

A Friendship Remembered



He was Jeffrey Hunter — the handsome, talented leading man from Milwaukee who set young girls' hearts to throbbing. But he was also just plain Hank — my friend.

by Don Kreger

As the Santa Fe Super Chief pulled out of Union Station in Chicago, I opened the envelope Nancy had given me at the farewell party the night before.

Inside was the most beautiful love letter I had ever read. It was dated March 16, 1950.

There was also a clever homemade greeting card with a drawing of two poodles on the cover. The bigger poodle was standing at a railroad track with a mortarboard on his head, suitcases all around him, and a diploma on one of the suitcases. The smaller poodle was looking forlornly at the bigger poodle and crying.

There was also a sign beside the railroad track with "Evanston" pointing in one direction and "Los Angeles" pointing in the other.

I felt awful. After all, how many people will love you in one lifetime? In my case, not many. And Nancy was a terrific girl.

We had met a couple of months earlier when we both were in a play at Northwestern. I was a senior, she was a freshman. I told her that I was going to Hollywood after I graduated. But knowing I was going to leave didn't make it any easier when the time came to go.

In spite of my feelings of guilt and remorse at leaving Nancy, I also felt excited and exhilarated. I was going to Hollywood. I didn't know what would happen there, but it didn't matter. It would be an adventure. I would be going someplace I had never been before.

Of course, I was also a dumb kid of 23, so what did I know?

Why Hollywood? Well, when you're a radio major from Northwestern and you want to make a name for yourself, there aren't that many choices. You can stay in Chicago or go to New York or Hollywood. I didn't want to stay in Chicago, I didn't know anybody in New York and Hank was in Hollywood.

Ah, there's the real reason. Hank was in Hollywood. And if Hollywood was good enough for Hank, it was good enough for me. In Hollywood, I wouldn't be alone. I would have a friend and support system. Hank would be there.

And who was Hank? Hank was my alter ego, my idol. He was a tall, handsome guy with blue eyes, dark wavy hair and an athletic build. He had everything going for him: looks, personality, character and talent. Maybe luck, too.

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Photograph from the book Film-Star Portraits of the Fifties, by John Kobal, Dover Publications, 1980.

His full name was Henry Herman McKinnies Jr. And all I knew about him at the time was that he came from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Later on, of course, I would learn a lot more details. He was born in New Orleans, grew up in Whitefish Bay and was an only child. In high school, he was all-*everything* — president of his senior class, lead in the senior play, pianist, choir singer, co-captain of the football team, and exceptionally popular.

During high school, he acted in plays and on the radio. And after a year in the Navy, he enrolled at Northwestern. That's where we got to know each other. We were both radio majors and we both had a drive for perfection. It wasn't long before we became good friends.

When I say we were friends, I don't mean social friends. I mean school friends. Hank and I moved in different social circles. He was a fraternity man and I lived in a prefab Quonset hut built on campus to house ex-GIs.

You also have to understand something about Hank. He attracted people. He had the ability to make friends with everybody. He had warmth, sincerity, a devilish sense of humor and a devastating Jack Nicholson smile.

Despite his looks and talent, however, there was nothing of the snob about Hank. In fact, he struck me as being unusually modest and self-effacing. His voice was quiet and gentle and his manners came right out of the Civil War South. I could imagine him saying to a lady, "Why, Miss Sally, I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance."

Hank was genuinely interested in people. When you had a conversation with him, he looked you in the eye as if no one else existed. If all of this sounds gushy, I can't help it. That was Hank. The nicest person you could ever hope to meet.

When the train pulled into the station in Los Angeles, Hank was there to meet me.

He was living with a family in Westwood and working on his master's degree at UCLA. He was also acting in a student production of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

Hank put me up until I could find a place of my own. And he gave me a ticket to see the play. As always, he was excellent. And I suspected that a talent scout from one of the major studios would probably see him act and pick him up for movies. I later learned that he *had* gotten a screen test with Paramount but that the president of the studio had turned him down. As it happened, the president of the studio was on his way out and resigned short-



From the MGM release *King of Kings*. © 1961 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc. and Samuel Bronston Productions, Inc.

