
Florence Bates: Pioneer Jewish San Antonio Lawyer and Golden Age Hollywood Actress

by Judith W. Rosenthal

During the 1940s and early 1950s, Florence Bates appeared in approximately sixty Hollywood films. She worked with the likes of Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier (*Rebecca*, 1940), Errol Flynn (*San Antonio*, 1945), Ava Gardner and George Raft (*Whistle Stop*, 1946), Danny Kaye (*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, 1947), Kirk Douglas (*My Dear Secretary*, 1948), and Doris Day (*Lullaby of Broadway*, 1951).

Just a few years younger than the silent screen star Theda Bara (*Theodosia, Burr Goodman*) and a decade older than Yiddish theatre's Molly Picon,



Florence Bates starred with Grady Sutton in the 1948 film My Dear Secretary.



Florence Bates' journey to Hollywood was most unusual. In fact, she began her career as a stage actress relatively late in life when she was more than fifty years old. Following her immensely successful Hollywood career, she made the transition to television and was a cast member of one of television's earliest sitcoms ("The Hank McCune Show," 1951). She also made guest appearances on "I Love Lucy," "My Little Margie," and "Our Miss Brooks." In spite of her extraordinary career, and unlike Bara and Picon, Florence Bates is somehow overlooked in the "lists" of successful female Jewish actresses and entertainers.

Florence Bates, of course, was her stage name. She was really Florence Rabe who was born in Texas in April of 1888. She was the daughter of German Jewish immigrants, Rosa and Sigmund Rabe, and one of three

siblings. Her father was the owner of an antique and curio store in San Antonio.

Extraordinarily well educated for a woman of her generation, Florence not only graduated from high school (1903) but also from the University of Texas (1906) with a degree in math. When a hand injury put an end to her childhood dream of being a pianist, she instead became a teacher and social worker.

In 1909, she married Joseph Ramer and

stopped working to raise their daughter, Mariam. The marriage, however, ended in divorce, and while looking for a new career, Florence decided to become a lawyer. She did not attend law school but instead studied law on her own. She was admitted to the practice of law in the state of Texas in 1914 at the age of twenty-six. Florence was among the earliest women admitted to the Bar in Texas, and quite possibly the first who was Jewish. Nonetheless, after four or so years of practicing law, Florence grew bored, leaving her legal career behind to begin assisting her sister who managed their father's store.

Florence's second marriage was to William F. Jacoby, a Texas oil man, and for a while the couple lived in Mexico. Florence apparently knew Spanish, and at one time was a bilin-

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gual radio broadcaster. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Jacoby lost his fortune. The couple moved to Los Angeles, bought a bakery, and made it a success. That was when Florence first tried out at the Pasadena Community Playhouse and was cast as “Miss Bates” in a play based on *Emma* by Jane Austen. During the 1930s, she honed her acting skills at the Playhouse and took the stage name of Florence Bates (her new last name taken from the “Miss Bates” character).

In 1939, she auditioned for Alfred Hitchcock and won the role of Mrs. Van Hopper in the 1940 film, *Rebecca*. In a *New York Times* review of Hitchcock’s film, Florence Bates is described as, “a magnificent specimen of the ill-bred, moneyed, resort-infesting, servant-abusing dowager.”

By now, Florence Bates was fifty-two years old and on her way to becoming a very successful character actress. For more than a decade she appeared on the big screen in film after film alongside some of Hollywood’s

most famous actors and actresses. Often she was cast in supporting comic and dramatic parts such as that “of plump, matronly characters, wealthy women, a gypsy, maids, a murderer, a humorously obnoxious mother-in-law, and as a landlady.”

Predeceased by her daughter and husband, Florence Bates passed away in Burbank, California, in 1954. She was sixty-five years old. She may not have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, nor did she win an Oscar, and probably few Americans remember her today. Nonetheless, she was a remarkable Jewish woman, a college graduate, an attorney, a movie star, wife, mother, and grandmother. Neither tall nor glamorous, Bates was thoroughly modern, and made a life that remains remarkable even by today’s standards.

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