

PHOTOPLAY

July, 1939



Lackadaisical

LOTHARIO

Beginning

THE LIFE

AND GOOD TIMES OF

JAMES STEWART



(Top) A boy's best friend—Jim's mother, with the four-year-old ruler of the Stewart homestead. (Above) Doddie and Ginny, seven-year-old Jim's pet names for his sisters Mary and Virginia

BY WILBUR MORSE, JR.

BOOOTH TARKINGTON might have created Jim Stewart. He's *Little Orvie* and *Billie Baxter* grown up, *Penrod* with a Princeton diploma.

The appeal of James Stewart, the shy, inarticulate movie actor, is that he reminds every girl in the audience of the date before the last. He's not a glamorized Gable, a remote Robert Taylor. He's "Jim," the lackadaisical, easy-going boy from just around the corner.

In the same way, the charm of Jim Stewart's life story, as it was unveiled for PHOTOPLAY by his family in the little country town of Indiana, Pennsylvania, by his closest cronies of school and college days and by the men and women who shared the struggles of his first years on Broadway and in Hollywood, is its stunning simplicity.

Jim Stewart is as American as chewing gum, marbles and Sunday-school picnics and the story of his life is a nostalgic saga of Main Street. The Jazz Age was at its height when he went away to prep school, a cynical sophistication was the approved manner when he was in college and later the artificial atmosphere of Broadway and Hollywood made acceptance of a creed of superficiality easy. Yet, through all these distracting influences, Jim Stewart remained essentially unspoiled, the roots of his character ever deep in the soil of substantial values.

And to appreciate fully the wholesomeness which distinguishes Jim Stewart today, it is necessary to trace those roots back to the small town from which he emerged.

Indiana is a brisk, busy little town of about 10,000 population in Western Pennsylvania, in the rolling foothills of the Alleghenies. A county seat and the shopping center of the mining and farming districts which encircle it, Indiana is near enough to Pittsburgh to keep the hayseed combed out of its hair, yet isolated enough from any metropolitan area to achieve an independent personality of its own.

HERE four generations of the Scotch-Irish family of Stewart have enjoyed success and substance as leaders in the business and social life of the town, leaving it only to march off to war, quietly, purposefully; returning without fanfare to the big brown-stoned hardware store of J. M. Stewart and Company which, since 1853, has stood like an impressive guardian at one end of the business block.

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Jimmy Stewart

PHOTOPLAY'S AUTHOR INVADES JAMES STEWART'S HOME TOWN AND RETURNS WITH THE MOST REVEALING LIFE HISTORY AND EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS WE HAVE PUBLISHED IN YEARS

It was to this hardware store Jim's grandfather, James Maitland Stewart, returned in Union blue after Grant had lit a cigar and accepted Lee's sword at Appomattox. And it was to this store, his tall, rangy son Alexander Stewart came home to carry on the family tradition, after strolling out of a senior classroom at Princeton to volunteer in the Spanish-American War.



Age: nine years, and—painful memories—not only piano lessons but spectacles!



A family portrait of the Stewarts—taken just before Captain Alec went off to France. Jim, at the age of ten, became man of the house and, to his family's amusement, he hasn't forgotten a certain habit formed then



Jim took the war seriously. He saluted the postman, the grocer, the baker, his teachers

Alec, so the family story goes, clad in white flannels and dancing pumps, had walked out of a chemical laboratory to enlist, leaving behind him some test tubes heating over a fire. The explosion which followed his departure was as devastating as any he heard in Cuba.

They tell a lot of other intriguing tales about this big-boned Alec, who rollicked through Princeton in the gay nineties, such as the time he spirited a cow past campus proctors and into the dean's office in Nassau Hall one night.

But it was a more sedate young Alec Stewart who had buried the pranks of his past in the nailbins of his father's store and was now singing a lusty tenor in the First Presbyterian Church choir, who met and married Elizabeth Jackson from the neighboring town of Apollo. A college graduate, like Alec, Bessie Jackson was the daughter of General S. M. Jackson who had distinguished himself as a Union leader at Gettysburg and was now State Treasurer in Harrisburg.