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ly after that. But Hank still didn't get a Paramount contract.

It didn't take me long to find an apartment in Hollywood on Garfield Place and I was soon joined there by my kid sister, Bobbie. She had been having love problems in the East and wanted to come and live with me in California and help me do whatever I wanted to do. The only thing was, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

As I settled into the Hollywood ambience, I began to meet people and hear what was going on. I learned that the summer stock theater in Laguna Beach, a resort town south of L.A., was looking for help. So I went down there and spent the summer of 1950 as an apprentice.

What I did was help build sets and run the sound equipment. I also made friends with some of the actors. They were mostly movie people from Hollywood. The actor I got to know best was Roddy McDowall, who had been a big child star at MGM in the *Lassie* pictures and appeared in some movies with Elizabeth Taylor.

When I returned to Hollywood, Hank called with some exciting news. He had signed a seven-year contract with 20th Century-Fox and was going to New York to be in his first movie, *Fourteen Hours*. It starred Paul Douglas, Richard Basehart, Barbara Bel Geddes (the former Miss Ellie on "Dallas") and a teen-aged actress named Debra Paget.

Hank also told me that he had changed his name to Jeffrey Hunter, but I could never call him that. He didn't look like a Jeffrey. He looked like a Hank.

To celebrate his success, Bobbie and I invited him over to our apartment on Garfield Place. Bobbie made some fried chicken and we toasted drumsticks.

No sooner was Hank launched on *his* acting career when I got *my* first professional acting job. It was in a newly published play about teen-agers called *Pink Magic*. In it, I played a shy young man who falls in love with a wallflower of a girl. The plot wasn't exactly *A Streetcar Named Desire* but at least it was a start.

In December of 1950, I got my first big

break. I was cast as Feste the Clown in a production of *Twelfth Night*. The play was financed by one of the heirs to the A&P fortune, Huntington Hartford, and starred his wife, Marjorie Steele.

Also in the cast were Ricky Soma, wife of famous movie director John Huston, and Alan Reed, who was later to be the voice of Fred Flintstone on the TV cartoon.

Hank came to see the play and made an effort to get his agents, Paul and Walter Kohner, to represent me for movies. But I was tough to cast — a character juvenile. What the major studios wanted were handsome young leading men like Hank. So nothing came of it.

I did get one piece of fan mail, though, that I've saved to this day. The writer was not an honor student in English, but I loved the letter anyway.

"Dear Mr. Kreger," it read.

"I just wanted to tell you that I saw you the other night and I think you are precious. It's the first time I ever seen (sic) a high-class show like that and I didn't want to go. Boy, was I glad because it was when I first saw you. I always thought that handsome men were only in the movies and that I would be board (sic) by the Shakespear (sic) show. Was I surprised when I laid my eyes on you. I am 14 years old and a freshman at Los Angeles High School. I want to be an actress and I hope someday I can act with you."

Of course, Hank was probably getting thousands of fan letters a week. And much sexier than that, I'm sure.

Besides *Twelfth Night*, there was another important event that took place in December of 1950. Hank got married to a beautiful starlet named Barbara Rush. The couple invited me to their attractive little apartment in Beverly Hills and we had drinks and dinner. Bobbie didn't go, but I've forgotten why.

Being with the two of them was an experience. The dashing, courtly, charming Mr. Hunter and the stunning, gracious, vivacious Miss Rush. I thought to myself: What the hell am I doing here?

I didn't see Hank a lot over the next year and a half. Mostly we spoke by phone. He was busy with his movie career and his new son, Christopher. On my part, I was beating the bushes for acting jobs and trying to make enough money to survive.

I worked in a pottery shop and came home with clay clogging my nose and throat every night. I worked in a garden hose factory until I almost went deaf from the noise of grinding up old plastic garden hoses. I worked in a lawn mower factory



From the Universal release *No Man Is An Island*. © 1962 Universal Pictures.

