car in Tulsa and drove the family to Nashville, where he was eventually sent to prison. After he got out, he bought a hardscrabble farm near Nashville, and that’s where the family was living when Bettie’s mother left him, angered by his impregnation of a neighbor’s daughter. For a while she was able to provide for all five children, but eventually she sent Bettie and one of her sisters to an orphanage. After a year Mom figured out a way to get them back home—but she’d allowed her ex to move into a vacant room. He used the opportunity to rape Bettie, at the age of 13, and then continue to molest her. To get away from him, Bettie became an incessant teenage volunteer, working at the community center and spending long hours at the library. School was her way out of hell. Classmates at Hume-Fogg voted her “Most Likely to Succeed.” Bettie’s perfect grooming, bright smile, and flirtatious ways with men were in part an attempt to cover up psychological scars.

Bettie rushed into marriage while a junior at Peabody, wedding a sailor who turned out to be jealous and possessive. After the marriage crumbled, Bettie set off on her cross-country idyll that ended in New York.

Given the sheer volume of her work, her career was remarkably short—just seven years, from 1950 to 1957, and only three or four doing her most famous work for Irving and Paula

continued on page 86

Commodore *continued from page 53*

Vanderbilt's gift, one of the largest philanthropic donations to that point in American history, commanded great attention. At the inauguration of Vanderbilt University in Nashville in October 1875, Charles Deems read aloud the benefactor's telegram of good wishes: "Peace and good-will to all men." Then, "with great tenderness of feeling," it was reported, the reverend quoted Scripture: "Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance of the sight of God." With that blessing the audience broke out into cheers.

No doubt, more than one of the Commodore's old antagonists snorted over newspaper accounts of the inauguration in Nashville. "Peace and good-will to all men," indeed! It was too much like the miraculous transformation of another hard-hearted businessman who had also spent some time with "spirits": Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' enormously popular *A Christmas*

Carol. But that was fiction. Could a real capitalist like Cornelius Vanderbilt truly change? Could he become, like Scrooge, "as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world"?

The Commodore would never be some real-life Scrooge, a dedicated philanthropist. His gift to Vanderbilt University resulted from a strange train of circumstances, an almost improbable run of luck.

But Vanderbilt University was not just an accident of marriage. Cornelius Vanderbilt, flinty, determined and calculating, did what he wanted to do. Marrying Frank, the Commodore knew she was different, knew she cared about religion and good deeds. The crafty veteran of so many stock manipulations surely realized what Frank was up to as she kept quiet about Woodhull and Claflin and lamented instead those flights of stairs and the needy men of the South.

No, the aging Commodore, eager to perpetuate his name, wanted it that way. So he and Frank danced a wonderful four-year marital gavotte that ended in the creation of Vanderbilt University.

It was a far better investment than he could have expected. Just about all the Commodore's other plans for immortality came to naught. His beloved New York Central Railroad no longer exists; his great family fortune is gone; hardly any male descendants, none of them famous, remain to carry on the family name. Instead, it is the former "Central University," with one of the great sports nicknames, the Commodores, that ensures the survival of the name Vanderbilt. ▼

This article is adapted from the inaugural Founder's Day Lecture presented March 16 by historian Michael McGerr at Vanderbilt University.

A.P.O.V. *continued from page 69*

Klaw. It all came to an end when Sen. Kefauver launched his obscenity investigation. Bettie was subpoenaed to testify and sat nervously for 16 hours in a Senate witness room, but was never called. The experience shocked her, though, and she told Klaw she wasn't having fun anymore.

If the first chapter in her adult life had been Holly Golightly, the second was more Frances Farmer. She ended up in a second marriage, to a Miami businessman named Harry Lear, but by this time she'd started to show signs of clinical schizophrenia. She became fanatically and eccentrically religious (telling her family there were seven gods and she was their prophet), strict to the point of cruelty with her stepchildren, and violent to herself and others. Charged with various crimes over a 10-year period—armed assault and attempted murder among them—she was hospitalized three times, the last time for 10 years in an institution for the criminally insane. When she was released, she was able to control the disease with medication, and her symptoms followed the normal course, lessening in intensity after menopause.

One fascinating aspect of the thousands

of articles written about Bettie is that hardly anyone looks at her history of mental illness—even though it raises questions about just what state of mind she was in from 1950 to 1957, when she was supposedly the world's most carefree nude model. (During one of her later episodes, she cried out that she needed to be punished by God for all her sins. This alternated with episodes during which she would decide she needed to kill somebody because God told her to do it.) At one point in the '60s, she moved back to Nashville and re-enrolled at Peabody, planning to get a master's degree in English, but she left after quarreling with a professor about some theological point. From then on, all her short educational stints were at Bible colleges.

All of this would be rich material for a psychologically complex Bettie Page film. Unfortunately, Mary Harron's recently released *The Notorious Bettie Page* is not that film. Harron ends Bettie's story in 1957, when she leaves New York, and thereby fails to grapple with the heart of the matter. Expertly portrayed by Gretchen Mol, the Bettie of the movie is the same Bettie rediscovered 20 years ago and raised to the status of a cult goddess. Hers is a war against prudery, economic

exploitation and faithless men. But isn't it possible that a war was going on within her own heart? What we're left with in the movie is the Bettie Cult. And if we were to analyze the tenets of that cult, they would be similar to the ones Herman Melville attached to Polynesian beauties in his early novels, to wit:

Bettie's naked insouciance is sex without guilt. Bettie's friendly smirk means she doesn't judge herself. Bettie's luminous blue come-hither eyes mean she doesn't judge me, either.

Bettie's simple pristine outfits mean she's the most beautiful woman in the world but doesn't know it. Bettie's willingness to do things other models won't do means she likes everybody, even the outcasts.

Bettie's playfulness means she can do any crazy thing ever imagined in the realm of the sexual subconscious and it will never be dirty. In fact, if there's one quality that defines Bettie Page, it's that she's so *clean*.

Bettie, in so many ways and to so many guys, was and is the perfect woman. Her fans might not be able to describe exactly what it was that she had, but *we* know, don't we?

She was the elusive Peabody Girl, come to life.