Bessie Jackson Stewart must have been a remarkably pretty young girl in those days soon after the turn of the century, when she came to Indiana as a bride. She is still strikingly handsome today, her soft white hair worn in a trim bob, her deep blue eyes as young as her smile.

It was from Bessie Stewart, seated in the homey front parlor of her house, with a fat album of precious pictures in her lap, that I

Jimmy Stewart



With sisters Mary and Ginny, Jim was star and producer of a flaming war-time play, fittingly called "The Slacker"

learned the intimate story of Jim's boyhood. Throughout the long afternoon of my visit, Alec was in and out of the room, stopping a moment to add an anecdote, supply a date, laugh over a family joke.

ONE of the first pictures in the book was of an old-fashioned frame house, set back from the street by a terraced yard. This, Mrs. Stewart told me, was their first home after they were married. "The Garden of Eden," Alec had named it, and here all three of their children were born, Jim on May 20, 1908, Mary in 1912 and Virginia in 1914.

Here Jim, when he had passed the crawling stage and had learned to walk, tortured the excitable Polish maid of all work by dragging in worms from the garden to her spotless kitchen, raiding the pantry for peanut butter.

Mrs. Stewart flicked the pages of the album. Here was Jim at four years old, with bangs and a white sailor suit. It was that year, Mrs. Stewart remembered, that Jim fashioned his first airplane, adding wings from a kite to a pushmobile cart and installing the works of a discarded alarm clock as engine.

For two days this contraption served as an exciting new plaything in the back yard and by the third afternoon, Jim was convinced it would fly. Borrowing an idea from the Wright Brothers, Jim decided to test his plane in the air by gliding from the sloping roof of the washhouse.

"He had managed to drag the cart up on the roof," Mrs. Stewart recounted, "and was all ready to take off when Alec happened to come into the yard. His shouts to Jim to stop were too late and he dashed back to the washhouse just in time to catch Jim and the plane as they hurtled toward the ground. They landed in a confused heap under the roof but fortunately no one was hurt.

"I'm sure Jim might have been seriously injured if his father hadn't happened by just when he did, but Jim was merely grieved because his first flight had been interrupted.

"It's a very good plane. I know it can fly," he argued.

"To distract him from any further neck-breaking experiments, Alec suggested that Jim turn his attention to building model planes and, helped by Clyde Woodward, one of the clerks at the hardware store, Jim began on a hobby that has held his interest to this day.

"When he was home last Christmas, he was more enthusiastic in his description of a new model he had just finished building than about anything pertaining to Hollywood."

MRS. STEWART turned the pages of the album again. Next was an entrancing snapshot of Jim gazing up at his father in unmistakable hero worship.

"Jim always has been intensely proud of his father," Mrs. Stewart smiled. "From the time he was a little boy, he's worshiped Alec and the greatest compliment you could give him was to say that he was like his father.

"I remember one of the first times I ever took Jim over to my family's home in Apollo. The Jacksons were a large family and the house was filled with relatives, home for a reunion. Jim was out in the kitchen with Della McGraw, the big, good-natured Irish housekeeper. The fam-

Jimmy Stewart



His first love was a vain moppet who preferred a rival with a pony. So Jim took buggy rides with neighbors

ily crowded around him cooing compliments, making a great fuss over him.

"'Oh, he has eyes just like his Aunt Emily,' said one.

"'Look, he has his Uncle John's nose.'

"'And his hair, isn't it just like Frank's?'

"Jim stood it as long as he could as one after another of his features was compared to that of some member of the family. Everyone except his father had been mentioned.

"Finally, jealous of the slight, Jim shouted, 'Well, anyway, my teeth are just like Daddy's!'

"Just like Daddy's." It was the keynote of Jim's childhood, that desire to be like the tall, tender man who never forgot a promise, never failed the nightly ritual of a romp. Jim imitated his father's rangy walk, his wide, jerky gestures, caught the trick of slow, deliberate speech. When you meet Alec Stewart you know instantly where Jim acquired his mannerisms, his voice, his eager interest in all about him.

One of Alec Stewart's happiest hobbies was his membership in the Volunteer Fire Association. Indiana was proud of the tradition of its volunteer fire brigade. To belong to it was a little something like having your name on the rolls of the Union League in larger cities.