While I was grinding up garden hoses, Hank was grinding out movies for 20th-Century Fox. If you watch the late show, you've probably seen them.

where I threaded wire into the canvas grass catchers until my fingers went numb.

Meanwhile, I was trying to break into feature films by acting in plays. I would get terrific reviews but nothing would happen. No talent scouts coming back to see me and no movie offers.

While I was grinding up garden hoses, Hank was grinding out movies for 20th Century-Fox: *Red Skies of Montana* and *The Frogmen* with Richard Widmark, *Take Care of My Little Girl* with Jeanne Crain, *Call Me Mister* with Betty Grable, *Dreamboat* with Ginger Rogers, and *Lure of the Wilderness* with Jean Peters.

If you have cable TV or watch the late show, you've probably seen one or more of these.

Finally, by the spring of 1953, I had had enough of the struggling actor's life. It was obvious to me that my chances of getting into features were slim and I was sick of the price I had to pay for waiting. I felt my life was at a complete standstill. So I quit my job at the lawn mower fac-

tory, packed my car and drove out of L.A. as quickly as I could. Bobbie had gone home the year before and gotten married.

I didn't say goodbye to Hank or even tell him I was leaving. It was just too painful to do. I think I felt ashamed that I had turned out to be such a failure and I didn't have the heart to face him or talk to him. Not that he would have cared whether I was a success or not. Our friendship would have still been just as strong.

I drove to Richmond, Virginia (my family lived in that area), and got a job as an announcer at a radio station. And while I was in Richmond, the most incredible thing happened.

Hank came to Richmond to attend the world premiere of his new film, *Sailor of the King*. The radio station assigned me to cover the premiere and record it. They didn't know I knew Hank. It was just a chance assignment.

The premiere was being held in Richmond because the producer of the movie, Frank McCarthy, had been on the World War II staff of General George C. Mar-

shall, U.S. Army Chief of Staff during the war. And General Marshall lived in Virginia.

As Hank, Frank McCarthy and General Marshall walked into the lobby of the theater, trailed by a crowd of photographers and bigwigs, I walked up to Hank with the microphone in my hand and said "Hi, Hank." He was delighted to see me, but we had only a few moments to talk.

That was the last time I ever saw Hank or spoke with him.

Over the next 16 years, our lives moved in totally different directions. Hank made dozens of movies, married twice more and had two more sons.

I went from radio to TV directing, to

We could have had some good times and we could have known each other's wives and kids.

The irony was that Hank, the lucky Hank, the Hank to whom everything had come so easy, would never have an old age. He was only 43 when he died.

Hank's death was not a major story in the Minneapolis newspapers. True, he had a successful movie career, but he was not a superstar. And I think I know why.

For one thing, Hank was a *character actor*. And a brilliant character actor at that. On radio, which was his first love, he could play anything with his voice. He could become a man 80 years old and it would be completely believable. On stage, with make-up and costuming, he would transform himself into an entirely different person.

But the major movie studios of the 1950s didn't want Hank to be a character actor. They wanted him to play the stereotyped handsome young leading man who would set young girls' hearts throbbing and draw them into the movie houses.

Hank's personality just didn't project well in movies. He was too gentle, too kind, too loving, too caring.

writing industrial films, to newspaper reporting, to advertising copywriting.

I was working at an ad agency in Minneapolis in 1969 when I read that Hank had fallen down a flight of stairs and died at his home in Van Nuys, California.

Later on, I learned that he had suffered a concussion while making a movie in Spain. While standing at the top of the steps in his home, he had a stroke and then fell. It was the stroke that killed him, not the fall.

I felt terribly depressed at the news. I regretted that I hadn't kept in touch with him all these years. We could have had some good times and we could have known each other's wives and kids.

I remembered one night in Hollywood when I got together with some Northwestern friends who knew Hank. One of the friends commented on how easy everything had come to Hank. "Maybe he'll have an unhappy old age," the friend joked.

