I leave them the curse of the dying;
I leave them their own fetid crowd;
I leave them the voices at midnight;
I leave them the hope of a shroud;
I leave them the groans of the fallen;
I leave them the culture of swine…
All these but another — bear witness, good brother —
I leave them the fate that was mine.

—The final verse of “The Testament of a Dying Ham” by Gene Fowler, the favorite poem of the Bundy Drive Boys
Prologue
The Hellfire Club Comes to Hollywood

The Bundy Drive Boys never belonged to an organization called the Hellfire Club, but they very well could have.

The original Hellfire Club was an aristocratic British group that met throughout the middle of the eighteenth century to drink, whore and raise hell. The club motto, taken from Rabelais and later appropriated by Aleister Crowley, was “Do What Thou Wilt.”

The Hellfire Club, like the Bundy Drive Boys, enjoyed reading blasphemous and often seditious pornographic poetry and skits. Original Hellfire Club member William Hogarth — like Bundy Drive boy John Decker in his portraits of W.C. Fields and Sadakichi Hartmann — enjoyed parodying religious iconography substituting Hellfire Club members for historic holy men.

It has also come to our attention though a conversation with John Barrymore III that his great-grandfather, born Herbert Blythe, renamed himself Maurice Barrymore after an historical character named Richard Barry, the 7th Earl of Barrymore (1769 - 1793). The Earl of Barrymore was born a little too late to become involved in The Hellfire Club, but on his own went against the rules of aristocracy by acting and becoming known as “The Rake of Rakes,” and like Hellfire Club members, was an enthusiastic womanizer.

The Bundy Drive Boys are the true latter-day versions of the Hellfire Club.

Fait ce que voultras.
The Bundy Drive Boys gather at John Murray Anderson’s Fall 1941 gala opening, weeks prior to John Barrymore’s death. 
W.C. Fields, Gene Fowler, John Barrymore, 
John Carradine, Jack LaRue, John Decker
HELLFIRE CLUB

THE MISADVENTURES OF JOHN BARRYMORE, W.C. FIELDS, ERROL FLYNN AND “THE BUNDY DRIVE BOYS”

BY GREGORY WILLIAM MANK

WITH CHARLES HEARD AND BILL NELSON
CONTENTS

07  Prologue

Part I: The 1920s

18  Chapter One: The Old Toymaker, “That Red-Haired Whore” and the Master Poisoner
30  Chapter Two: Mad Jack’s Travelin’ One-Man Freak Show
50  Chapter Three: The First Hippie
62  Chapter Four: The Great Charlatan
70  Chapter Five: “The Devil Can-Cans in Their Souls”
80  Chapter Six: Father Confessor
88  Chapter Seven: Maloney and Other Vultures

Part II: The 1930s

96  Chapter Eight: The Glory Days and Nights
128  Chapter Nine: Captain Blood
146  Chapter Ten: The Featured Players
164  Chapter Eleven: The Last of the Twittering Vaginas
180  Chapter Twelve: The Greatest Year of the Movies, “The Spiritual Striptease of Gypsy Rose John,” and John Decker’s Biggest Caper
Part III: 1940 – 1947

200 Chapter Thirteen: 1940: Bundy Drive
226 Chapter Fourteen: 1941: “A Match for the Tribes of Hell”
242 Chapter Fifteen: The Death of John Barrymore
266 Chapter Sixteen: In Like Flynn, Courtroom Melodramas,
   Jane Russell’s Brassiere, Ghosts from the Past, Dream-Turned-
   Nightmare, “Am I Supposed to Eat This — or Did I?”
286 Chapter Seventeen: 1944: “A Superbly Weird Imagination,”
   Farewell to Bundy Drive, “Jesus” Walks the Pool,
   W.C.’s Last Popinjay, and the Passing of “Chrysanthemum”
298 Chapter Eighteen: 1945: End of a War and
   “The Five Million Virgin Cunts from Heaven”
304 Chapter Nineteen: 1946: Mona, Peeing in the Wind, A Female
   Captain Bligh, and the Passing of the Great Charlatan
324 Chapter Twenty: 1947: Raphael’s Angels

