

Tom Ewell

(1909-1994)

By Jerry Long



Biography From Wikipedia.org

Tom Ewell (born Samuel Yewell Tompkins, April 29, 1909 – September 12, 1994) was an American film, stage and television actor, and producer. His most successful and most identifiable role was that of Richard Sherman in *The Seven Year Itch*, a character he played in the Broadway production (1952–1954) and reprised for the 1955 film adaptation. He received a Tony Award for his work in the play and a Golden Globe Award for his performance in the film. Although Ewell preferred acting on stage, he accepted several other screen roles in light comedies of the 1950s, most notably *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956). He appeared in the film version of the musical *State Fair* (1962) and in a small number of additional ones released between the early 1960s and 1980s.

Ewell was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, the son of Martine (nee Yewell) and Samuel William Tompkins. His family expected him to follow in their footsteps as lawyers or whiskey and tobacco dealers, but Ewell decided to pursue acting instead. He began acting in summer stock in 1928 with Don Ameche before moving to New York City in 1931. He enrolled in the Actors Studio.

He made his Broadway debut in 1934 and his film debut in 1940, and for several years, he played comic supporting roles. His acting career was interrupted during World War II when he served in the United States Navy.

After World War II, Ewell attracted attention with a strong performance in the film *Adam's Rib* (1949), and he began to receive Hollywood roles more frequently. Ewell continued acting in summer stock through the 1940s: He starred opposite June Lockhart in Lawrence Riley's biographical play *Kin Hubbard* in 1951, the story of one of America's greatest humorists and cartoonists, Kin Hubbard. With this play, he made his debut as a producer. In 1947, he won a Clarence Derwent Award for his portrayal of Fred Taylor in the original Broadway cast of *John Loves Mary*.

His most successful and, arguably, most identifiable role came in 1952, when he joined the Broadway production of *The Seven Year Itch* as protagonist Richard Sherman. With Vanessa Brown as "The Girl", Ewell played the part more than 950 times over three years, as he indicated in a mystery guest appearance on the June 12, 1955, airing of *What's My Line?* to promote the 1955 film adaptation. He earned both the Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play and the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor – Motion Picture Musical or Comedy for portraying Sherman.

He enjoyed other film successes, including *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts* with Sheree North and *The Girl Can't Help It* (both 1956) opposite Jayne Mansfield. In *The Girl Can't Help It*, Julie London appears as a mirage to Tom Miller (Ewell) singing her signature song, "Cry Me a River". He played Abel Frake in the 1962 version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *State Fair*. In

1956, at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, he co-starred with Bert Lahr in the U.S. premiere of *Waiting for Godot*.

However, as his film and theater careers seemed to have reached their peaks, he turned his attention to television. Over several years, he played guest roles in numerous series, and received an Emmy Award nomination for his continuing role in *Baretta*. His final acting performance was in a 1986 episode of *Murder, She Wrote*.

From September 1960 to May 1961, Ewell starred in his own television series, in the self-titled *The Tom Ewell Show*, which lasted for one season.

In 1970, Ewell played Hoy Valentine in *The Men From Shiloh* (the rebranded name of *The Virginian*) in the episode titled "With Love, Bullets and Valentines". In the mid-1970s, Ewell enjoyed popular success with a recurring role as retired veteran policeman Billy Truman in the 1970s Emmy-winning TV series *Baretta*. Ewell appeared in 36 episodes of the television-cop series, which starred Robert Blake as Detective Tony Baretta, until its end in 1978. In 1979, he was a guest star on the television series *Taxi*. Ewell also co-starred from 1981 to 1982 as the drunken town doctor in the short-lived television series *Best of the West*.

On March 18, 1946, he married Judy Abbott, daughter of Broadway director George Abbott; the short-lived marriage ended in divorce a year later. Ewell then married Marjorie Sanborn on May 5, 1948; they had a son, Taylor.

Ewell died of undisclosed causes at the Motion Picture Country House and Hospital on September 12, 1994. His widow, Marjorie, said he had suffered a long series of illnesses. Ewell was also survived by his adopted son, Taylor (November 2, 1954), and by his mother, Martine Yewell Tompkins (1889–1998), who lived in Curdsville, Kentucky, where she died at age 109.

In 2003, Ewell was inducted into the Owensboro High School Hall of Fame.