As a young contract player, Hank had no choice over what movies to be in or what parts to play himself. And his personality just didn't project well in movies. He was too gentle, too kind, too loving, too caring. The actors who projected well were the alienated, brooding neurotics: Brando, Jimmy Dean, Monty Clift, even Richard Burton.

His appearance also worked against him. He was almost too good-looking to be taken seriously. And too young-looking. William Holden had the same problem. In his early career, he was considered a pretty boy. But by the time he had made *Stalag 17* and *Network*, his face had matured. It had lines and character. He was taken seriously. And yet, he still had the same talent.

I can think of only one handsome young leading man of the early 1950s who survived. And that was Robert Wagner, who ironically made six films with Hank. I think the reason Wagner survived was that he

became a TV actor.

I remember a movie Hank made in 1967 called *Custer of the West*. He had matured so much that I hardly recognized him. I asked myself: "Can this be Hank?" And it wasn't until the end of the movie that I was positive it was.

I think if Hank had gone into TV as Robert Wagner did, and if he had lived, he would be an even bigger star today. But so much for speculation.

Seven years after Hank died, I moved to Milwaukee following my divorce in Chicago. The week I moved, I read in *The Milwaukee Journal* that Hank's father had died of cancer.

One of the first things I wanted to do after getting settled was to visit Hank's mother, Mrs. Edith McKinnies. I called her up and arranged to meet her after church on Sunday morning and take her to brunch.

Together with my future wife, Mari Kay, we went to Pandl's in Bayside and talked about Hank. When Mrs. McKinnies learned I was a writer, she said to me: "Please don't write about Hank. Let him rest in peace."

I think she was afraid that I would do harm to his memory. And I could never have done that.

Not long after that Sunday brunch, Mrs. McKinnies was gone. Apart from her grandchildren in California, I don't think she had much incentive to continue in life. Maybe I'm wrong. But I don't think so.

That might be the end of the story. But there's one final chapter. I was reading *New York* magazine about five years ago when I came across an article about a movie Hank made in 1956 called *The Searchers*.

The article said that *The Searchers* had become one of the cult films of movie history and had inspired many contemporary filmmakers. Its story line was the model for many similar films to follow.

The Searchers takes place in Texas shortly after the Civil War. It is about a man named Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) whose favorite niece (Natalie Wood) is kidnaped by marauding Comanche Indians.

Accompanied by a young man named Martin Pawley (Hank) who had been adopted by Ethan's brother, Ethan embarks upon an obsessive, relentless five-year search for his niece.

There is a continuing conflict throughout the movie between Ethan, who wants to kill his niece because she has been "tainted" by savages, and Martin, who

loves her and wants to protect her.

The article made such an impression on me that *The Searchers* became something of an obsession.

I called up the author of the article and we talked about the movie. I haunted Milwaukee libraries looking for reviews and references to the movie in film books. And I saw *The Searchers* again and again on TV, at the Oriental Theatre, at a UWM film seminar and on videotape.

Even though Hank's most famous role was probably Christ in *King of Kings*, he never made a better movie than *The Searchers*. It was a great story, beautifully photographed and magnificently acted.

In it, he played a *real character*, not just another handsome leading man. *The New York Times* called Hank "wonderfully calm and brave." And in spite of the fact that he was probably still a little too good-looking, he came off as completely believable.

In The Searchers,
Hank played a
real, completely
believable
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He was directed by the masterful John Ford, who I'm sure shaped his performance. And as Ethan Edwards, John Wayne gave the finest performance of *his* career.

And why was I so obsessed by *The Searchers*?

Maybe it had something to do with nostalgia, with a longing to return to the Hollywood of the early 1950s.

Maybe it was just sentimentality, or a reaching out for my "lost youth."

Maybe it was my way of keeping Hank alive and our friendship alive.

I don't know. I'm not a shrink.

I remember one time I talked with my wife, Mari Kay, about Hank. I spoke with such feeling that she smiled at me and said: "You sound like you loved him."

I laughed at that. But maybe she was right.

After all, what is friendship if not a form of love? •