

The Great Depression Movies & Celebrities Reading

Movies in the 1930s

Movies were becoming a major part of day-to-day life in America during the 1930s. Who were the most popular film stars of the era? What did the movies mean to the people in that decade?

In 1927, a movie titled *The Jazz Singer* debuted. This was the first movie to feature sound (all movies prior to that had been silent films). Ever since that time, the film industry has been a booming business in the United States. Even in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, 80 million movie tickets were sold every week.

There were many big-name stars throughout the decade including Errol Flynn, James Cagney, and Edward G. Robinson. Cagney and Robinson were best known for their roles in gangster movies like *The Hatchet Man* (Robinson) or *G-Men* (Cagney). America became fascinated with young actors and actresses like Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, and of course, “America’s little darling” Shirley Temple.



The biggest movie star of the decade was Clark Gable. From 1930 to 1939, he made thirty-nine movies. He portrayed many different types of characters, from a cowboy, to a gangster, reporter, chauffeur, gambler, lawyer, doctor, minister, and miner. However, he will always be best remembered for his role as Rhett Butler in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*.

Gone with the Wind remains one of the most popular and most critically acclaimed movies of all time. It grossed nearly \$200 million in theaters. This made it the most financially successful movie ever made, a record it held for 26 years. When adjusted for inflation, it remains the most successful film of all time.

1939 is often regarded as the greatest year in cinematic history. Aside from *Gone with the Wind*, several other notable films were released that year. *Wuthering Heights* (starring Laurence Olivier), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (featuring Jimmy Stewart), *Stage Coach* (with John Wayne), and *The Wizard of Oz* are still regarded as classics today.

Movie theaters of the 1930s were grand, elegant structures. Many theaters had chandeliers or other luxurious features in the lobby. The seats in each theater were nice and plush, and the screen was behind an ornate curtain that opened when the movie started.

Each movie began with a newsreel, previews of coming attractions, and a cartoon. These animated shorts introduced moviegoers to characters such as Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, Daffy Duck, Donald Duck, and many others. Other live-action shorts might have featured the Three Stooges or the Little Rascals.

Words to watch for:
debuted acclaimed
inflation luxurious

In the afternoons, many theaters showed a matinee. These were cheaply-made films intended for children. Most were science fiction or cowboy films. Many of these movies were serials, meaning each film would end in a “cliff-hanger”, and young viewers would have to return the following week to see the conclusion. Matinees were usually priced lower, with tickets costing as little as 10 cents. In the evening, ticket prices averaged about 25 cents, and theaters showed higher quality films intended for the entire family.

Movies meant a great deal to the people living through the Great Depression. It was not merely a form of entertainment or a way to pass the time. Going to the movies provided much needed relief from the struggles of daily life. Many people were poor, and times were tough, but for 25 cents, they could enter a beautiful theater and forget their worries for a couple of hours.