

Earl Blackwell (left) and Ted Strong make glamor—other people's—pay off.

# They sell secrets

By Howard Whitman

Ever since a little white shingle reading "Celebrity Service" was hung outside a New York brownstone house next door to the night club El Morocco, there has been no end of confusion. Celebrities visiting El Morocco have inquired at the brownstone thinking the sign meant room service. Bobby sockers have knocked to ask, "Can you make me a celebrity?" One good-natured moron thought it was a place where you could rent celebrities by the hour.

Celebrity Service, of course, performs none of these functions. Today America has more celebrities than it can keep track of and Celebrity Service aims, simply, to keep track of them. For a price, it is prepared to tell its subscribers where Greta Garbo is hiding out, what Albert Einstein's address is in Princeton and how Elizabeth Arden spells her real name.

In its files are facts on some 50,000 famous people. From them you can learn that Moss Hart has an electric toothbrush, Helen Hayes is pigeon-toed, Mary Astor drinks ten cups of coffee a day, author Sally Benson is a grand-



**Lana Turner:** She prefers to sleep in satin nighties.

mother, Irving Berlin composes on a piano he bought for \$100, Lauritz Melchior loves to cook and singer Dick Haymes was born in Argentina.

Celebrity Service's office is a busy hodge-podge of files, cross-files, indices, cards, folders, stuffed pigeonholes, telephones, confidential memos, address books, private dossiers and fat envelopes. Navigating through all this are half a dozen girl operatives and the firm's two youthful owners, Earl Blackwell and Ted Strong.

Subscribers to Celebrity Service, who pay \$12.50 a month, receive a daily bulletin dealing chiefly with the movement of celebrities in and out of New York; they may also phone any time for special inside information. Each subscriber is required to name a maximum of two representatives for this "telephone consultation," and the consultants must identify themselves and be checked against the list.

During the week of atomic amazement following the bombing



**The Duchess of Windsor:** Her largest diamond weighs a round 40 carats.

of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Celebrity Service had 50 telephone consultations concerning the atom and its friends. Subscribers, among them two major press services, were caught short and phoned for the immediate whereabouts of Einstein, Vannevar Bush, James B. Conant and other scientists.

Humphrey Bogart is runner-up to the atom in amount of attention received in recent months.

Bogart, it seems, is elusive. Helen Menken, his first wife, phoned Celebrity Service once to ask where Bogart could be found. They gave her a phone number on the West Coast. Next day she called back to say she had phoned there and Bogart had left. Celebrity Service ferreted, finally got as far as Louis Bromfield. Speaking across the country to a Hollywood hotel, Strong asked Bromfield, "Could you help us on the whereabouts of Humphrey Bogart?"

"Yes, a little," Bromfield replied.



**Ray Milland:** He likes telephones. Until recently, he had 15 of them in his home.

“He’s sitting opposite me at the breakfast table.”

