

He's been called "the most talented young actor on the 20th lot"—Jeff

Hunter is Hollywood's answer to the hue, cry and demand for brand new faces . . .

BY ARTHUR L. CHARLES

dreamboat's a-comin'

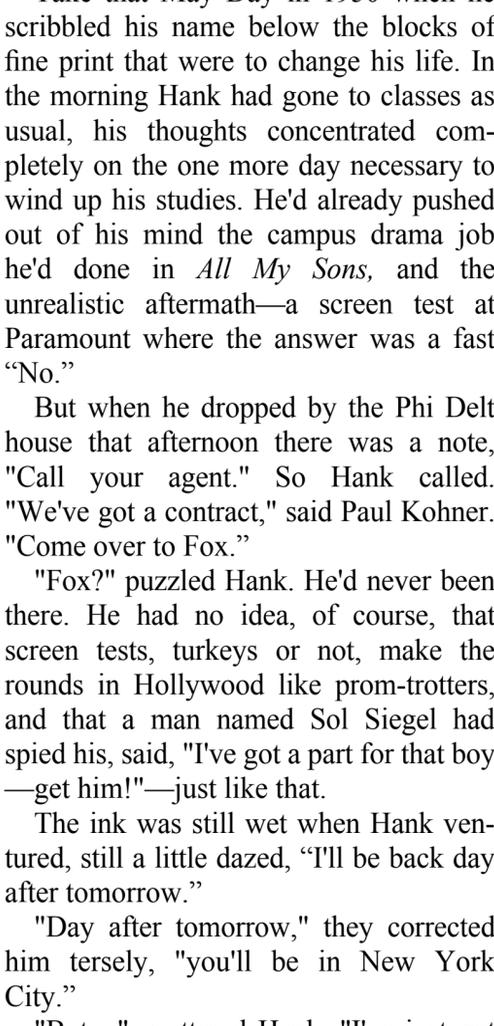
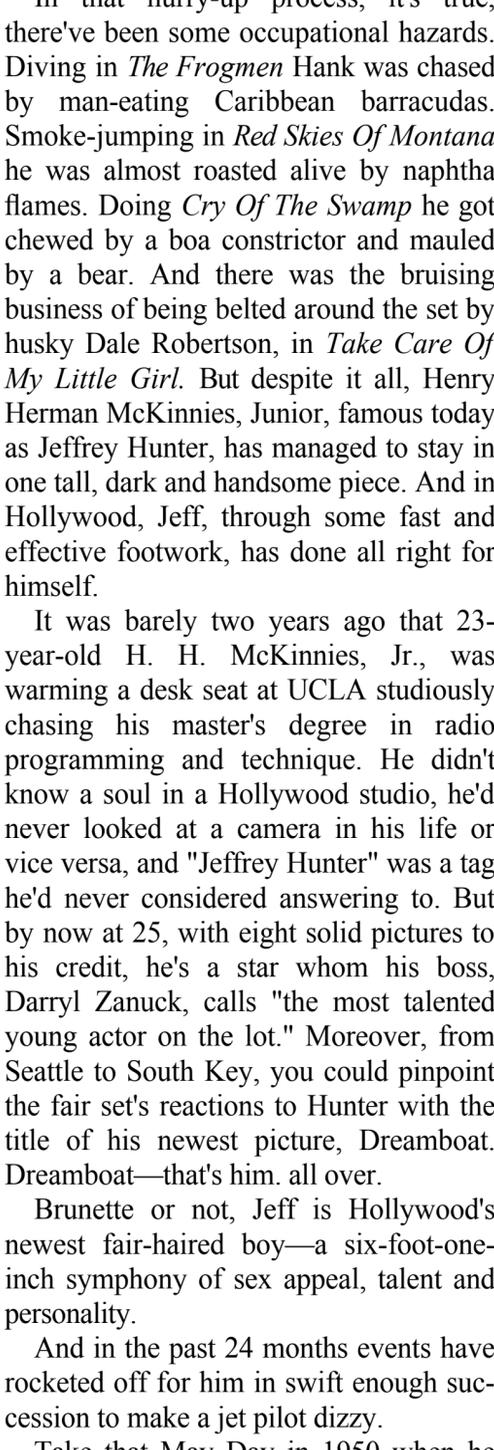
One afternoon, up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the postman delivered a package to skinny 12-year-old Henry Herman McKinnies, Jr., who raced back up to his room and tore it open excitedly. Inside, as a reward for a Ralston cereal box-top and SO hard saved cents, was a miraculous object—a Tom Mix Makeup Kit.