Part IV: The Aftermath

340 Chapter Twenty-One: Shuffling Off the Mortal Coil

366 Acknowledgements

370 Bibliography

381 Index
John Decker’s cadaver, soft-boiled
Prologue

June 10, 1947: In his art studio at 1215 Alta Loma Drive in Hollywood, the corpse of John Decker — artist, forger, and profane figurehead of Hollywood’s “Bundy Drive Boys” — lay in state, flanked by his paintings, his widow and approximately 250 weeping, drunken mourners. The art studio-turned-funeral parlor was only a bottle’s throw from the trashcans of the Mocambo nightclub on the Sunset Strip. His favorite drink never more than an arm’s reach away, Decker created his final masterpieces and forgeries while other whiskey-soaked revelers danced in Conga lines only yards away. At the wake, Decker’s cadaver looked strikingly like John Barrymore made up as Lucifer. This surely would have pleased the deceased. “The Great Profile” had been the most celebrated of the hard-drinking pack who once gathered at Decker’s previous home and studio, 419 N. Bundy Drive, an English Tudor cottage in then-pastoral Brentwood. The oaken door had a magical fairy-tale look, for Decker had painted his coat-of-arms unicorns below its “peep hatch,” and had added his ironic motto:

Barrymore had likely been the greatest actor of his century. He'd made cinema history, changing from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde without makeup. He had triumphed as Hamlet on both the New York and London stage. In their *Grand Hotel* love scene, Greta Garbo impulsively kissed him, forever after praising the man’s “divine madness.”

“I like Decker,” Barrymore once said. “He hates sunsets and his mother.”

They had degenerated together. By the time John Barrymore had died in 1942, the star was trashing his talent, pissing in public, and trying to seduce his 21-year-old daughter Diana.

The Bundy Drive Boys called Barrymore — affectionately — “the Monster.”

For many, John Decker was the devil who perched on John Barrymore’s shoulder, appealing to the actor’s real-life Hyde and cheerleading the man’s final debauchery. Decker’s major fame had come through his paintings of Hollywood stars in Old Masters style — e.g., Garbo as da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, and Harpo Marx as Gainsborough’s Blue Boy. Decker painted them as he saw them, and as brilliant writer/Bundy Drive Boy Ben Hecht expressed it,

Decker not only gets a true likeness down — with one of the swiftest, sharp-shooting brushes in modern art — but he also introduces into his portraits a full Freudian biography of the celebrity involved

His subjects weren’t always pleased. When Katharine Hepburn played *Mary of Scotland* (1936), she sat for Decker, who gave the actress an aura so radiantly evil that the spooked actresss immediately gave away the picture and was allegedly reluctant to sit for a portrait ever again. The long-disowned painting only emerged again in 2006 after the star’s death.

The Bundy Drive Boys — gifted, world-famous men — smiled like pirates, cavorted like the Marx Brothers and had dark sides worthy of Dracula. The pre-Rat Pack gang had created a crazy Hollywood peep show, a wild midnight carnival, a modern *Canterbury Tales*.
Supporting Cast:

• **W.C. Fields:** “It’s a funny old life,” the curmudgeon once said. “Man’s lucky if he gets out of it alive.” The bulbous-nosed comedian managed in a superb irony, considering his known dislike of the holiday, to die on Christmas Day, 1946. He was also the inspiration for one of John Decker’s most famous works — Fields as Queen Victoria. “Sabotage!” rejoiced Fields of this incarnation. “Decker has kicked history in the groin!”

• **Errol Flynn:** The star who was forever Robin Hood — despite barely escaping conviction in 1943 for statutory rape — had a tragic aura that Decker caught in a casual portrait with almost startling perception. Flynn, just before his death in 1959, spent his final moments entertaining his doctor with tales of Decker and the Bundy Drive Boys.

