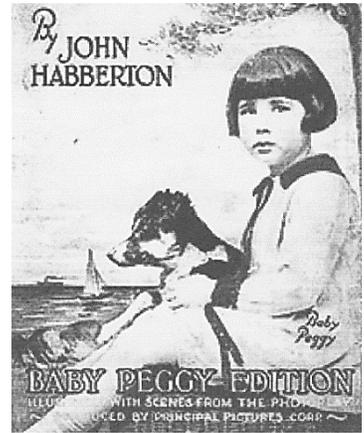


## Diana Serra Cary Peggy-Jean Montgomery - “Baby Peggy”

(information from Wikipedia, New York Times obituary after her death in 2020, and “Whatever Happened to Baby Peggy” a book written by Diana Cary)

Diana Serra Cary was born Peggy Jean Montgomery on October 29, 1918 in San Diego to Marian and Jack Montgomery. She was also known as Baby Peggy and was an American child film actress, vaudevillian, author and silent film historian. She was the last living American film star of the Silent Era of Hollywood.



Jack Montgomery found work in Hollywood as a stuntman. Peggy was just a toddler when her mother, who had never seen a movie set, took her along on a visit to Century Studio. A director spotted Peggy-Jean on a stool. The director had been looking everywhere for a small child to work with one of their famous contract players, who was a dog, Brownie. She was cast with Brownie and that first film was very successful and a star was born.



Diana Serra Cary as Baby Peggy in the 1923 film “The Darling of New York.” By age 5, she had made more than 150 pictures.

Between 1921 and 1923 Baby Peggy made over 150 short films for the Century Film Corporation. In 1922 she received over 1.2 million fan letters and by 1924 she had been dubbed The Million Dollar Baby for her \$1.5 million annual salary. Baby Peggy’s career was controlled by her father. Her film career abruptly ended in 1925 when her father had a falling out with the producer over her salary and canceled her contract.

Her parents continued to spend excessively, wasting much of the money she had made. Jack planned to buy a ranch and convert it into a high-end getaway. The stock market crash of 1929 put an immediate halt to the plans. In 1929 the Montgomery's sold their Beverly Hills home and moved to rural Wyoming where they had made a \$75,000 deposit on the land and existing property. They struggled to make a living and returned to Hollywood in the early 1930s much to the teenage Peggy’s chagrin. Despite her childhood fame and wealth, she found herself poor and working as an extra by the 1930s and was paid three dollars a day.

At the age of seventeen, trying to escape the film industry and her parents’ plans for her life, Peggy ran away from home and rented an apartment with her sister Louise. She married actor Gordon Ayres, whom she met on a movie set in 1938.

In 1941 Peggy's father Jack was injured while working on a Western film. With his cash settlement he was able to buy a dude ranch near Grand Lake, Colorado in 1943. He had been negotiating with the retiring owner whose fair price and easy terms were irresistible.

"It's a beautiful spread, just outside of Grand Lake, Colorado at the western entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. Snow-capped mountains all around, miles of trails, nine solid log guest cabins and a good main lodge. Lights are from carbide gas in a buried tank and the bathrooms are just Chic Sales outside." Peggy asked if he had told Mother. "I figured it's better to spring these things on your mother all of a sudden, rather than let her build up a storm by knowing too long in advance. Once she sees this place, she'll love it." Three weeks later they were on their way to Colorado.



Jack asked Peggy and Gordon if they would help him on the ranch. Both preferred Colorado to wartime Hollywood. When Gordon's draft notice arrived, he appealed his 1-A status on the basis that the West had been picked clean of manpower and he would be needed to help harvest hay on the family ranch in Colorado. The day before they were to leave for Grand Lake, Gordon reported to the Los Angeles induction center. At noon he called to say they had turned down his request for deferment, he had passed his physical and was on his way to boot camp for basic training.

At the age of twenty-five, Peggy had no job skills and her movie career was over. But on the ranch Peggy could at least be useful doing work she knew. She saved fifty dollars a month from her father and her stipend as a serviceman's wife and invested in a herd of Hereford cattle.

The task of running a four-hundred-acre dude ranch was formidable, for despite wartime restrictions on travel, the Montgomerys averaged twenty-five guests a week all summer long. Guests donated their own ration stamps, but most of the time her father's rifle kept enough meat on the table. Her mother decided it was ridiculous to "throw away" two hundred dollars a month on a cook who couldn't feed twenty-five guests as well or as economically as she.

During haying season Peggy doubled as trail guide and member of the hay crew, working beside Mexican cowboys to get the hay crop in.



Among the guests at the ranch was a silver-haired fisherman named Malcolm Myer. He was head librarian of the Denver Public Library and founder of the famed Western History Room. When Peggy told him of her interest in Indian lore and Western Americana, he invited her to come to Denver and spend two weeks with him in the library. It was like being welcomed into paradise. Peggy told him that if Gordon went overseas, she was planning to take a correspondence course and asked his advice. He offered to direct her studies and treat her like my own private graduate student and would loan her the books.

Gordon was given a permanent assignment at Fort Ord in California and asked Peggy to join him. She promised to return to the ranch to work through the following summer and Dr. Myer said he could send her books to Carmel, California just as easily as Grand Lake.

