

20. *It's a Wonderful Life*

Screenplay by Frances Goodrich & Albert Hackett & Frank Capra
Based on short story "The Greatest Gift" by Philip Van Doren Stern
Contributions to screenplay Michael Wilson and Jo Swerling

About the writing of the film:

- Philip Van Doren Stern had a dream one night, and later wrote it up as a short story. Unable to sell the story to any magazines, he had it printed on his 1943 Christmas card. That card became the basis for *It's a Wonderful Life*.
- One of the recipients of Stern's Christmas card was his Hollywood agent, who immediately turned around and sold the story to the movies. —*MM*, December 1989-January 1990
- RKO chief Charles Koerner bought the original story at the suggestion of Cary Grant, who planned to star in the film. In 1945, after multiple failed attempts by several well-known writers to adapt it as a screenplay, Koerner sold the story to Frank Capra. —*Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 15, 1996
- Capra's story pitch to Lew Wasserman, James Stewart's agent, was disastrous. Capra recorded what happened in his notebook: "As I tell [the] story, it evaporates into thin air. Tell Stewart to forget it. Wasserman's dying. Jimmy [Stewart] doesn't want to hear [the] story." But because Stewart had previously worked with Capra on a couple of very successful films, he is convinced to take a chance. —*Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 15, 1996
- Stewart's version of the pitch story was very different. He described Capra's apologetic and bumbling pitch and his recollection of his response: "And I said, 'Frank, if you want me to do a picture about a guy who wants to kill himself and angel named Clarence who hasn't won his wings yet who comes to save him, I'm your man. I know you've just started the story but why don't we let it go—I like it.'" —*MM*, December 1989-January 1990
- The name of the character for George Bailey came from a man Jimmy Stewart was acquainted with while stationed at Selfridge Field in Michigan, where both were members of the 94th Pursuit Squadron. The real George Bailey, who now lives in Valrico, Florida, said that Stewart liked his "everyman quality" and wanted to use the name. —IMDB
- The film has two lines of "secret dialog"—spoken quietly through a door. At the end of the scene when George bursts in on a meeting with his father and Potter, George overhears the following two lines of dialog through the glass pane of the door behind him: Potter: What's the answer? Bailey: Potter, you just humiliated me in front of my son. —IMDB
- In its initial release, *It's a Wonderful Life* was a box office failure, reportedly losing \$500,000 in its first run.
- This was the first and last time that Frank Capra produced, financed, directed and co-wrote one of his films. —IMDB
- The movie drew fierce criticism for its political statements about post-WWII society when it was released in 1946. The FBI labeled it a "subversive" movie and charged that its use of a nasty, Scrooge-like businessman "was a common trick used by communists." —IMDB
- Paleontologist and science historian Stephen Jay Gould based the title of his book *Wonderful Life*, about evolution, on this movie. —Wikipedia

About the writers:

- The writing team of **Frances Goodrich & Albert Hackett** met in Denver in 1927, where they were performing in a stock company. They began collaborating in 1928 and were married a year after their first play became a hit.
- Both Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett began their careers as performers, including several Broadway plays. Hackett also appeared in silent films.

- “They discussed a scene at length, sometimes acting it out. Afterwards, they each wrote a draft, which they exchanged. ‘Then,’ Frances said, ‘began “free criticism,”—which sometimes erupted into screaming matches.’” —David Lee Goodrich (nephew of Goodrich & Hackett), *The Real Nick and Nora: Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Writers of Stage and Screen Classics*.
- They were strong and vocal supporters of the Screen Writers Guild [which later became the Writers Guild of America] in the early days of its existence.
- In addition to the many well-known films they wrote, Goodrich & Hackett also wrote plays—probably their most famous collaboration was the Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Diary of Anne Frank*.
- Screenwriting awards/nominations for Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett: WGA Screen Laurel Award, 1956; 7 Writers Guild nominations, with 4 wins, for *Father’s Little Dividend*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Easter Parade*, *Seven Brides For Seven Brothers*; 4 Academy Award nominations.
- **Frank Capra’s** long career in film began in silent movies, when he was writing and directing comedies. In some cases, he wrote (or co-wrote). For other films he wrote (or co-wrote) and directed.
- The bulk of his writing credits come before 1929.