[A listing of the movies (32 – from 1940 to 1983), stage productions (19 – from 1934 to 1965) and television shows (38 – from 1948 to 1986) he starred in can be found on Wikipedia.org]



Daviess County, KY 1910 Federal Census – Samuel Tompkins (Tom Ewell), age 1, is residing with his parents at 812 Frederica Street in Owensboro:

812	128	151	Tompkins Samuel	Head	M	W	38	11	3							Kentucky	
			Martine	Wife	W	W	21	11	3	1	1						Kentucky
			Samuel	Son	M	W	1	5									Kentucky



Daviess County, KY 1920 Federal Census – Samuel Tompkins (Tom Ewell), age 10, is residing with his mother & stepfather, John Reid Alexander, on 18th Street in Owensboro:

1	1	1	Alexander John R	Head	O	W	37	10									Kentucky	
			Martine	Wife	W	W	30	10										Kentucky
			Tompkins Samuel	Step son	M	W	10	8										Kentucky



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 2 May 1925, p.5:

MISS SWEENEY IS BEST TALKER

Wins Declamatory Contest
Held At Senior High;
Yewell Tompkins Second

Miss Elizabeth Sweeney, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Sweeney, won the declamatory contest at the senior high school last night, being awarded a gold medal by the Lions club. Her subject was "Over the Bailster." Yewell Tompkins was second, his subject being "The Famine from Hiawatha." Miss Sweeney is a junior and Mr. Tompkins a sophomore.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 19 May 1926, p.10:

YEWELL TOMPKINS ELECTED LEADER

Rose Curtain Players Have
Annual Banquet At "Y.
W." and Select Officers.

The Rose Curtain Players, a dramatic organization of the senior high school, held their annual banquet at the Y. W. C. A. last night, with covers laid for thirty-one guests. Following the program officers were elected for the coming year as follows: Yewell Tompkins, president; Julia Lee Ditto, vice president; Carl Gruenke, secretary; Ellen Hart Smith, treasurer.

President Truitt Siler was toastmaster for the evening. Miss Cilffordean Hammond rendered a vocal solo, accompanied by Miss Colistia Jones. Supt. J. L. Foust, in a toast to the players sketched a bit of history of the drama from its beginning to its present development, wishing success to the Rose Curtain Players and their program for next year.

Miss Emma Dru Wilson gave the response to this toast. Miss Rena Calhoun, one of the directors, gave a talk on "Make-up" and told of the progress of amateur theatricals; that never in history has there been the interest in amateur production of plays as at the present.

Principal J. O. Lewis gave an impromptu talk to the members. President Siler gave a short talk telling of the accomplishments of the club and at this point announced the officers for the coming year. Yewell Tompkins, the new president, had a few words, and Supt. Foust followed with the good news for the club that the organizer, A. J. Larence, who has been at Kentucky university the past year, will again be a member of the faculty of the senior high school next year, Mr. Lawrence organized the Rose Curtain Players in the fall of 1924, and has been one of the directors.



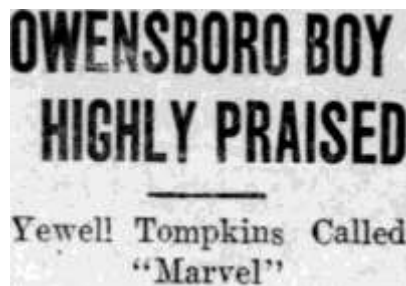
**The Owensboroan, Owensboro High School,
yearbook, Owensboro, KY, 1927, p.27:**



YEWELL TOMPKINS
"STRAWBERRY"
Classical
President of Dramatic Club '26-'27;
Dramatic Club; Officers Club; Student
Council; Member of Honor System
Committee; Debating Team '27; Latin
Club; "Chuckles"; "13th Chair"; Class
Grumbler.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 19 April 1927, p.10:



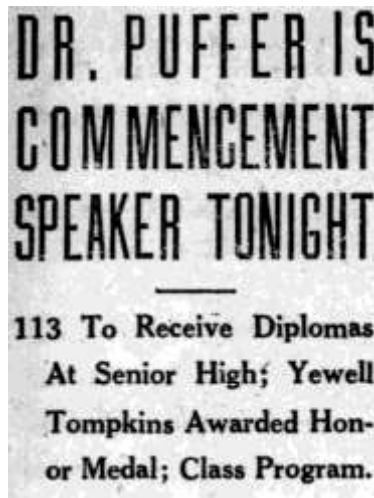
Yewell Tompkins' winning of honors in the state declamatory contest at Lexington last week occasioned a laudatory letter from Wellington Patrick, director of the extension department of the University of Kentucky, to Supt J. L. Foust who congratulated both the talented Owensboro youth for his demonstrated forensic ability and his instructor Prof. Virgil Sturgill, for the excellent coaching which helped to win the prize.