• **Thomas Mitchell:** The great character actor won the 1939 Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, giving one of the shortest and most refreshing acceptance speeches in Oscar history: “I didn’t think I was that good!” He was the victim of (or perhaps a collaborator on) Decker’s now infamous alleged forgery — the Rembrandt Bust of Christ that has awed the faithful for decades in Harvard’s Fogg Museum.

• **Sadakichi Hartmann:** Ancient and unwashed, he was once New York’s “King of the Bohemians,” with the colossal misfortune in World War II Los Angeles of having Axis Powers ancestry, half-German and half-Japanese. Regularly compared to looking like a praying mantis, he wrote about a tempted-by-the-flesh Jesus Christ over 100 years before *The Da Vinci Code*, and amazed and appalled the not-easily-impressed Barrymore, who described Hartmann as “a living freak presumably sired by Mephistopheles out of *Madame Butterfly*."


• **Ben Hecht:** The fireball newspaper reporter and prestigious stage and screenwriter of such hit plays (with co-author Charles MacArthur) as *The Front Page*, won the very first Academy Award for Original Screenplay for 1927’s *Underworld*, and used his Oscar for a doorstop. He later contributed to such classic films as *Stagecoach, Wuthering Heights* and *Gone With the Wind*, all in the same year. Sharing an office in Hollywood for a time with fellow Bundy Drive Boy Gene Fowler, the duo engaged a blonde showgirl (“Bunny”) who performed her secretarial duties wearing only high heels and a smile.

• **Gene Fowler:** The Denver-born journalist/Hollywood writer, hailed as “The Rabelais of the Rockies,” was once the tenth best-paid man in the United States — yet had such contempt for his film studio work that he demanded he be paid daily, as would a day laborer. “The truth — Fowler was as out of place in Hollywood as a third leg on a rumba dancer,” said Ben Hecht. “As what man of talent isn’t?” Regarding his cronies with both simpatico and compassion, Fowler preserved the frivolities and genius of these men in books such as *Good Night, Sweet Prince* and *Minutes of the Last Meeting*.

• **John Carradine:** The cadaverous character player first won notice parading up and down Hollywood Boulevard, wearing a cape and slouch hat, roaring Shakespeare. Success would not tame his eccentricity. He’d announce one night at the Garden of Allah that he was Jesus Christ and would prove it by walking across the swimming pool. He sank.

• **Alan Mowbray:** The British thespian tallied up a remarkable amount of film and TV appearances yet despised the sight of his own face on screen and avoided all his own credits. A popular toastmaster and admitted scoundrel, he was also a pioneer of the Screen Actors Guild, writing the check so that the rebellious group (regarded in 1933 as subversive) could gain legal representation.
• **Roland Young:** The mousy actor, also a Britisher and Topper of the movies, sported a mustache and monocle and specialized in scene-stealing larceny. Barrymore used to laugh that, when Young played Dr. Watson to Barrymore’s Sherlock Holmes in the 1922 film, the star felt so sorry for his meek little co-player that he suggested bits of business for him. Later seeing the film, Barrymore realized Young had stolen virtually every scene.

• **Anthony Quinn:** Once denounced by Cecil B. DeMille as “a half-breed,” he bounced back by marrying DeMille’s daughter Katherine. Destined for two Oscars, the young and stalwart Quinn — who fathered a child at 81 (“Zorba the Stud,” read a tabloid headline) — inspired the joke that he was primarily a Bundy Drive Boy because he had Decker’s blood type and willingly reported for emergency transfusions.