Whenever he could, Jim followed his father to the fire association's meetings, watching drill; with excited interest, helping polish the nozzle of a hose, sharing the company's pride in the acquisition of each new piece of equipment. Soon Jim's persistence in attending each meeting, his wide-eyed worship of the heroes of the brigade, led to his being accepted as official mascot of the company and when he was six years old, Jim was thrilled at Christmas time by receiving as his main present, a fireman's uniform, complete to visored cap and brass-buttoned tunic, an exact copy of the outfit worn by his father.

The present had no sooner been unwrapped than Jim, disregarding all other gifts, rushed to his room to don the magnificent new raiment. He was still in his prized costume at the Christmas dinner table, having removed the shiny, visored cap only after vigorous protest, when the sonorous bell over the firehouse clanged a summons on the quiet winter afternoon air. Alec pushed his chair away from a half-finished plate of turkey and started out of the house. Before his mother could stop him, Jim, grabbing up his fireman's cap and his hatchet from under the Christmas tree, followed.

"The fire wasn't a very big one," Alec remembers, "just an old barn and we put out the blaze in short order. When I looked around for Jim he wasn't anywhere in sight. I walked around in back of the shed and there he was with his hatchet that wouldn't have made much of a dent on a snowball, hacking away feverishly at a rear door."

It was a memorable experience, that first fire he attended as mascot and, a little later, recounting the story to his grandparents, Jim's enthusiasm began to stretch the facts. The small barn with one or two horses became a great stable with scores of frightened animals trapped in a giant conflagration.

Grandma Stewart listened attentively to the

Jimmy Stewart

glowing account. Exaggeration followed exaggeration until finally the little old lady asked, "And were all the horses lost, Jim?"

The apprentice axman shot a look at his father, who had been watching the boy curiously.

"Well," hesitated Jim, "I think one of the horses got his tail burned."

It became a catchword in the Stewart family when someone seemed overboard on a story. "One of the horses got his tail burned!"

JIM was eight years old when the Stewarts moved from "The Garden of Eden" to their present home, a big brick house on Vinegar Hill, the residential knoll which rises in the center of town. Meanwhile Jim had started going to the Model School, an adjunct of the State Teachers College in Indiana, and here began his friendship with Joe Davis, Bill Neff and Hall Blair, who were to become the closest chums of his boyhood.

Miss Amy Gray, one of Jim's teachers at the Model School, remembers him as a serious-faced little boy who wore glasses and showed an unusual talent for drawing. In fact, the cover of the book in which she has kept unusual work of her pupils through the years is decorated with a skillful crayon sketch of Jim's, depicting a knight in armor astride a fiery black charger.

It was at the Model School that Jim succumbed to the one romance of his younger years. Her hair was red. Her ribbons were the biggest of any girl in the class and though a front tooth was missing at the moment, she was unquestionably the prettiest miss in the room. For months Jim had looked upon her as merely another classmate, but on the afternoon of the spring pageant when she offered him half her cake, after the refreshment stand had refused him more than three helpings, Jim knew that here was a girl to be cherished.

Nothing definite was said on the subject, but it was pretty well understood between them that she was, henceforth, to be his girl. It was toward the redheaded young lady's chair that Jim always hurried at dancing class and it was to Jim she turned when partners were chosen for parties at the school.

All through the spring, young love ran its course, undisturbed by anything more serious than an occasional hair pulling, until the fateful day that John Blair's father gave him a pony.

Ah, the fickleness of feminine fancy! Just twenty minutes after the redhead saw John Blair's pony, Jim had definitely returned to the ranks of the unattached males.

But if the redheaded one was lost, there was solace to be found in the fact that next-door-neighbors, Jean Prothero and her sister Agnes, also had recently acquired a pony and welcomed the mastery of a man's hand on the reins.

The Prothero pony was a much faster animal than John Blair's and Jim exulted in passing the Blair cart, with its beribboned redheaded passenger, and flicking his whip with a nonchalant disdain that must have been both a reproach and a reprimand to the unfaithful one.

