

James Stewart Backgrounder

Stewart was born May 20, 1908, in Indiana, PA, where his parents owned a hardware store. As a child, he took part in amateur theatrical productions and continued to act as a student at Princeton University, where he earned a degree in architecture in 1932. The lure of acting proved too great, however, and Stewart joined the University Players, a summer stock group headquartered in Massachusetts. Stewart and another member of the troupe, Henry Fonda, became lifelong friends.

After making screen tests with various movie studios, Stewart signed a contract with MGM. He made his film debut in 1934 and quickly became a star despite initial uncertainty about the kinds of roles he should play. Stewart won his first Oscar nomination for his performance in the title role of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939).

In Hollywood, Stewart played opposite such leading ladies as Carole Lombard in *Made for Each Other* (1939), Marlene Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again* (1939), and Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). For his performance in the latter film, Stewart won the Academy Award for “Best Actor.”

Stewart served in the United States Army Air Forces* during World War II, winning multiple decorations — the Distinguished Flying Cross with Cluster, three Air Medals with Clusters and the French Croix de Guerre with Palm. As a B-24 combat pilot and squadron commander, he flew 20 missions over Germany, including one over Berlin. He later retired as a brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve.

His first movie after the war was *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), a sentimental holiday favorite in which he portrayed George Bailey, a man who learns the true meaning of Christmas with the help of a guardian angel named Clarence. In *Harvey* (1950), Stewart played another signature role as Elwood P. Dowd, a martini-drinking “philosophizer” who believes he is always accompanied by a giant white rabbit.

Other highlights from this stage of Stewart's career include four movies — *Rope*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* — directed by Alfred Hitchcock, the “master of suspense,” who offered Stewart roles that gave him the opportunity to show less familiar sides of his personality. First, Stewart took the role of a teacher who solves a murder mystery in *Rope* (1948). As a photographer confined to a wheelchair in *Rear Window* (1954), Stewart had to rely on his facial and vocal expression to convey thought and emotion. In a *tour de force* performance, Stewart vividly communicated the torment of an itch under the cast on his leg. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), Stewart was a doctor drawn into a sinister web of intrigue. In *Vertigo* (1958), widely considered Hitchcock's masterpiece, Stewart played a man obsessed with a mysterious woman.

Stewart played a shrewd country lawyer in *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), and played a lawyer again in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a Western released in 1962. In the early 1970s, he tried his hand at television, first in a weekly situation comedy, *The Jimmy Stewart Show*, playing a professor of anthropology, and then as a lawyer in *Hawkins*.

James Stewart died on July 2, 1997. In addition to his “Best Actor” Oscar for *The Philadelphia Story*, Stewart won many other honors, including an honorary Oscar for lifetime achievement, awarded March 25, 1985. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in May 1985. In 1997, Princeton University honored Stewart by dedicating a film theater in his name.

* The United States Army Air Forces preceded the U.S. Air Force, established in 1947 as a separate branch of the military.

