

## W.C. Fields

W.C. Fields, born William Claude Dukenfield (1880-1946), was born in Philadelphia, the son of an immigrant cockney fruit peddler. He ran away from home at the age of 11 after a fight with his father and led a miserable, homeless life as a kid, getting into fights (where he got his light bulb nose) and landing in jail often. It was this bitter childhood that never left him, confirming a cynicism that was his stock in trade.



Juggling saved him. He started juggling at nine, and the skill proved his entrance into show business at 14. Before he was 20 he was performing as a vaudeville headliner, and he then went on to triumphs in the US and Europe, playing the London Palladium and earning a command performance at Buckingham Palace. By 28 he appeared on the New York stage and ten years later he made his first film, *Pool Sharks*. He was

then a headliner in the Ziegfeld Follies into the 1920s, was the star of a Broadway show, "Poppy," which was later turned into a film *Sally of the Sawdust*.

Fields made several silent films but really found his niche in sound pictures, with his distinctive gravelly voice and sardonic delivery. He proved an early master of black humor, genuinely playing the personality he had become: resentful of authority, cynical about family life, caustic about marriage, and genuinely hating or dismissing children.

He distrusted banks, and was so worried about protecting his money that he placed small amounts in some 700 accounts all over the world. He was the antithesis of common moral standards of the day and was loved for it, especially by American men. The films most people remember him for were several features he made in the mid-1930's and early forties, pictures like *It's A Gift*, *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man*, *My Little Chickadee*, *The Bank Dick*, and *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*, typically writing his own particular dialogue.

Only MGM's prestigious production of *David Copperfield* (1935) was a distinctive departure for Fields. It was his only dramatic role, but he was born to play it. The fact is that he was not first assigned to the part; Charles Laughton was. His portrayal of Mr. Micawber (see photo above, in center) ran against the whole trend of his persona and his life: in this film he had to stick to the discipline of his role (under a great director, George Cukor) rather than be his usual anarchic self. Here he played one of the exemplary optimists of all literature, and here he was a benign presence for the young lead, played by studio child star Freddie Bartholomew.

Fields became famous for his jokes about himself, his love for drink, his hatred of women, kids, and animals. When he appeared with co-star Baby Leroy in one picture, he spiked the infant's milk with gin.

Examples of some of his acrid lines were:

--- *I must have a drink of breakfast.*

--- *Someone left the cork out of my lunch.*

--- *I exercise extreme self-control. I never have anything stronger than gin before breakfast.*

He was tough on women, too:

--- *(To a woman fashionably dressed) She's all done up like a well-kept grave.*

--- *A women drove me to drink. I never had the courtesy to thank her.*

Fields was, finally, an equal opportunity misanthrope:

--- *I am free of all prejudices; I hate everybody equally.*

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