Such ignominy! To be cast as a lowly spear carrier in the commencement play while his best friend, Joe Davis with the beard, took the leading rôle



Graduation from the Model School and his first pair of long trousers were thrills that fell to fifteen-year-old Jim Stewart

The Stewart hardware store, the heritage Jim deserted for Hollywood

Jimmy Stewart

The war in Europe, which had up until now been merely something older folks talked about at the dinner table, suddenly became an immediate, personal thing that spring. For, within a week after America joined the Allies, Alec Stewart applied for a commission and was given a captaincy in the Ordnance Department.

"The war brought an early sense of responsibility to Jim," Mrs. Stewart declared. "Alec was sent to Camp Dodge in Iowa and Jim immediately became the man of the house. His concern for me was most comforting. I remember, for instance, how every night he would go around locking all the doors and windows as his father had done. It's a funny thing but, when Jim is home now, he still makes the rounds the last thing before he goes to bed.

"Jim took the war very seriously. He used to wear a soldier's suit with a little trench cap and on the slightest provocation he would salute. He'd kiss me good-by, as he went off to school, and then salute. He'd salute the postman, the grocer, the baker and, I'm sure, his teachers on arrival at school.

"His play took on a martial manner, too. The back yard was turned into a No Man's Land. Trenches were dug, battle lines mapped out, copied carefully from the newspaper reports from the front, and 'Doddie' and 'Ginny' (Jim's pet nicknames for his sisters) were made Red Cross nurses."

WHEN Captain Stewart sailed for France in the spring of 1918, Jim's mounting spirit of patriotism found expression in the presentation of a blustering play called "The Slacker." Jim was the author, star, director and stage manager. The piece was given in the spacious basement playroom where the children had built a stage, rigged up footlights and strung a very professional curtain.

Virginia recalls the dramatic debut of Indiana's favorite star.

"Jim was terribly intense about that play, just as he is about everything he gets interested in. He's either wrapped up in a venture to the exclusion of all other interests or completely indifferent. There are no halfway measures with Jim.

"We rehearsed and rehearsed that play. I remember I had just one line, 'War is declared,' but Jim had me practice that scene four and five times a day for the whole week before the great matinee. Each night before I went to bed, he'd say, 'Now you're sure you've got your part? Let's hear it again.' And over and over, in varying inflections, I'd recite, 'War is declared!'

"At last the eventful day arrived. All mother's friends and the parents of the other children in the cast were gathered for the première. Jim was in a flurry of excitement, superintending the costuming of every member of the cast, testing the footlights, making sure the curtain would work right and finally, with a toot on a trumpet, starting the show.

"Jim, of course, was the slacker of the story. His reception of my ringing news that war was declared established a new high in sneers. The next scene showed Jim being drafted. Then came the battle scene and our masterpiece of scenic lighting in which red paper over the footlights was supposed to establish the effect of gunfire and shells bursting. The slacker proved a hero in an emergency and the last scene found him being decorated by General Pershing.

"We felt it was really a powerful drama with a gripping message and were extremely pleased with our performance. But the audience somehow seemed to regard it as a comedy, for even the most tense moments of the play were met with howls!"

The next production of the Stewart Basement Players was another war sketch, titled with simple dignity, "To Hell with the Kaiser." Then, really bitten by the bug of showmanship, Jim branched out with a series of movie matinees. In return for doing odd jobs for the proprietor of the local picture palace, Jim often was able to borrow a projection machine and a reel of the current serial for his home screenings.

Jimmy Stewart

WHEN Captain Stewart returned from France the following spring, the house on Vinegar Hill became the favorite haunt of every boy in town with even a nodding acquaintance with Jim. For the tall, rangy Ordnance officer had brought home enough souvenirs to stock a small museum; helmets, bayonets, gas masks, rocket pistols, in fact just about everything but a mast from a German battleship scuttled at Jutland or a piece of one of the Big Berthas that had belched at Paris.

New trenches were dug with spades that had actually scooped up contested ground in France. Uniforms, if not complete, now were authentic in at least one item for every warrior. And battle now had some purpose, for to the victors went the spoils of prized trophies, returnable, of course, at the end of every engagement to the Stewart attic armory.