Henry dug out the precious ingredients and set to work making himself into the most horrendous Frankenstein-like apparition he could dream up. Then he ran in the dusk up the street and knocked on the front door of a neighbor's house.

The woman who answered took one look, screamed, slammed the door and locked it. Pushing his luck, Henry Herman tore ecstatically around to the back door and banged. This time the man of the house confronted him angrily, ripped away the fright wig, putty and false eyebrows.

"Henry McKinnies," he barked, "beat it right home this minute and wash your face—and don't you ever go around fooling decent people like this again! If you keep it up, some day you're gonna get shot!"

That was a good dozen years or so ago, and while he has been fooling people off and on since, Hank McKinnies has yet to get blown to glory—unless you call zooming to Hollywood stardom a shooting affair.



Married 16 months, Jeff and Barbara love to stay home in their Westwood Village apartment where they vary domestic chores with testing their acting skill on a tape recorder. Barbara hopes to present Jeff with a son come June.

In that hurry-up process, it's true, there've been some occupational hazards.

Diving in *The Frogmen* Hank was chased by man-eating Caribbean barracudas.

Smoke-jumping in *Red Skies Of Montana* he was almost roasted alive by naphtha flames.

Doing *Cry Of The Swamp* he got chewed by a boa constrictor and mauled by a bear.

And there was the bruising business of being belted around the set by husky Dale Robertson, in *Take Care Of My Little Girl*. But despite it all, Henry Herman McKinnies, Junior, famous today as Jeffrey Hunter, has managed to stay in one tall, dark and handsome piece. And in Hollywood, Jeff, through some fast and effective footwork, has done all right for himself.

It was barely two years ago that 23-year-old H. H. McKinnies, Jr., was warming a desk seat at UCLA studiously chasing his master's degree in radio programming and technique. He didn't know a soul in a Hollywood studio, he'd never looked at a camera in his life or vice versa, and "Jeffrey Hunter" was a tag he'd never considered answering to. But by now at 25, with eight solid pictures to his credit, he's a star whom his boss, Darryl Zanuck, calls "the most talented young actor on the lot." Moreover, from Seattle to South Key, you could pinpoint the fair set's reactions to Hunter with the title of his newest picture, *Dreamboat*. *Dreamboat*—that's him. all over.

Brunette or not, Jeff is Hollywood's newest fair-haired boy—a six-foot-one-inch symphony of sex appeal, talent and personality.

And in the past 24 months events have rocketed off for him in swift enough succession to make a jet pilot dizzy.

Take that May Day in 1950 when he scribbled his name below the blocks of fine print that were to change his life. In the morning Hank had gone to classes as usual, his thoughts concentrated completely on the one more day necessary to wind up his studies. He'd already pushed out of his mind the campus drama job he'd done in *All My Sons*, and the unrealistic aftermath—a screen test at Paramount where the answer was a fast "No."

But when he dropped by the Phi Delt house that afternoon there was a note, "Call your agent." So Hank called. "We've got a contract," said Paul Kohner. "Come over to Fox."

"Fox?" puzzled Hank. He'd never been there. He had no idea, of course, that screen tests, turkeys or not, make the rounds in Hollywood like prom-trotters, and that a man named Sol Siegel had spied his, said, "I've got a part for that boy—get him!"—just like that.

The ink was still wet when Hank ventured, still a little dazed, "I'll be back day after tomorrow."

"Day after tomorrow," they corrected him tersely, "you'll be in New York City."

"But—" sputtered Hank, "I've just got 30 minutes more class work—then I'm through."

"Thirty minutes is too much," they said. "You're hopping off by plane at dawn. You're in a picture—*Fourteen Hours*. It's shooting in Manhattan. Goodbye now."