Following is the letter:

"I am writing to send my congratulations on the performance of Mr. Yewell Tompkins, who won first honors in the state in boys' declamation. The: performance of this young man was a marvel to the judges and critics who heard him. He was certainly outstanding and to my memory this is the best declamation of its kind that has been given in the state of Kentucky within the last five years. He not only shows remarkable training, but rare ability and I want to convey to you my appreciation of the honor that he brought to your school."



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 26 May 1927, p.8:



Class Day Exercises

Yewell Tompkins, senior, a son of Mrs. John Reid Alexander, was awarded the honor student medal, one of the highest honors of the year, during the class day exercises yesterday afternoon at the senior high school auditorium. A handsome gold medal, offered this year by Capt. James Kennedy, of Fairmont, W. Va., formerly in charge of the high school R. O. T. C, was presented by Principal J. O. Lewis.

This honor was awarded Mr. Tompkins by vote of the faculty, the points by which it came to him being rated according to attitude, leadership, participation in school activities, scholarship, deportment and attendance. Young Tompkins won the state championship in declamatory sponsored by the University earlier in the spring. He has carried the presidency of the Rose Curtain Players, and his taken a leading part in all of the school activities and is a general favorite with students and faculty. He has made a splendid record during his high school career.

The honor medal has been a custom for the past three years. In 1925 it was won by Miss Reba Robertson, and in 1926, Samuel Archer.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 16 June 1929, p.16:

**Yewell Tompkins Makes
Good In Dramatic Roles**

Yewell Tompkins, Owensboro, a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, has achieved dramatic prominence on the campus. He has appeared in "The Poor Nut" (1929 Prom. Play) "Romance," "A Night of The Trojan War," "La Natural," (Spanish play), "The Devil's Desciple," "The Terrible . Meek," and "The Importance of Being Earnest," (1930 Prom play). In addition to these, he has been working this spring with the Al Jackson Players, a stock company in Madison.

He has appeared in ,the following stock company productions: "The Trial of 'Mary Dugan," "Kongo," "Spider," "Hit the Deck," with Mrs. Leslie Carter in "The Shanghai Gesture," with Marguerite De La Motte (leading lady of Douglas Fairbanks) in "The Great Necker," and other productions. Tompkins has also taken part in other campus activities.



Daviess County, KY 1930 Federal Census

– Samuel Tompkins (Tom Ewell), age 20,
is listed as being absent from the residence at 1817 Frederica Street in Owensboro:

1817	165	175	Alexander John R	Head	W	900.	R	20	M	20	49	M	34
			Martine J	Wife				V	F	W	41	M	18
			Sheet 7 A Line 24										
1817			Tompkins S. Yewell	Step-son					N	M	20		18



**The Badger, University of Wisconsin yearbook,
Madison, WI, 1932, p.318**



S. Yewell Tompkins –
President of the group, “Wisconsin Players”
Entered University of Wisconsin in September 1927



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 31 January 1934, p.10:

Heard About Town

Yewell Tompkins has been engaged by the Theatre Guild for its next production, "They Shall Not Die," a play concerning the Scottsboro rase by John Sexley, author of "The Last Mile." The production will have its premiere in Washington, D. C, February 19, and will open in New York a week later. The cast includes Ruth Gordon, Linda Watkins, Helen Westley and Claude Rains. Mr. Rains has just returned from Hollywood where he played the title role in "'The Invisible Man." Mr. Tompkins is a son of Mrs. John Reid Alexander, of Owensboro. His professional name is "Tom Ewell." He has appeared on "The March of Time" radio program several times this winter.

[Note: This is the first appearance of the stage name, “Tom Ewell” found in the Owensboro newspapers.]



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 8 March 1936, p.1B:

Yewell Tompkins, Under Stage Name of
"Tom Ewell," Makes Good On Broadway



U.S. World War II Draft Card

Birth 29 April 1909 (not 1900) - registered 16 October 1940 in New York City:

SERIAL NUMBER 3206		1. NAME (Print) Tom Ewell <small>(First) (Middle) (Last)</small>		ORDER NUMBER 1588
2. ADDRESS (Print) 137 East 40th St New York, N.Y. <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
3. TELEPHONE LE. 2-8753 <small>(Exchange) (Number)</small>	4. AGE IN YEARS 31 <small>DATE OF BIRTH Apr. 29, 1909 <small>(Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)</small></small>	5. PLACE OF BIRTH Owensboro Ky. <small>(Town or county) (State or country)</small>	6. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP U.S.A. American.	
7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Mrs. Martine Tompkins <small>(Mr., Mrs., Miss) (First) (Middle) (Last)</small>			8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON Mother.	
9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON State Treasurers Office, Louisville Ky. <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
10. EMPLOYER'S NAME Jack Kirklund.				
11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Forrest Theatre, N.Y. City, N.Y. <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.				
REGISTRATION CARD D. S. S. FORM 1 <small>(Form)</small>		16-17108 Tom Ewell <small>(Registrant's signature)</small>		



