

## **HOW CLARK GABLE SORTA, ALMOST COULD HAVE PAID A VISIT TO DOUGLAS LAKE....**

**.....MAYBE**

By Jan Huntley

Through the years, many interesting stories have circulated about unusual events, famous visitors, or even shocking happenings here at Douglas Lake. Most of them, not surprisingly, have turned out to be not quite what they were said to be. And the occasional one turned out to be a purely imaginative invention. In that latter category was the one about the British ship supposedly constructed on the lake that wound up being sunk because it was too large to make the voyage to Burt Lake via the Maple River. That brings us to the one about Clark Gable and his surprise visit to Douglas Lake one summer's day during the 1930s.

My mother was a major contributor to this one, and she repeated it gleefully many times during my childhood and thereafter. The substance of the tale was that Clark Gable, a movie idol of his day, had been visiting Mackinac Island in the mid-1930s, at which time he had made the acquaintance of one or more Douglas Lake residents. Since no names of these local residents were ever provided, however, the story was difficult to corroborate. The tale continued with a description of a promise purportedly made to this/these local resident(s) that the actor would have his pilot fly over the lake when he left Mackinac Island and would have him waggle the wings and buzz the cabin of his new friend(s) as a farewell salute. Had all gone according to plan, of course, there would not have been much of a story to tell. However, according to her, a miscommunication must have occurred. Instead of buzzing the north shore cabin where his new friends supposedly lived, the pilot had taken direct aim at the southern shore of the lake, where no one was expecting its arrival. The plane dropped from the sky and skimmed over the surface of the lake before waggling its wings and quickly elevating as it approached the shoreline. And in the window of the plane, according to Mother, was a man who looked very much like Clark Gable, waving enthusiastically. Only at the very last second did the plane shoot upward, barely missing the chimney of the cabin as it disappeared from view. At least, that was how the story went.

Over the years, I have looked for evidence that such an event could have ever taken place. Assuming that Clark Gable would only have been on Mackinac Island if he were involved in shooting a scene from one of his movies or promoting one of his films, I checked his film biography to no avail. There was no evidence that Mr. Gable had ever played a role in any film shot in the general area, let alone on Mackinac Island. Indeed, I could find no evidence that he had ever even been on Mackinac Island at any time during the 1930s. Nevertheless, Mother continued to insist that Clark Gable had waved at her from the window of his private plane as he flew past directly overhead at very low altitude.

Then it came to pass that while I was researching local history while preparing to write a different article, that I chanced upon this interesting passage in a story in *TIME Magazine* entitled "Sport: One Fresh, Two Salt." Therein the author described three significant yacht races taking place during the summer of 1936, one on the Great Lakes and the other two, ocean-based. That passage stated:

"In progress last week on Lake Michigan was the 29<sup>th</sup> running of the longest fresh-water yacht race in the world, the Chicago Yacht Club's famed Mackinac Race from Chicago up Lake Michigan, through hazardous Mackinac Straits to Mackinac Island. Sailing the 331-mile course and due to finish this week was the largest (42) fleet of yachts ever to participate. On hand to greet the winner were Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, Franchot Tone, Myrna Loy, Jean Harlow, and Harry M. Daugherty."<sup>1</sup>

Quite suddenly, the story acquired at least a scintilla of credibility, since it was clear from the magazine account that Clark Gable had, in fact, been staying on Mackinac Island in the mid-1930s, two facts consistent with Mother's recollection. Furthermore, it would not have been surprising, given the star-power of the famous names enumerated, that some Douglas Lake residents would have traveled to Mackinac Island to share in the glamorous events taking place that week. So the question becomes: did Clark Gable really fly down to Douglas Lake to say goodbye to his fellow celebrants? Quite possibly, since there is at least SOME verifying data available to help substantiate it. Therefore, this very intriguing tale has been elevated to the realm of a "definite maybe." Does this account jar loose some distant memory in anyone whose family was living on the northern shore of Douglas Lake on a summer's day in July of 1936?



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<sup>1</sup> "Sport: One Fresh, Two Salt," *TIME Magazine*, Monday, July 27, 1936.