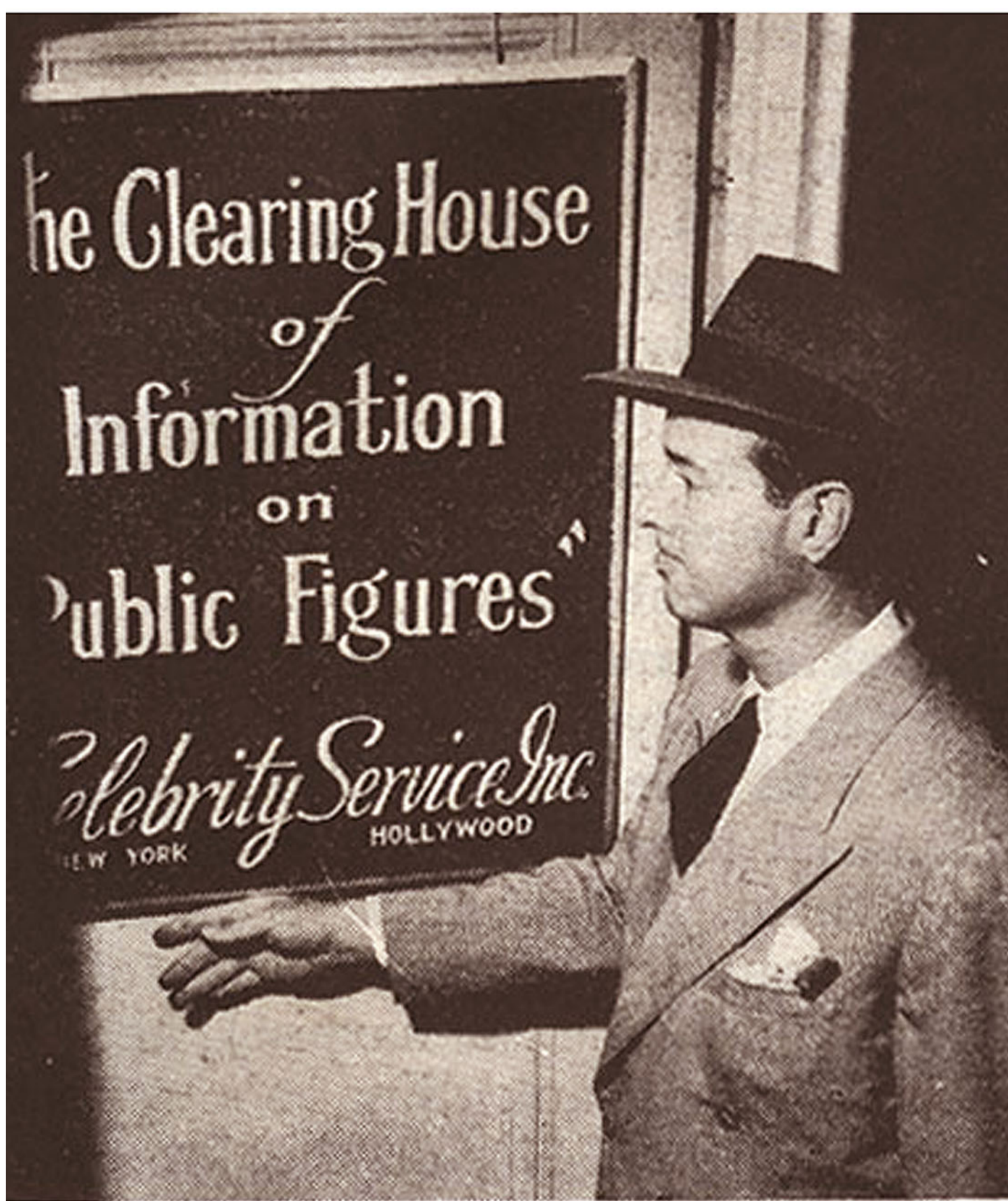
Not long afterward, Mayo Methot, Bogart’s third wife, called Celebrity Service to get the number of Helen Menken, Bogart’s first wife. This meant getting in touch with Bogart through Lauren Bacall, his fourth and present wife.

“It’s exasperating, but it’s part of the business,” shrugs Strong.

The FBI has five subscriptions to Celebrity Service. Not long ago it put Strong and Blackwell to their toughest test.

“We want to tail a certain big-shot musician. We don’t know his name. We just know he’s got a tour mapped out for Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston,” Celebrity Service was told.

They called up impresarios, agents, bookers and theatrical press agents, rounding up data on all personal-appearance tours scheduled for the next six months. They sifted the tours down to those which included Chicago, Philadel-



Earl Blackwell, a young man who has the answers, walks in to get a few of them.

phia and Boston; then to a mere handful which covered the three cities in that order. In this handful, the FBI found its man.

A query from the National Broadcasting Company, also a subscriber, stuck Celebrity Service for two hours and finally caused them to throw in the sponge. They searched for the whereabouts of a radio team known as "The Three Bums" until they had to give up.

"We're convinced there just isn't any such team," they announced, after checking every theatrical roster, agency and boarding house in New York.

"Oh, we didn't mean three special bums," NBC explained. "We just meant any three bums—you know, off the Bowery." A great number of expletives were repressed at that point, for in this business, even more than most, the customer is always right.

Earl Blackwell, president of Celebrity Service, is 34, a native of Atlanta. In 1932 he went to Hollywood with a crop of newcomers which included Robert Taylor and



In this crowded, bustling office are filed fascinating facts on 50,000 headliners.

Jean Parker. He played bit parts, then—on the advice of several directors—turned to playwriting. By 1937 he had completed something titled *Aries Is Rising*, which lasted two weeks on Broadway.

Meanwhile Ted Strong, who is also 34 and comes from Boston, was in New York trying to publish a novel. His luck was no better than Blackwell's.

