

**MAE EVELYN  
(HALL)  
VARDEN  
1893-1958**



**NATIVE  
AMERICAN  
CHARACTER  
ACTRESS**

Evelyn Varden was a prominent stage, film and television character actress from 1910 through the late-1950s. She is probably best remembered for playing landlady Monica Breedlove in the 1955 cult classic *The Bad Seed* starring Nancy Kelly, Henry Jones and Patty McCormick.

Mae Evelyn Hall was born in June 1893 in Adair, Indian Territory. In 1867, the Delawares, once a powerful tribe, had been given rights within the Cherokee Nation. In March 1903, ten-year-old Delaware tribe member Hall, chose as part of her Cherokee Nation allotment forty acres of land near Bartlesville, soon to be one of the leading oil towns of Indian Territory. At first her tract appeared to be ordinary agricultural land, but subsequent development of the oil industry put it in the heart of a valuable oil field, and worth a large amount of money.

The Cherokee Allotment Act of 1902 provided that contests against selections of land in allotment must be instituted within nine months from the date of an allotment's original selection of the land. Sometime after the allotment certificate had been issued to Hall, Ida M. Swannock instituted contest proceedings whereby she sought to obtain the land selected by Hall. She claimed that the nine months' contest period didn't apply to her.

Dawes Commissioner Tams Bixby ruled in Swannock's favor and required Hall to return the allotment certificate. In 1907, Hall sued Secretary Garfield of the Interior Department to enjoin him from issuing a patent to the land to Swannock, require Commissioner Bixby to return her allotment certificate, and set aside contest proceedings on the grounds that the Dawes Commission had no jurisdiction whatever on the matter. The results of what was ultimately decided is unclear.

Hall's acting career began when she was still a baby – in her aunts' repertoire company, with her father as company manager. By the time she could speak she played child parts. The family sent her away to school at Los Angeles' Collegiate School but she soon returned to play ingenues even though still too young. She was often called Dolly Varden based on the sprigged organdie dresses she wore. Her stage name became Evelyn Varden.

Her first role on Broadway was at age sixteen in November 1910 in *The Nest Egg*. In November 1914 Varden married Australian actor Charles Pearce Coleman but they divorced in 1920 due to his repeated infidelity, habitual intoxication, and desertion. She married William J. Quinn in 1921 and retired from the stage to live in Baltimore where Quinn managed a chain of hotels. There she joined the board of a local theatrical company called the *Vagabond Players*, which led her to directing productions.

She was in her 40s when Varden's stage career was revitalized again in September 1934 as a character actress, starring as Elsie Foster in *Alley Cat*. In February 1938 her career took off, playing Mrs. Gibbs, the small-town matron who dreams of Paris, in the original production of *Our Town*. The November 1950 melodrama *Hilda Crane* was a personal success for Varden although the play itself only ran for two months. Her final Broadway appearance in the 1954 production of *The Bad Seed* was one of her acclaimed performances. Varden also occasionally appeared on radio from the early 1940s and well into the 1950s. She would later appear in a number of television productions during the 1950s.

Varden didn't make her first movie appearance until 1949 at age 56 with the film *Pinky*. She made over a dozen more films, often as talkative neighbors and absent-minded matrons. Varden's best-known motion picture performance was as the gregarious storekeeper in the 1955 film classic *The Night of the Hunter*. She also recreated her stage roles in the 1956 motion picture adaptations of *Hilda Crane* and as the landlady in *The Bad Seed*.

In 1957 Varden appeared in London for the first time, earning kudos as an American mother in *Roar Like a Dove*. After appearing for nine months in the very successful play, Varden was too ill to keep working and returned to her home in New York where she immediately entered a hospital. While there, she learned the British drama critics honored her with the award for Best Supporting Performance in a Play or Musical for 1957/1958. Still hospitalized, Varden died a couple of weeks later in July 1958 at age 65.