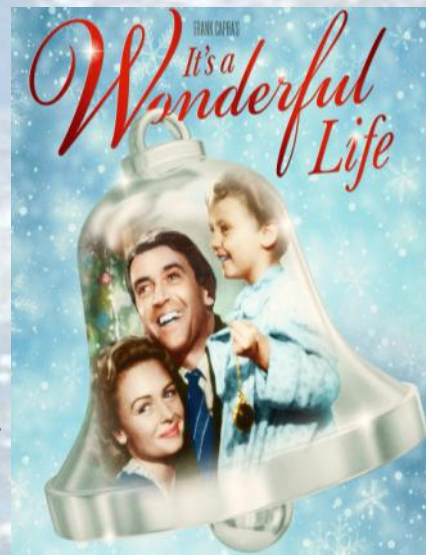


The original story "The Greatest Gift" was written by Philip Van Doren Stern in November 1939. After being unsuccessful in getting the story published, he decided to make it into a Christmas card, and mailed 200 copies to family and friends in December 1943. The story came to the attention of RKO producer David Hempstead, who showed it to Cary Grant's Hollywood agent, and in April 1944, RKO Pictures bought the rights to the story for \$10,000, hoping to turn it into a vehicle for Grant. RKO created three unsatisfactory scripts before shelving the planned movie, and Grant went on to make another Christmas movie staple, "The Bishop's Wife."

At the suggestion of RKO studio chief Charles Koerner, Frank Capra read "The Greatest Gift" and immediately saw its potential. RKO, anxious to unload the project, in 1945 sold the rights to Capra's production company for \$10,000. Capra, along with writers Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, turned the story and what was worth using from the three original scripts into a screenplay that Capra would rename "It's a Wonderful Life."



Seneca Falls, New York claims that when Frank Capra visited their town in 1945, he was inspired to model Bedford Falls after it. The town has an annual "It's a Wonderful Life" festival in December. The Hotel Clarence opened in Seneca Falls, named for George Bailey's guardian angel. On December 10, 2010, the "It's a Wonderful Life" Museum opened in Seneca Falls, with Karolyn Grimes, who played Zuzu in the movie, cutting the ribbon.

Both James Stewart (from Indiana, Pennsylvania) and Donna Reed (from Denison, Iowa) came from small towns. Stewart's father ran a small hardware store where James worked for years. Reed demonstrated her rural roots by winning an impromptu bet with Lionel Barrymore when he challenged her to milk a cow on set.

The contention that James Stewart is often referred to as Capra's only choice to play George Bailey is disputed by film historian Stephen Cox, who claims that "Henry Fonda was in the running."

And Jean Arthur was first offered the part of Mary, but had to turn it down for a prior commitment, before Capra turned to Olivia de Havilland, Martha Scott, Laraine Day, and Ann Dvorak. Ginger Rogers was offered the female lead, but she considered it "too bland."

Jimmy the raven (Uncle Billy's pet) appeared in "You Can't Take It with You" and each subsequent Capra film.

"It's a Wonderful Life" was shot at RKO Radio Pictures Studio in Culver City, California, and the 89-acre RKO movie ranch in nearby Encino, where "Bedford Falls" consisted of Art Director Max Ree's Oscar-winning sets originally designed for the 1931 epic film "Cimarron," with a main street stretching 300 yards (three city blocks), with 75 stores and buildings, and a residential neighborhood, adding a working bank set, a tree-lined center parkway, and planted 20 full-grown oak trees on the existing sets.

Pigeons, cats, and dogs were allowed to roam the mammoth set in order to give the "town" a lived-in feel. RKO created "chemical snow" for the film in order to avoid the need for dubbed dialogue when actors walked across the earlier type of movie snow, made up of crushed cornflakes.

Dimitri Tiomkin had written "Death Telegram" and "Gower's Deliverance" for the drugstore scenes, but in the editing room, Capra elected to go with no music for those scenes. Those changes, along with others, led to a falling out between Tiomkin and Capra. Tiomkin was saddened that Capra decided to have the music pared or toned down, moved, or cut entirely. He felt as though his work was being seen as a mere suggestion.

"It's a Wonderful Life" premiered at the Globe Theatre in New York on December 20, 1946, to mixed reviews that ran from "Capra's inventiveness, humor and affection for human beings keep it glowing with life and excitement" to "The weakness of this picture, from this reviewer's point of view, is the sentimentality of it—its illusory concept of life." The film recorded a loss of \$525,000 at the box office for RKO.

The film's elevation to the status of a beloved classic came decades after its initial release, when Capra announced, "It's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. I'm like a parent whose kid grows up to be president." James Stewart declared that out of all the movies he had made, "It's a Wonderful Life" was his favorite. In 1990, the movie was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the United States Library of Congress and selected for preservation in their National Film Registry.

In 2002, Britain's Channel 4 ranked it as the seventh greatest film ever made in its poll "The 100 Greatest Films" and in 2006, the film reached No. 37 in the same channel's "100 Greatest Family Films."

In June 2008, AFI revealed its 10 Top 10, the best ten films in ten "classic" American film genres, after polling over 1,500 people from the creative community. "It's a Wonderful Life" was acknowledged as the third-best film in the fantasy genre.

The film's popularity continues, and it currently holds an 8.6 out of 10 rating on the IMDB consumer reviews and a 93% "Fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes. And more raves continue...

Film sponsored by Isle Royale Queen IV and CHIA-Copper Harbor Improvement Association, both of Copper Harbor. A festive buffet will be put on by Kangas Café & Catering of Hancock.

