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The Golden Age of Hollywood Gossip

Stories that reflect badly on nearly everyone—the Warners, the Selznicks and, oh yes, the Steins



Jack Warner (Second from right), with his wife, Ann, the actress Lili Damita, Marlene Dietrich and Errol Flynn at a party in 1938.

PHOTO: © BETTMANN/CORBIS

By Edward Kosner

Feb. 5, 2016 3:57 pm ET

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Albert Einstein and his wife are being shown around the Warner Bros. studio in Hollywood by Jack Warner. "Doctor," he tells the great man, "you have your theory of relativity and I have mine: 'Never hire a relative.'"

On their first date, a starlet named Jackie Park goes to Cary Grant's house, and the handsomest man in Hollywood greets her in a white silk blouse, velvet pants and gold lamé shoes.

WEST OF EDEN

By Jean Stein
Random House, 334 pages, \$30

A movie mogul learns of Marilyn Monroe's death when the phone rings and with a familiar accent says: "This is code K"—the Kennedys' secret signal—"Marilyn is dead."

Even if you're a connoisseur of Hollywood tales, you've probably never heard these. And there are many, many more in "West of Eden: An American Place," Jean Stein's dark, uninflected oral history of five families and their grand houses. It belongs on the Hollywood-noir shelf next to Kenneth Anger's "Hollywood Babylon" and Christina Crawford's "Mommie Dearest"—chronicles of death and dysfunction amid sunny splendor.

Jean Stein is Hollywood royalty—the daughter of Jules Stein, a dapper ophthalmologist from Indiana who turned a Depression-era dance-band booking agency grandiosely named the Music Corporation of America into the most lucrative entertainment powerhouse of its time. She's an insider with an outsider's cold eye and a practiced ear for stories that reflect badly on nearly everyone.

Three decades ago, she collaborated with George Plimpton on "Edie: An American Biography," the acclaimed oral history of Edie Sedgwick, the California society girl who perished in the fey glamour of Andy Warhol's Factory. Her new book is at once more personal and chillier. And the family sagas that she has assembled range from the merely peculiar to the grotesque. Alcoholism, manic depression, suicidal urges, loneliness and sheer misery lurk behind every golden door.

The weirdest story is related by Ed Moses, an artist, and Walter Hopps, who was a curator and art dealer. As struggling students in the 1950s, they were enlisted by the fashionable psychiatrist Judd Marmor to look after a young woman named Jane Garland, a schizophrenic who fared poorly in mental hospitals. It was Marmor's theory that Jane would improve if she could live the semblance of a normal life at her mother's Malibu beach house with round-the-clock supervision. So carefully screened young men were paid to take Jane down on the beach, out to lunch and dinner, to the movies and dancing.

The problem was that the young woman was deeply disturbed. At restaurants, she would suddenly slam her plate on the floor or do headstands and scissor kicks—a spectacle all the more unnerving because she refused to wear underwear. This went on for years, although Ms. Stein neglects to say whatever happened to the tormented soul. She does report, though, that Robert Kennedy stopped for some reason at the Garland house on his way to the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles that June afternoon in 1968 and Jane's mother gave him a spider monkey a few hours before he was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan.

Ms. Stein's other narratives involve more familiar names—the Dohenys of Doheny Drive; the Warners; Jennifer Jones and her husbands, Robert Walker, David O. Selznick and Norton Simon; and, finally, her own family, which lived high over Beverly Hills in a mansion called Misty Mountain.

Like Mulholland and Sepulveda, Doheny is just a street to L.A. transplants and Uber drivers, but the family patriarch was a founder of the modern city. At the turn of the 20th century, William Mulholland built the aqueduct system that brought water to L.A., touching off the water wars and providing the inspiration for Roman Polanski's "Chinatown." The Sepulvedas were an original Spanish land-grant family. And Edward Doheny, after striking oil in Mexico, developed the industry in Los Angeles so effectively that, in the 1920s, L.A. pumped 20% of the world's supply. As rich as anyone anywhere, Doheny built an enormous house, then added a vast ballroom decorated with 18 marble pillars from Pompeii. Doheny's son Ned built an even grander house for himself, an English country mansion called Greystone. Raymond Chandler evoked it in "Farewell, My Lovely": "It was smaller than Buckingham Palace... and probably had fewer windows than the Chrysler Building."

The Dohenys did not live happily ever after. In 1921, the father sent Ned to Washington with his driver, Hugh Plunkett, and \$100,000 in a leather satchel for Albert Fall, President Harding's corrupt secretary of the interior and the impresario of the Teapot Dome oil-lease scandal. Under pressure to testify against Doheny's son, Plunkett died in a murder-suicide with Ned—although it was never really established who shot whom.