• **John Barrymore:** “The Monster.” The Boys practiced swordplay in front of the roaring fireplace, gave a spirited midnight reading of *Macbeth* (Decker, in top hat with flour on his face, creating a ghostly effect), swapped tall tales, and protected each other from the horrors of their own private demons. Each man had a quixotic defiance of the Film Industry and a loyal, almost child-like devotion to the others. After Barrymore’s funeral, Decker, who had painted his portrait numerous times, unveiled his latest evocation. It was a Calvary-esque Barrymore, in loincloth, crucified between two naked women — his sloe-eyed last wife who had fleeced and divorced him, and her mother.

  “These men lived intensely,” wrote Gene Fowler, “as do children and poets and jaguars.”

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If John Barrymore had been the Bundy Drive Boys’ center-ring attraction, John Decker had been their demonic ringmaster. He’d been the man who kept the calliope shrieking away, long past the witching hour.

The bier at Alta Loma was based on the deceased’s painting of Van Gogh’s funeral, with casket on a pool table and Decker’s famous deathbed sketch of Bar-
rymore, suffering a mortal’s final death agonies. The sketch, crowned with a spray of red roses, stood propped on Decker’s coffin, an evocation of his art, their friendship, and Barrymore’s prophecy of coming back as a ghost.

“If you think I’m joking about the visitation,” Barrymore had warned one rainy night, pointing a dramatic finger in the firelight, “wait!”

John Decker’s widow, his third wife — he never legally divorced the first two — was nearly hysterical with grief. Blonde, attractive Phyllis Decker carried the soignée look of a leading lady in a Bogart melodrama. Once more she admired Decker’s large, broken, almost phallic nose — and further damaged in recent years by a pet parrot — but winced as she regarded his mustache. It was a naturally red color, and reminded him of the two things that, as Barrymore had expressed, Decker despised most: sunsets and his auburn-haired mother. Phyllis knew why he had hated them; so had Barrymore and the Bundy Drive gang.

Using her mascara wand, Phyllis darkened the cadaver’s mustache one last time.

A recording of Decker reciting Cyrano de Bergerac’s defiant “No thank you” speech played over and over at the bier — another of the deceased’s requests:

*To sing, to laugh, to dream, to walk in my own way and be alone…*

Many mourners had come only for the booze, and for a morbid proximity to the diminishing legend of the Bundy Drive Boys. Donations were necessary to pay for the wake. Few were forthcoming.

Then… as Gene Fowler wrote in a personal letter to Ben Hecht (not present at the funeral):

There was a spray of red roses hanging on the Barrymore deathbed sketch and, so help me, God! I am told that at the very moment the minister said, “Let us pray,” this spray of flowers came down with a plop upon the unopened half of the casket lid. I remember that you once said that if anyone could come back from what is known as the Great Beyond, that Barrymore could do it. Perhaps this was some kind of a benediction, or its antithesis...

The shocker nearly caused the widow to faint and scared the hell out of tipsy mourners who screamed at the spectral surprise. It was as if Hamlet’s ghost had conjured itself at the bier, as if “Mad Jack” had fled his tomb at L.A.’s Calvary Cemetery to fulfill his ghostly promise and to pay his final respects.

Yet the true ghostly spectacle was still to come.

14 Hollywood’s Hellfire Club
The hearse left the Strip, heading south to Inglewood Cemetery. The pallbearers, including actor/art collector Vincent Price, artist Philip Paval, and Alan Mowbray and Anthony Quinn bore the coffin to the crematory. As was the custom at Inglewood, the pallbearers received the invitation to watch the actual cremation, and they reluctantly agreed. The open casket and the corpse headed for the fire.

And then, as Paval later wrote in his memoir, it happened. As if by some horrific final prank, the satanic-looking corpse with mascara on its mustache suddenly sat up in flames. It was as if the cadaver were on a carnival joyride into hell, enjoying its own fiery immolation. It was, by the law of physics, a reaction of the body to the blast of heat, but the Bundy Drive Boys imposed their own mystical spin on John Decker’s Phoenix-like resurrection.

Barrymore and other deceased Bundy Drive Boys would rally and join him.