

Rex Bell and Clara Bow: Hollywood Celebrities Made Southern Nevada their Home



Rex Bell (above) and Clara Bow (below) in Hollywood publicity photos.

In 1931, Hollywood stars Rex Bell and Clara Bow bought and founded the Walking Box Ranch outside of Searchlight, Nevada. Bell was still establishing his film career. He had appeared in just 16 films, in supporting roles. Bow had appeared in over 50, and was one of Hollywood's most well-known stars. Following their move to Searchlight, Bell's film career continued, with leading roles in films the year after.

The Bell family settled near Searchlight, a mining town that was benefitting from the construction of Hoover Dam about 50 miles away. The Walking Box Ranch offered the couple isolation, but with ready access to Los Angeles via the Arrowhead Highway. The highway allowed them to travel easily to Hollywood while retaining enough remoteness to withdraw from the hectic world of film making.

The working ranch allowed Bell to express his enchantment with the idealized cowboy. As a young man, Bell spent time in Illinois working with his father in the cattle stockyards. After moving to Searchlight, Bell continued to travel to Hollywood to make films, mostly westerns. At home he immersed himself in the work of a rancher. Bell's herds of cattle spread out over half a million acres of grazing land. The couple's two sons grew up working the ranch and attending school in the relatively young town of Las Vegas.

The isolated ranch appealed to Bow's desire to get away from the stresses of Hollywood and film. Bow's film career had been a stellar success, and she was one of the top-drawing stars of her era. Bow had been popular throughout the 1920s. Her style



The ranch house at Walking Box Ranch. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.



Cowboys and ranch hands at the Walking Box Ranch, branding a calf. Rex Bell is in the center in a dark shirt. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.



Rex Bell Jr. and his brother George began riding horses from a young age and worked on the ranch alongside their father. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.

influenced women and drew both men and women alike to the theater. When she signed her five-year contract with Paramount in 1926, her yearly salary was over \$88,000, and increased to \$208,000 per year by the end of the contract. In today's money, her salary in the period rose from nearly \$1.3 million a year to over \$3.5 million a year. Even at the start of that contract, Bow had plans to end her career in 1931. Bell and Bow were married in Las Vegas in 1931, and she left Hollywood to retreat to her "desert paradise." Bow returned to Hollywood to make two more films before retiring.

The couple's older son Rex Bell Jr. was interviewed for an oral history project to discuss his family. He recalled his parents "entertaining" only occasionally, but having friends visit the home often. Family photos show the family and their friends in the swimming pool, riding horses, and dining at their large, rustic table. Guests included friends from the film business, such as Bow's friend Marion Lewyn, an actress who had retired from acting in 1928 and had earned moderate success as a screenwriter, and her husband Lewis Lewyn, a producer in Hollywood. Visiting family, from both Bell' and Bow's side, were frequent guests. Photos show the occasional film star visiting on the Bell family's terms, such as Lon Cheney Jr. and Edgar Bergen with his ventriloquist's dummy, Charley McCarthy. The couple even hosted some of General Patton's officers, during the time when Patton was training troops in the Mojave in preparation for war in North Africa during World War II.



Dinner with visiting family and friends. Actor Lon Cheney Jr. is seated to Clara's right, long before he was typecast to play monster characters in Universal's horror films. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.



The fireplace in the ranch's great room was the focal point of the Hollywood couple's home. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.

Clara Bow's goal in moving to a remote town in Nevada was to seek some isolation from Hollywood. Her career in film had been a monumental success, but the pressures and public scrutiny and rumor gave her ample reason to retreat to her ranch and remain there. Rex Bell's career was just beginning, and he still very much wanted to carry on a strong public life. Bell continued making films. He opened successful western wear stores in Las Vegas and Reno and made yearly appearances in the parade at Hellsdorado Days. In the 1950s, Bell entered politics and was elected as Nevada's 21st Lieutenant Governor. Bow's mental health deteriorated. She left the ranch to live in greater isolation in California. There she remained until her death in 1965, having outlived Bell by three years.



Clara loved the desert landscaping around her home, a very different environment than the Brooklyn neighborhood she had grown up in. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.



Rex Bell riding in the Las Vegas Hellsdorado Days parade. Bell was a prominent supporter of, and participant in, local events such as this. Photo courtesy of UNLV, Walking Box Ranch Collection.

Writing Prompts: Isolated Desert Living

1. Why did Clara Bow and Rex Bell move to an isolated ranch in the Mojave Desert? What do you think drew them to the desert? Consider the emotional reasons as well as the idea of the American frontier. Use the text as well as the historical photos to inform your answer.
2. Can you see yourself living in an isolated desert home? What aspects of this would appeal to you? What would be challenging? Think about this idea, and write about your perspective. Make sure to elaborate on why you feel this way.