Ms. Stein's chapter on Jack Warner and his brothers starts with a quote about movie moguls from David Geffen: "Jack Warner was a great character, like all of them," says Mr. Geffen. "They were remarkable guys, but they were monsters." As Hollywood monsters go, Jack Warner, in Ms. Stein's telling, was hardly the most fearsome. He lived like a pasha, had Salvador Dalí paint portraits of him and his wife, Ann, and tried to control everything. From his office, visitors could see a big black water tower emblazoned WARNER BROS. When his word was challenged, he simply pointed out the window and asked, "Whose name is on the water tower?"

Warner Bros. was the most socially conscious of the big studios. According to Warner's son, the studio made wartime pro-Soviet pictures, including "Mission to Moscow," at President Roosevelt's behest, to warm American public opinion to an ally fighting Hitler. Still, Warner felt vulnerable when the House Committee on Un-American Activities began investigating Hollywood. He embarrassed himself under questioning, dissolving in sweat and blurring out names. A few years later, Warner sold the company out from under his brother, Harry, who promptly had a stroke. Jack Warner died in 1978, his widow 12 years after. Six weeks later, their house was bought by... David Geffen.

The exotically beautiful actress Jennifer Jones, an Okie born Phyllis Isley, was one of Hollywood's biggest stars in the 1940s and '50s, with roles in hit films like "The Song of Bernadette," "Duel in the Sun" and "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing." She was also an exceptionally strange woman.

Ms. Stein's narrators, including Jane Fonda, Dennis Hopper and Sally Kellerman, paint a portrait of a tormented soul who threatened suicide often and tried to keep her promise more than once. She might change her outfits three times during the lavish dinner parties she gave with the producer Selznick but never sat down to eat. She went in full makeup—in case she had to be taken in the middle of the night to the hospital, where she might be photographed.

Ms. Stein's own voice is heard most often in the book's final chapter about her own family. "West of Eden" tiptoes around the perpetual speculation that MCA, ruled by her father and his protégé, Lew Wasserman, had more than a nodding acquaintance with the Mob. But the book makes clear that the key to MCA's omnipotence was a deal cut with Ronald Reagan when he was head of the Screen Actors Guild after World War II. Reagan granted MCA a waiver to operate both as a talent agency and a producer of TV shows and movies—a blatant conflict of interest.

Meanwhile, Jean was living the Hollywood high life. One of Lyndon Johnson's cronies fixed her up with a promising young federal prosecutor named Roy Cohn (it didn't take), and Judy Garland sang "Over the Rainbow" at her coming-out party. Still, from the beginning she seems to have had a knowing grasp of fantasyland reality. Just before her father's funeral at Forest Lawn, she hears Lew Wasserman's wife, Edie, tell him: "Well, it's about time." She writes: "Even though I was distraught, I thought, 'Now, this is too good to be true.'"

Much of "West of Eden" matches that description. There is also an inescapably sour tang to these tales of excess, narcissism, willful self-regard, disappointment and doom. And there is a kind of pretentiousness in this cascade of extravagant detail about essentially trivial incidents and concerns. Yet, as ever, gaudy, debauched, merciless Hollywood has the power to enthrall its audience.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

Appeared in the February 6, 2016, print edition.

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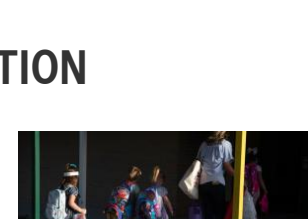
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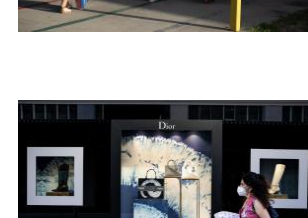
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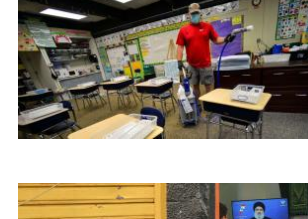
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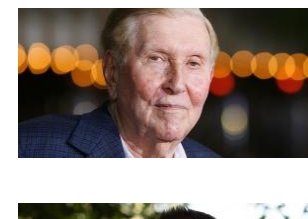
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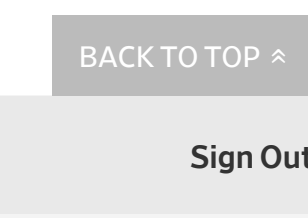
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