The rest of the world might be sinking contentedly into the welcome ways of peace, but the Battle of Vinegar Hill raged on through the spring and summer and, by fall, the novelty of the war trophies having worn off, Jim and Bill Neff and Hall Blair produced a bit of war equipment all their own. It was a tank, a sort of freehand adaptation of a regular army baby tank. Wheels from pushmobiles of younger, more innocent days were utilized for locomotion. The sides of the tank were built of packing boxes. A cheese box served as turret and pieces of two-inch pipe made excellent armament. The illusion of gun-fire was achieved by blowing flour in bursts through a funnel.

"So brave a sight did our tank make," recalls Hall Blair, "that we were invited by the mayor to head an Armistice Day parade. Everything went fine until the wheels of the tank got caught in the streetcar tracks right in front of the reviewing stand and the parade had to detour around us."

"Jim was always building things in those days," his sister Mary remembers. "Most memorable was the boat he and Bill Neff and Hall Blair built at Two Lick, a little cluster of summer cottages beside a creek about four miles from town.

"All through the spring the boys had worked every week end on the boat, a twenty-foot flat-bottomed scow which was to be propelled by two side paddle wheels. All through the early summer they had hammered and sawed and painted and finally, late in July, they were ready for the launching.

"It was a momentous occasion and Ginny and I and some other friends accompanied the boys to Two Lick to christen the craft. Jim climbed in and grasped the handles of the paddle wheels. With a shout, Bill and Hall shoved the scow into the water. Jim began to paddle furiously but the moment the boat hit the water it started slowly to sink. There was Jim paddling away for dear life, headed toward the far shore, but instead of moving across the stream, the boat just sank lower and lower until finally Jim was up to his waist, still paddling!"

The next fall brought a new interest as station KDKA in near-by Pittsburgh began the first radio broadcasts. Bill and Hall and Jim immediately turned their inventive activities to the construction of receiving sets.

"For the next few years," said Blair, "most of our time was spent building radios. In fact, we were so busy those days keeping up with each new improvement of that fast-growing science that none of us had any time for dates with girls. I don't believe Jim paid much attention to girls anyway, until he went away to college."

IN addition to his enthusiasm over radio, Jim acquired another hobby about this time which was to pay rich dividends a few years later.

For several months Virginia had been urging her father to buy her a toy accordion that had captured her fancy in a store window. Finally, at Christmas, Alec gave her a real full-sized accordion. It was too heavy for Virginia, however, and Jim began fooling with it.

Jimmy Stewart

Soon he could pick out a few tunes and after several lessons from an Italian barber who was the accordion virtuoso of the community, Jim was able to perform well enough to play with the Boy Scout band in their weekly concerts on the steps of the town hall.

The spring of 1923 brought graduation from the Model School and with it the commencement play, an ambitious little venture into fantasy called "The Frog Prince." It would be pat to record that Jim distinguished himself in the leading rôle, revealing the promise of future triumphs. As a matter of fact, his part was that of the proverbial spear carrier, a spear carrier none too sure of his footwork in the mass scenes.

The pictures in Mrs. Stewart's album of Jim, the spring he was fifteen, show a thin, gangling youngster in his first pair of long trousers, proudly purchased for commencement. Alec was worried at the boy's failure to fill out fast enough and arranged for Jim and Joe Davis to work that summer with the crew of a lumber camp.

Jim returned from the camp, fifteen pounds heavier, tanned, swaggering a little at having held down a man-sized job for a month. He was greeted with important news. In the fall, he was to go away to school, to Mercersburg.

A whole new world suddenly opened up to the boy, whose life had been bounded by ties of a closely knit family, the well-ordered routine of school days, and the safe adventures of a small town.

Just ahead lay Mercersburg with all the new, unexplored opportunities of a prep school rich in prestige and the tradition of fabulous figures like Ted Meredith, of Olympic fame, and Ed Wittmer, of All-American football renown.

And beyond, beckoning him into a bright, glorious future, gleamed the distant, romantic towers of Princeton.

A gangling Galahad with a purpose, Jim Stewart found—and held tightly to—his own theme of simplicity in the discordant cacophony of the Jazz Age. Athletic laurels at Mercersburg, social success at Princeton were sweet triumphs to this Penrod from Pennsylvania, whose appealing life story continues in next month's PHOTOPLAY.

PHOTOPLAY



*Jimmy
Stewart
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