Well, at dawn Hank was winging East, all right, his first ride on a plane, his first trip to New York since he'd gone there in rompers, his first job in a movie—and behind him was a collegiate goal he'd steered for since his high school days, missed by 30 short minutes!

And when he came back, he'd hardly unstrapped his bags when the telephone rang. "We don't like your name, Hank," said a voice. "Nothing personal—but think up a new one, will you? And make it snappy. Got just an hour to get the ads and publicity going on your picture."

Hank sat down at his handy portable and pecked out all the names he could think of—front and back—on index cards. Up in the office of Harry Brand, the publicity chief, he dealt himself "Jeffrey" with one cold hand and "Hunter" with the other. They paired up. "How about Jeffrey Hunter?" he asked as the deadline passed.

"Hi, Jeff!" grinned that genial executive.

Now, a resilient laddie who can switch both his life's plans and his name that fast without psychic upheavals is obviously quick on the uptake and able to field a fast bounce. But by now Jeff Hunter knows that anything can happen so you'd better keep yourself ready to jump. All along, it's been that way with him.

When Producer Julian Blaustein called him in for his first big movie break in *Take Care Of My Little Girl*, for instance, he asked a few questions: Was Jeff by any chance a Greek letter man?

Jeff said he certainly was. He was a Phi Delta Theta at Illinois Alpha chapter, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. What's more, he had been chapter president, and the tong meant a lot to him.

"UM-hmmm," purred Mr. Blaustein happily. "That's fine—just perfect. Well, I suggest you resign at once."

"Resign?"

"Why, yes—before you get kicked out."

Blaustein explained: He was all set to rip collegiate Greek letter fraternities and sororities into quivering shreds with the movie expose *Take Care Of My Little Girl*—and Jeff was to be the main ripper. "After Chad Carnes hits the screen, Jeff," he assured him, "you will not only be kicked out by your lodge but possibly tarred and feathered."

So there went another prop from Jeff's security, another Hollywood clipping of the cord with his past—or so he thought. But he did such an acting job that he was swamped with letters from all the brothers saying "Bravo!" The national publication, *The Scroll*, wrote him up in glowing terms and instead of a heel he turned into a Phi Delta hero.

Actually, of course, none of these twists and turns have been unwelcome to Jeff Hunter. In fact, results have been swell. Maybe the habit of changing his course fast is why he proposed to pretty Barbara Rush, now his wife, on their second date, and a hurry up outlook could be why they're expecting a family addition so soon. At any rate, right now Jeff is supremely happy with the hand fate has dealt him in Hollywood, and thankful too, which is only fitting and proper. Because Jeff was born on Thanksgiving Day, 1926, right after his mom had shoved the cranberry sauce in the icebox to set and started on the walnut stuffing.

"But nobody at our house got any turkey that day," Jeff grins, beating you to the punch. "The turkey was me."

That event took place on Hepser Street in New Orleans where the first H. H. McKinnies and his bride, Edith Burgess McKinnies, had migrated from Arkansas. So there's Rebel blood in Jeff's veins. But if you listen for any "you alls" to fall from his lips today, you'll be disappointed. In fact, making *Cry Of The Swamp* down in Waycross, Georgia, not long ago Jeff had to keep a tape recorder turning to catch the native patter so he could copy it for his Cracker character. That's because, almost before he could get used to his grits and gumbo, the depression made Yankees of his folks and switched Jeff into the first quick change in his life. His dad, a refrigeration engineer, moved North to get a job in Milwaukee, and that's where Hank grew up, right by nippy Lake Michigan in the Whitefish Bay part of town.

Jeff's inclinations toward the drama were just so-so for a long time until he got his more gnawing athletic ambitions smashed along with his nose, several ribs, collar bones and assorted parts of his chassis. He was only a normally show-off kid who liked to fool around with puppets and collect pennies from backyard magic shows. Sometimes, too, especially when it involved little girls he liked, he romeoed in kiddie plays at school.

