



Contributed photo

Tommy Stears first gained attention for shining shoes on Pacific Avenue. He later acted in Hollywood.

'Shoeshine Boy,' actor remembered

By KAREN A. DAVIS

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz's beloved "Shoeshine Boy" turned character actor Tommy Stears is being remembered as a man who overcame a rough start in life to follow his dream.

Stears, a member of the Santa Cruz High School class of 1954, died Aug. 16 in his sleep at his home in Studio City. He was 68.

He loved acting, though he never quite hit the big time, according to his friend and high school classmate Len Klempnauer of Capitola.

"No star with his name is etched in the concrete sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard, for Tommy never got a real shot at stardom," Klempnauer recently wrote. "But he almost did."

As a child, Stears became a familiar Santa Cruz fixture known to all here as the "Shoeshine Boy." His domain was Pacific Avenue, the Santa Cruz Wharf and the Boardwalk, where he also hawked copies of the Santa Cruz Sentinel and the San Francisco News.

In 1943, a Sentinel photographer snapped a picture of an 8-year-old Stears and his friend, 9-year-old Gene Mazzei of Santa Cruz, shining the shoes of a World War II soldier seated on the beachside steps at the Boardwalk.

By 1947, Stears was so well-known downtown that a local barber ran an ad in the Sentinel announcing that "Tommy is now shining shoes at the Ivy DeLuxe Barber Shop."

Stears' father abandoned Tommy's mother and five siblings when Tommy was a boy. The family became so financially desperate that, at one point, Stears' mother considered putting him up for adoption.

Tommy

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"Tommy had been mowing the lawn of a childless couple in the neighborhood who wanted to adopt him," said Rod Jensen of Aptos, a friend and classmate. "He begged his mother to keep him and said he would shine shoes and sell newspapers to earn money. He told her he would wear used clothes and, most sadly, that he would eat less."

Jun Lee of Scotts Valley, a childhood friend and classmate, remembers how Stears would "would come to our house in Chinatown to eat when the main protein we had were chicken necks and rice, with

some veggies from the garden."



STEARs

As an actor in Hollywood in the 1950s

Stears' mother died a few weeks before he graduated from high school. Still, he managed to work several jobs his senior year, including a late shift at the Birds Eye frozen food plant. The job left him little time to clean up or sleep before returning to school, so Roger Baer, the high school athletic director, set up a cot for Stears in the physical education office.

After a brief stint at Fresno State, Stears' broke into Hollywood and soon the teen had roles on Studio One and other television shows. He garnered a bit part in the 1958 film "Dragstrip Riot" that starred Fay Wray, the actress perhaps best known for being held in the clutches of King Kong atop New York City's Empire State Building in the classic 1933 movie.

Soon after, Stears was up for the lead in a movie directed by Irvin Jordan and a Hollywood Reporter column titled "Best Bets on '58 Casting" dubbed him a "juvenile character actor who was a hit ... (and a) scene stealer."

But then he was drafted in 1958 and his dreams were deferred. He served two years, including a tour



Sentinel file photo

This 1943 photo shows 8-year-old Tommy Stears, bottom left, shining the shoes of a soldier on Pacific Avenue. Stears became a well-known fixture downtown.

Tommy Stears

NAME: Thomas Alvah 'Tommy' Stears.

BORN: Jan. 28, 1935, in Watsonville.

DIED: Aug. 16, 2003, in Studio City.

EDUCATION: 1954 Santa Cruz High School graduate. Attended Fresno State University.

OCCUPATION: Character actor.

SURVIVORS: Daughters Tess Seay and Katie Ramirez, both of Fresno, Cathryn Beauchemin of Redlands and Tami Abeloe of Gardnerville, Nev.; brothers Kenneth Stears of Folsom and Richard Stears of South Lake Tahoe; sisters Betty Skeith of Dinuba, Dolores Peebles of Cory, Colo., and Laverne Hunt of Spanish Fork, Utah; and six grandchildren.

SERVICES: Were held Aug. 22 in Burbank. Burial was in National Cemetery in Riverside.

DONATIONS: The Santa Cruz High School class of 1954 hopes to place a memorial bench at the Santa Cruz Wharf in Stears' honor. Contributions may be made at any Bank of America branch to the Tom Stears Memorial Account, in care of Jim Fitzpatrick, account No. 0049 6755 2684.

of duty in Korea, before returning to Hollywood in 1960.

Upon his return, most of the work

he got was in the theater. He played some small recurring TV roles on "General Hospital," "One Life to

Live," "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and "Combat" and in the 1965 movie "Red Line 7000." In later years, he landed a bit part in 1981's Ragtime, 1984's "The Muppets Take Manhattan" and the Guns N' Roses music video "Patience."

Still, Stears' never quit his day job. He worked as a cab and truck driver, a bartender and security guard and, at the time of his death, had been working for an asbestos removal company.

When his career began to sputter, Stears turned to alcohol, friends say, though he later sought help from Alcoholics Anonymous. In 2001, he received one award that he displayed proudly — his 25-year sobriety pin.

In his later years, he made many trips to visit former classmates in Santa Cruz.

Contact Karen A. Davis at kdavis@santa-cruz.com.