The two met in their mutual frustration and, in 1938, conceived Celebrity Service. As a starter they went from office to office, mostly in the theatrical field, to sell their idea. The fruit of the first two months' operation was a telephone bill about two digits higher than their bank account. But by spring of 1939, Celebrity Service had caught on and the subscribers poured in.

Since then Celebrity Service has added two other enterprises. A weekly theatrical calendar tells Broadway what openings are being planned, what plays bought, what options taken. And a semi-annual



**Artur Rodzinski:** As relaxation, this symphony conductor raises goats.

“contact book” for strugglers in those fields gives names and phone numbers of good “contacts” in movies, the stage, night clubs, radio, newspapers, advertising, lecturing and publishing.

Blackwell and Strong have discovered that you cannot everlastingly trail celebrities without collecting all manner of curious facts about them. Now columnists phone to find out the musical tastes of Vicki Baum (she’s a harpist), the birthday of Frank Sinatra’s son (January 10, 1944) or the breed of Lily Pons’ dog (Lhasa Apso).

Are you interested in the nocturnal habits of the famous? Then let Celebrity Service inform you that Betty Grable and Harry James sleep in a double bed; that the Franchot Tones have a bed eight feet square; that Ray Milland sleeps in pajama tops only; that Paulette Goddard sleeps in the skin God gave her.

And that’s not all. Hedy Lamarr always has a dog, won’t live without one. General Eisenhower’s



**Betty Hutton:** She's one of Hollywood's better poker players.

Scottie, Teleg, was taken away from him and placed in quarantine for six months when Ike went to England to plan the invasion. Ike, by the way, read Western stories "for excitement" all through the Battle of Europe and carried a four-leaf clover with him from Normandy to Berlin.

The Duke of Windsor, when fidgety, smokes in short puffs and spansks his right thigh with his hand. Winston Churchill, during World War II, used to play with miniature tanks on the floor of 10 Downing Street.

Customers are always on Celebrity Service's neck to find out what celebrities are doing while they're not being celebrated. Well, John Dewey, the philosopher, likes to solve puzzles involving jig-saws and bent nails. Hattie Carnegie raises livestock. John D. Rockefeller Jr. goes ice skating. Tommy Dorsey plays with miniature trains. Dunninger goes into mental huddles with his 3,000 Buddhas. Kate Smith collects Dresden china.





**Tallulah Bankhead:** Unconventional at all hours, she sleeps in a sweater.

Gypsy Rose Lee plays with paper dolls, likes to can fruits and vegetables. Thomas Hart Benton, the artist, plays the harmonica.

Celebrity Service knows the ages of practically all our glamor women. Without batting a gray hair it can tell you that Gloria Swanson is 47, Elsa Maxwell 62, Lynn Fontanne 63, Mary Pickford 52, Loretta Young 32 and Barbara Stanwyck 38.

Occasionally some writer wants to know the subtlest approach to a certain headliner. Here again Celebrity Service can help.

To get close to Bette Davis, send her a dog, any dog, the day before the interview; she's a past president of Tail Waggers, an organization for homeless dogs. Lillian Hellman can be tantalized by the prospect of joining a new organization. Cornelia Otis Skinner's weak spot is Harriet Beecher Stowe. You must talk old automobiles to James Melton; he collects them.

Occasionally Celebrity Service gets special chores from subscribers.

## Celebrity Culture



**The Bogarts:** To reach wife No. 1, get in touch with wife No. 4.

An advertising agency sent in a check made out to Frances Gumm and asked if Strong and Blackwell could find any celebrity answering to that name. They promptly forwarded it to Judy Garland.

In 1943, Celebrity Service was asked what celebrities had babies that year. They came up with 82, including Rosalind Russell, Veronica Lake, Mrs. Joe Louis, Gene Tierney, Mrs. Charles Boyer and Mrs. Fred Snite Jr., wife of the man in the iron lung.

When Blackwell and Strong decided to keep track of celebrities, they resigned themselves to being anonymous. Recently they received an invitation from *Who's Who in America*, which wants to include them in the next edition.



**Anthony Eden:** He leaves torn, uneaten crusts of bread on his plate.



**Betty Grable:** She eats garlic and onions for her complexion.



**Katharine Hepburn:** She's an outstanding actress, an attractive, well-born, successful, independently wealthy woman—but she bites her fingernails.

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