Once, in eighth grade a doll named Sally, who was his real life passion, teamed up with him in "The Birds' Christmas Carol" but it was very rough putting out artistic emotion with the whole football team, who knew how things stood, yelling cat-calls in his flaming ears. He didn't run across anything quite so mortifying as that until he hit Hollywood and had to smooch heavily with Jeanne Crain right after they'd been introduced.

But mostly what made Jeff tingle as a boy was sports. Football, basketball, baseball, track, skiing, swimming—whatever was in season, but football was his big charge. When he was only 11 he copped an All-Wisconsin junior gridiron contest for punting, passing, and drop-kicking, and from seventh grade on he fullbacked and usually skippered a championship squad.

"At that point, I had only one ambition in life," Jeff admits, "college football." So, of course, that's what he didn't get.

He bruised too easily. It became a discouraging family routine setting Jeff's bones and sewing his trips and tears. After the last play of a championship game in his high school freshman year when Jeff's tackle reaped a face full of cleats, blood and a prolonged trip to dreamland, his mom laid down the law.

"I know you'll play football," she said, "so go ahead. But don't expect me to watch you. I can't take it." And she never saw another game, although Jeff kept on playing until a splintered arch sent that varsity hero dream glimmering for keeps. But by that time he had plenty of other interests.

Jeff had been exposed to piano lessons and they took (today he pats a keyboard beautifully, plays the organ, too). He was channelled to dancing school, and he got family applause for every bit of personality expression from the Tom Mix makeup kit on up to class plays. Result was that by the time he'd graduated from Whitefish Bay High School, there wasn't much he had missed in spreading his talents around. Jeff was class president, student body head, and—most important to him—a big operator in local radio programs, notably "The Children's Theatre of the Air" and "Those Who Serve." These brought him his first paycheck (\$12.50), a tuxedo, and a radio course scholarship to Northwestern University. Only, before he could use it, Jeff was in the Navy.

At Great Lakes he struck for a radar technician's rating, but he soon discovered they had too many "sparks" already so he went back to primary training hoping to get to Japan. He wound up in sick bay with measles, complications and a medical discharge.

Then came Northwestern where Jeff called his shots for three years. He majored in speech and radio, minored in psychology and English, acted in the University plays, the NWU Radio workshop and guild. Summers he collected credits at the NBC Radio Institute in Chicago, and played summer stock in Pennsylvania. Along the way he found time for campus hi-jinks, parties and escapades—and in the date department—if Jeff didn't have a new girl pinned every semester he thought he was slipping.

After collecting his sheepskin, Jeff headed for Hollywood in a new car his dad gave him for graduation. Jeff knew, as anyone does, that the big league of radio is right in Hollywood. That he got switched soon to the other Hollywood big league was purely by accident, not design.

"All I knew about the movies," Jeff will assure you, "was what I learned on a family trip when I was 13. Nothing."

When his next studio visit rolled around—for that Paramount test—nine years had passed, but the sight Jeff saw this time was definitely more enchanting and significant in his swift changing young life. Specifically, he saw pretty, doe-eyed Barbara Rush, a Pasadena Playhouse alumna from Santa Barbara, who was one of those Paramount "Golden Circle" starlets. And when Jeff saw her he wanted to see her again, so he did. Neither Jeff nor Barbara, however, will pretend they had any idea of making a team at first. In fact, their first date was a very incompatible affair.

THE way Barbara tells it, Hunter first trapped her foolish heart by promising a day at the beach. Picturing a lazy idyll on golden sands lapped by soothing surf under an azure sky, "I went all out *Vogue*," Barbara remembers. "New tailored slacks, gay blouse, floppy hat and cute gold sandals. I even bought a stylish picnic hamper and had my hair set."

Well, Jeff stopped his car on the dizzy brink of bleak Point Dume. He lifted up the back end of the car and hauled out a rubber boat, spears and fins. How she descended the face of that precipitous Gibraltar Barbara will never know, but at the base there were jagged rocks, crashing waves and carnivorous seals who chased her—she swears—with slavering jaws. She spent the day bobbing about in the rubber craft, holding on for dear life while Jeff disappeared happily in the maelstrom, coming up now and then to drop a wriggling, impaled and bloody fish in her lap.