Peggy spent the next two summers working at the ranch. Jack was in his mid-fifties and was concerned about his age. He became restless and bored with the work of ranching. Peggy took over as a wrangler-guide, racking up hundreds of miles on daylong trail rides. And when her father shot a two-prong buck at dawn, Peggy helped him load the carcass in the station wagon and help him hang and clean it in the barn. Peggy made up the guest cabins daily, helped her mother prepare and serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, did the dishes and sang Western ballads around the campfire at night. Once a week Mother and Peggy laundered eighty sheets, forty pillowcases and scores of other linens in a small, gasoline-driven washer with a hand-turned wringer between breakfast and high noon, when it was time to have a hearty lunch on the table for two dozen starving dudes fresh from the trail.



If the summers were rugged, the winters were man-killers. There were no caretakers left, Peggy went back to California to be with her husband at Fort Ord. Jack and Marian were forced to put in two long winters at the ranch alone. Two feet of snow on the level was not uncommon and still cows had to be milked, chickens fed, eggs gathered, coal and wood hauled. When illness and the heavy round of chores put Jack in bed, Marian took over, hitched up the team of dappled grays to the hay sled, hauled and scattered feed in the upper pasture.

Next summer, Peggy tried to convince her father that the ranch was almost paid for and the war would soon be over and next summer the ranch would make a killing. Peggy set to work with a vengeance, cleaning out the horse and cow barns, a task that took three hours of wielding a pitchfork and singing “Buffalo Gal” to help keep up the pace. She rode up to the flooded meadow and attacked the interwoven willow dams with a shovel to get the creeks flowing again. Peggy stood gazing up at the white cone of towering Mount Baker and the dark forest of second-growth pines covering its flanks. She had ridden over every inch of that range and just gazing up at that lovely mountain made her feel rested.

One hot August day Jack and Peggy were in search of some missing saddle horses and rode into the yard of a neighbor’s ranch. A newcomer was on his shaded veranda with his guests, sharing a cool drink. They walked the ponies right up to the hitching rack in front of the main lodge and Jack inquired if they had seen any strays with their brand. “No, we haven’t,” the man said, “but why don’t you have lunch with us? Just tie your horses up there at the rail.” Without looking at her father, Peggy knew the man had committed a mortal sin against the “Code of the West” by asking us to tie up our own mounts and thinking we would permit them to stand, saddled, under a blazing noonday sun. “Thanks anyway, we packed our own lunch.”

On one of Peggy’s last rides together along the Colorado river, Jack said “This whole country is fillin’ up with gunsils. They just don’t do things the way they should be done – they’re not the same kind of people I used to know.” They were strangers to the Code. The dream ranch could not be made to exist if the old range customs were gone. Among the new generation of ranchers, everything was becoming mechanized, they were truck and tractor crazy.

A week later Japan surrendered. The war was over. Gordon was discharged from the army in April of 1946. Gordon was in love with show business and not with Peggy. He left for Broadway. As Peggy was ready to leave for the ranch in June, she received a phone call from her Father. “Well, Peg, your mother and I are

headed your way. A wealthy young investor from Maryland came by in February and expressed interest in the place. It's been a helluva long winter for an old man and it's still spittin' snow. He called back, made me a good offer – and well, I've just sold the ranch!"

Peggy got a job as a switchboard operator at the Carmel phone company. The job not only supported her as the serviceman's allowance had been terminated, but it restored her confidence and self-esteem. She opened a checking account, put away savings, bought a nice wardrobe and paid off the debts that Gordon left behind. During those nineteen months Peggy took instructions in the Catholic faith and was baptized and confirmed in Carmel Mission, taking Serra as my confirmation name. She had finally found the emotional and spiritual home she had been seeking.

In 1948 when Gordon called after almost two years, she sent him money for an airline ticket to come home. On the third day following his return he said "I really didn't plan to stay. I only came back to get a divorce."

Peggy was a switchboard operator and a bookstore clerk, and then managed a gift shop in Santa Barbara. She told no one of her past and took the name Diana Serra. In 1954 she married Robert "Bob" Cary, an artist, and took his surname. The Carys settled in Mexico where he painted and she became a freelance journalist, writing magazine articles. In 1970 they moved to LaJolla, part of San Diego, and she began a new career as a film historian. Her first book "The Hollywood Posse" was an account of stunt riders in film. Her second "Hollywood's Children" recounted the often-troubling stories of child actors.

But it was the years of work on her memoir, "Whatever Happened to Baby Peggy", the autobiography of Hollywood's Pioneer Child Star that proved therapeutic and redemptive. For her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2017, Ms. Cary self-published a first novel, "The Drowning of the Moon," a historical tale set in the Mexican-American colonial empire of New Spain and featuring the noble women of a silver-mining dynasty facing civil war. In recent years she appeared at silent film festivals, lectured and gave interviews about her career.



Diana with Baby Peggy dolls sold during the 1920s.



The Carys lived for many years in Gustine, California. Bob Cary died in 2001. Diana Serra Cary, child star 'Baby Peggy' of silent film died on February 24, 2020 at the age of 101. Diana Cary's survivors include their son, Mark and a granddaughter.