

Gary Cooper

1901 – 1961

Soft-spoken and bashful but tough as leather when honor or danger demanded – that’s the way movie star Gary Cooper played the western man in such movies as “The Virginian” and “High Noon.”

The Helena native, whose real name was Frank James Cooper, was known as “Coop” in later life. His father was an associate justice of the Montana Supreme Court. Coop learned to ride during his boyhood days on the family’s Seven-Bar-Nine Ranch near Craig.

After several years of schooling in his parents’ native England, Coop returned to his home state, attended Montana State University in Bozeman for a few months, then transferred to Grinnell College in Iowa. He studied art there before coming back to Helena and a job as a newspaper cartoonist.

On a visit to Los Angeles, where his lawyer-father has moved to represent a Montana client, Cooper began his long and phenomenally successful movie career by working for \$5-a-day as a cowboy extra. He won two Oscars during his 35-year career in motion pictures.

Cooper himself wrote that his taciturn “nope” and “yup” approach was developed because acting genuinely embarrassed him. But certainly his sense of timing and understated emotion contributed to his popularity in widely varying roles, including baseball pro Lou Gehrig.

The world also admired the courage and honesty with which Cooper faced his own death from cancer at the age of 60.