

# Jack Warner at San Simeon

## 1972

by Taylor Coffman

First published in *Journal PLUS: Magazine of the Central Coast*, October 2012, pp. 30-31; updated for [www.coffmanbooks.com](http://www.coffmanbooks.com), 2013

THE WEATHER WAS PERFECT. With temperatures well into the eighties all afternoon, the evening stayed in the seventies—mild and balmy, without a trace of humidity. The date was Friday, October 6, 1972. The place: Hearst Castle, San Simeon. The California State Parks Foundation was staging a first-ever fundraiser on the hilltop. Security was informal, and the guests were made to feel as if William Randolph Hearst himself were about to appear. The event was billed as “San Simeon Revisited.” Merv Corning (of *Westways* magazine fame) illustrated that theme for a stunning poster that everyone got to take home.

Debbie Reynolds was on hand, still a youthful forty in 1972. Bill Hearst also came, the affable second son of his dynamic father; Bill, whom I would later know, was then a jaunty sixty-four. But the celebrity I best recall was Jack Warner. He had just turned eighty and was still a movie mogul of the old school, the head man at Warner Bros. in Burbank.

Warner had known Bill Hearst’s father in the 1930s, maybe earlier. W. R. Hearst and Marion Davies had originally been aligned in the film industry with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. As of 1935, they began making their Cosmopolitan Productions through Jack Warner’s studio. The Cosmopolitan-Warners arrangement ran through 1938. One of the Davies pictures was *Page Miss Glory* (1935); Dick Powell was the

leading man. Another was *Cain and Mabel* (1936), when Marion played opposite Clark Gable. Warner and his wife, Ann Boyar, went to San Simeon during those years. They also saw Mr. Hearst and Miss Davies at Wyntoon after the Cosmopolitan deal ended.

In January 1941, while the Hearst-Davies entourage was at that northern estate, Warner sent a wire from Hollywood beginning, "Dear Marion and W. R." Jack had long been on a first-name basis with those famous hosts. Unfortunately, the Warners were having to cancel. "Can't tell you how sorry we both feel that we have to remain in this vicinity," he said, "as we both had our hearts set on leaving here tomorrow night. Love. Best wishes to you both." There'd be other trips to Wyntoon to offset this intended one, dating from right before World War II.

That was who I saw at Hearst Castle on that fall evening in 1972: Jack Warner, a man well-tanned and still fit at eighty, looking trim and natty in his tuxedo, a cigar forever in hand. I was twenty-two. I'd just put in my first summer as a tour guide at San Simeon, and I was already deeply hooked, a devotee of "Hearstiana" who was now undergoing a baptism, with Debbie Reynolds, Bill Hearst, and Jack Warner as my godparents. Cary Grant was there too, but I never saw him (how could he possibly have eluded me?).

Before dinner, while everyone enjoyed champagne and hors d'oeuvres at the Neptune Pool, a band started playing. Was that truly how it was in the 1930s heyday, when W. R. and Marion held their casually royal court? We guides, as Parks Foundation hosts for the evening, were dumbstruck, spellbound, all but swept off our feet. Just the same, we kept eyeing the shrimp and other delights on the serving tables. We knew there'd soon be plenty for us as well.

Next, still before dinner, we formed small groups to see the upper floors of the Castle, rooms including the private Hearst quarters, the

Gothic Suite. I don't remember whom I drew (it wasn't Debbie Reynolds). The ladies wore evening dresses and the gents tuxedos; everyone looked dazzling. Dinner was finally announced and we employees withdrew, making our own evening meal of the lavish spread left behind at the pool.

We returned to duty afterwards. The guests had dined in the Refectory itself, the grand, medieval hall within the Castle, over which Mr. Hearst and Miss Davies had presided back in their day. And just as in that period, bygone and rightly revered, the guests had smoked as if there were no tomorrow; that's no longer done, of course, at more recent fundraisers staged by today's Friends of Hearst Castle, a group I helped found in 1984. But this was 1972. You can think of it as forty years *before* 2012. Or you can regard it as forty years *after* the historic moment, in 1932, when Franklin D. Roosevelt captured the Democratic nomination with key support from the Hearst voting bloc — or even as the year that Jack Warner and his brothers made *Winner Take All*, starring James Cagney and Marian Nixon. "San Simeon Revisited" fell precisely in the middle of that eighty-year span.

I recall standing under the wrought-iron screen adjoining the Refectory. The guests had cleared out; no one was around except for one man; I saw him out of the corner of my eye. It was Jack Warner, committing what at San Simeon amounts to a cardinal sin. Namely, he was lounging in one of the Gothic choir stalls that line the great dining room, puffing on his cigar. On the daily tours, a nudge against those fragile seats could lead to an impassioned scolding, depending on the guide of the hour. But this was October 6, 1972, and no one was about to tell Jack Warner that he was being blasphemous.

We looked at each other for a second or two. He kept on puffing, his eyes deep in thought, deep in reflection: he was thinking of olden times, I'm sure, times that few others had known firsthand the way he

had. I turned and left the room, leaving Mr. Warner to his own devices. I never saw him again.

Today, as I look back on forty years of studying William Randolph Hearst, I sometimes think of Jack Warner, who died in 1978, and that incomparable fall evening. I especially think of him whenever there's a Warner Bros. movie, whether on TV or in a theater. It happens without fail: that bold and mighty *WB* logo, so confident, so powerful, gives me goose bumps every time.

Coffman continued working at Hearst Castle until 1983. The author of several books, he's recently begun a new project called *Hearst and St. Louis*, inspired by the former Hearst items in the Saint Louis Art Museum, one of the Midwest's finest repositories. The quote from Jack Warner is courtesy of Will Hearst III's personal archives.