

Contemporary Collectibles: That's Life

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

In its heyday, Life magazine had an impact that's difficult to imagine today.

Before television hit its stride, and before newspapers printed even black-and-white photos, Life was the lens through which Americans could view what happened in any week in the U.S. and worldwide. This was accomplished by assembling an unparalleled team of journalists and, in particular, extraordinary photographers - including such greats as Alfred Eisenstaedt, Margaret Bourke-White, Cornell Capa, Edward Steichen, W. Eugene Smith and Philippe Halsman - and establishing the photo essay as a new form of journalism.

It also landed such coups as publishing serializations of the memoirs of Winston Churchill, Harry Truman and Douglas MacArthur, as well as the manuscript of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea."

The first issue of the modern Life (an earlier satirical humor magazine with that title had been around since 1883, but when it floundered in the 1930s, Henry Luce, publisher of Time and Fortune, bought it for \$92,000 in order to obtain the name) was published on Nov. 23, 1936. It was motivated by Luce's appreciation of the public's hunger for stories told via images, and by technological advances in both photography (such as the small Leica camera) and in improved high-speed printing processes.

With its arresting black-and-white covers and white type on red-field logo, it wasn't long before Life became the nation's premier photo-illustrated periodical, dominating the market for 40 years, at its highest point selling more than 13 million copies per week.

The cover of the first issue was a somber but striking Margaret Bourke-White photograph of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana. This debut copy consisted of 96 pages - including Bourke-White's groundbreaking nine-page portrait of the Western town that grew along with the construction of the dam and five pages of Eisenstaedt's pictures - sold for 10 cents and had a print run of 466,000 copies, which sold out in four hours. Within four months, circulation had reached 1 million. The first celebrity cover didn't appear until the following November: a not-too-healthy-looking Jean Harlow (she would die the following month), establishing a reciprocal relationship with the major Hollywood studios. Harpo Marx, of all people, was the first male cover subject.

When America entered World War II, Life committed itself to war coverage, employing the distinguished Robert Capa, the sole photographer to record the first wave in the D-Day invasion of Normandy in 1944. Life established itself - along with movie newsreels - as a primary vehicle for bringing dramatic images of the war, and succeeding events, to the American public.

The first color cover, on the March 25, 1946, issue, featured not a superstar, but a now barely remembered MGM actress named Lucille Bremer. In most cases, however, a Life cover could add considerable impetus to an actor's career, and it was a real accomplishment to appear more than once.

Gary Cooper was the first star to have a repeat performance, but the all-time record goes to Elizabeth Taylor with a total of 11, followed by Marilyn Monroe's nine and Sophia Loren's seven.

For a long time, you could pick up a vintage copy of Life for a couple of dollars, but prices have been rising. Certain examples are especially collectible, due to their scarcity or the historical or crossover interest of their covers. These include:

- Nov. 23, 1936 - first photographic cover.

- May 3, 1937 - Jean Harlow.

- Nov. 8, 1937 - Greta Garbo, photographed as Camille by Clarence Bull.

- July 11, 1938 - Shirley Temple.

- Aug. 22, 1938 - Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

- Sept. 26, 1938 - Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

- June 12, 1950 - Hopalong Cassidy.

- April 7, 1952 - Marilyn Monroe's only black-and-white cover.

- November 1963 - the Kennedy assassination.

- Aug. 28, 1964 - The Beatles.

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