

**KATHERINE  
EDWINA  
GIBBS  
1905-1968**



**1930s  
ACTRESS  
KAY  
FRANCIS**

In the 1930s, Kay Francis was one of the highest paid actresses in Hollywood, with legions of fans, and her image adorning more magazine covers than anyone but Shirley Temple. Few film historians remember her mediocre films today but her scandalous diary became legendary.

Katherine “Kay” Edwina Gibbs was born in Oklahoma City in January 1905. In November, the family moved to Santa Barbara then Los Angeles and finally Salt Lake City before her actress mother left her rich, drunkard, and promiscuous husband and returned to New York City with her daughter. Kay would develop her father’s bad habits. She last saw him in 1908 when he visited New York. He died in St. Louis in 1919.

Kay grew up poor as Katherine performed in various stock companies. She attended Catholic schools when it was affordable. Katherine envisioned a musical career for Kay, who chose stenography instead. Upon graduation at sixteen, Kay did some fashion modeling for New York magazines before working as an assistant for Juliana Cutting, one of the most elite party planners for the crème de la crème in Manhattan.

In January 1922, 17-year-old Kay met James Dwight Francis, a wealthy womanizer and heavy drinker. Kay had three abortions before they finally married in December. Her in-laws sent her on a European vacation in March 1925 to get a no-fault divorce. After months of partying, she returned to New York in September with her sights on acting.

She started her Broadway acting career just as Hollywood began recruiting Broadway actors to work in the talkies. Co-star Walter Huston helped her get a screen test and Paramount hired her. At the same time, she met William Gaston, from a wealthy and politically-influential Boston family. She had another abortion in July 1925 before marrying him in November. They divorced a few months later.

After co-starring in the Marx Brothers’ movie *Cocoanuts* in 1929, she went to Hollywood. She married actor-producer Kenneth MacKenna in 1931 but his career floundered in Hollywood, sending him back to New York. They divorced in 1934. Between 1930 and 1932, Kay made 21 films with William Powell, but left for a better deal at Warner Brothers, where her witty attitude and silvery voice made her the top star by 1935.

Kay continued to have scandalous affairs – and resulting abortions – with Maurice Chevalier (1934), George Brent (1935), and screenwriter Delmer Daves (1936), with all her sexual escapades recorded in her diary. Kay’s films became second-rate when the studio showcased on her beautiful costumes. When she sued Warners to get better projects, they cast her aside. The end came in May when she was labeled “box office poison” in a film journal, along with stars Garbo, Dietrich, Mae West, Crawford, Hepburn, and Astaire.

Kay continued to make films but no studio would sign her. She traveled through Europe and Africa entertaining troops for the war effort. Her film *Four Jills in a Jeep* (1944) documented her experiences. After a string of pictures at poverty-row studio Monogram Pictures, Kay made a brief return to stage work, before retiring permanently in 1952. She wanted to be forgotten.

A young sailor recognized Kay – after a night of heavy drinking – in New York in 1962. “Is that Kay Francis?” he asked. She opened one eye and said, “It used to be.” Kay received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960 but soon she was battling breast cancer. Francis died in New York City in August 1968 at age 63, wanting no services nor grave marker. She donated some of her million-dollar estate to The Seeing Eye, an organization that trains guide dogs for the blind.

Kay Francis, with her alluring dark looks and fabulous designer clothes, was loved by fans, even with a slight speech impediment. The reason she is not remembered today is ... great films make great movie stars.