"I must have loved him," sighs Barbara, "or else I suppose I'd have murdered the man." Instead she agreed to a second excursion, which was more her style for romance. They went to the Santa Ynez Inn for dinner and after that walked to a promontory of the Pacific Palisades to look at the sea.

"Nice spot," observed Jeff. "Someday I'd like to build a house here—that is, if you'll marry me." Barbara had run into that kind of fast work before, but Jeff seemed to mean it so she said she'd think it over.

She thought it over while Jeff made two more pictures and then he thought she'd thought long enough. So even if she did yearn wistfully to be a June bride, last December, after finishing *Take Care Of My Little Girl*, Jeff drove to Sedona, Arizona, where Barbara was on location, and got pretty masterful about it. They hookeyed off to Nevada and were married December first at St. Christopher's in Boulder City, had a two-day honeymoon at Las Vegas and then Jeff was yanked back from bliss and exiled for two long months to the Virgin Islands to make *The Frogmen*. And that "hello-goodbye" kind of married life is what the Hunters have been up against ever since.

In the 16 months that they've been Mr. and Mrs., Jeff and Barbara have been together exactly eight. Unfortunately, both of them seem to draw distant locations—when the only location they dream about is a certain apartment high on a sunny hill in Westwood Village.

For a long time after they set up house-keeping there, the Hunters parked on the floor and slept on a mattress right on the rug. By some frantic shopping they finally assembled a bed, a stove, refrigerator and a couple of chairs. Now their home's cozily furnished in Early American things, and boasts a piano and electric organ. But it took over a year. No wonder they don't want to desert it, even for Hollywood's most brilliant affairs. After leaving one the other night where the hostess eyed them blankly and said, "How do you do? Who are you?" Jeff told Barbara, "Honey, I guess we're both just too homegrown to make the glamor grade."

Maybe they are. The old empty-headed giggle girls and whoopee boys who used to paint Hollywood red seven nights a week are few and far between these days. Most of them—like the Hunters' set of best friends—Dale and Jackie Robertson, Debbie Reynolds and Bob Wagner, John and Pati Derek, Nancy Gates and Bill Hayes, Peter Hansen and Betty, Mitzi Gaynor, to name a few, are young people with resources and interests for themselves beyond the schools for scandal.

With that gang, quite often Jeff and Barbara roll up to a mountain cabin at Big Bear for a week-end of sports—skiing in the winter, hiking and sailing in the summer. Or they dance at the Palladium, roll down to a beach beauty spot for a picnic.

Neither Jeff nor Barbara smoke. Jeff takes a drink when he wants it, Barbara doesn't even do that. They like food and the fun of cooking it (they almost set the kitchen on fire the other night with one of those flaming dishes a picture magazine plugged). They like music—Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and the modern classics. They both play the piano, still study it, too. They like books; Jeff's a worm who haunts the UCLA library up the street. They like sports—swimming, spear diving, touch football, handball for Jeff and swimming and hiking for Barbara. They like the arts; they have serious hobbies—photography, painting. They trade ideas and are purposeful about improving themselves in the business they're in. At home Jeff and Barbara keep their tape recorder winding constantly, checking their speech; they try out their parts on each other. "I could have stepped into Jean Peters' job any time she got sick," grins Babs, "I knew it by heart." There's a group going every Monday night skippered by Estelle Harman, Jeff's former drama teacher at UCLA, where young professionals from radio, TV, the movies—budding actors, song writers, script writers, even a night club singer join in to kick new ideas and notions around. "To tell the truth," says Jeff, a little guiltily, as if it's against the Hollywood rules, "We find it's fun to work and improve. I don't see why just because you're an actor, you have to be a screwball, too."

Jeff's got the straight thinking good sense to realize that the easy gravy days are over for his generation. He knows he'll have to work and prove himself—and often change himself—and so far that's just what he's done. He gives the mossy old Cinderella success story a flip with the back of his hand and about time, too. In fact, Jeff Hunter has a favorite line for that: "Luck," he'll tell you, "is just when preparedness meets opportunity."

That's the way it's happened to him—and that's a good line to paste in your hat and keep there, as Jeffrey Hunter has, whether you're chasing success in Hollywood or anywhere else. END