See also article on Tom Ewell's mother, Martine Yewell Tompkins on website, [West-Central Kentucky History & Genealogy](#), by Jerry Long



Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, 1 May 1955, p.1E:

It's Still Yewell Tompkins to Owensboro Friends of Tom Ewell, Star of Hit Play 'Seven Year Itch'
By Margaret Knox Morgan



Tom Ewell
He's still Yewell to many



Martine Tompkins
Lives near Owensboro

WHEN "The Seven Year Itch" comes South during the second week of May, the play bills of Louisville and Evansville will announce that the cast is headed by a star named Tom Ewell. But in Owensboro, where Tom Ewell was born, he's still known as Yewell Tompkins to schoolmates and friends of his mother, Mrs. Martine Tompkins. There, even converts to Tom's stage name absent-mindedly look in files under Y's instead of E's when they're looking for information about him.

The man whose performance in "The Itch" has threatened to break all previous records for long runs on Broadway must have been destined for the stage from birth. His grandfather, the late Martin Yewell, was Mayor of Owensboro when Yewell was born. A circus came to town when the baby was 10 days old, and the proud grandfather could see no reason for his grandson to miss the show simply because the infant wasn't going out a great deal socially.

The Elephants Bow

As the parade passed down Frederica Street each elephant, as it reached the Tompkins home, paused, turned half way around to face the house, bowed, then resumed its trek through town.

Of his early years in Owensboro Tom has said, "I used to recite at the drop of a hat. I was really a menace. No church or Rotary Club or local Elks' minstrel was safe from me. I always was trying to push myself forward. I told my mother I was going to be a star actor. I didn't say 'actor.' I said 'star actor.' "

By the time Yewell Tompkins had reached high school he was doing still more about that yew to be behind footlights. In 1923 he became a charter member of the "Rose Curtain Players," Owensboro Senior High dramatics club. Mrs. J. Eugene Gilbert, who directed the Players then as now in addition to her regular duties as school librarian, remembers that Yewell was actor, technician, assistant director, business manager and practically everything else when a play was in production.

A Different Story

In its review of "The 13th Chair" in the mid-Twenties The Owensboro Messenger said, "Yewell Tompkins was the outstanding star of the play," and he "showed more natural ability than most detectives that have appeared on the professional stage."

Tom Ewell's memories of those days are somewhat different, however. When the present road tour of "The Itch" was in the planning stage, Ewell remarked, "I'd give anything in the world to play Owensboro. If I remember correctly, my last appearance there was in our high school senior play. It was 'Smilin' Through.' I was president of the Players, so I cast myself in the leading role," he admitted.

"I'll never forget it. Toward the end, when I was made up as an old man, I sneezed and a great cloud of white powder used on my hair went floating out over the floodlights," he laughed. "I'd like to do a little bit better for Owensboro." After graduation from high school, Tom enrolled in law at the University of Wisconsin. But he was not completely sold on the legal profession, and it took little encouragement on the part of a classmate named Don Ameche to draw Tom out of college, into stock productions, and eventually to Broadway.

Some Hard Years

The next few years were not easy, even for a man whose natural talent, determination and ambition had been evident from youth. By day Tom worked in department stores, behind soda fountains, at just about anything that would keep him solvent while he attended drama school and had parts in 27 none-too-successful productions.

At some time during the parade of the 27, Tom made some South American shorts for Paramount. His roles in those are among his mother's favorites of all the parts he has played. But his mother was not the only one who liked those interpretations. Katharine Hepburn was equally impressed and asked that Tom be signed for a supporting role in "Adam's Rib," a picture in which she and Spencer Tracy starred.

The picture teas the turning point in the career of Tom Ewell. After that came "Mr. Music," "John Loves Mary" and "Up Front." The great reward for years of yeoman duty came finally in "The Seven Year Itch."

Mrs. Tompkins sent Tom a telegram of congratulations when the play opened, adding, ". . . and I hope it proves to be 'The Elephant Itch.'" The elephant itch, it seems, lasts three years longer than the seven-year variety.

Through all the years leading up to his great success Tom maintained his desire to play Owensboro. Seven years ago he sent Miss Mabel Brown, a family friend, a note from New York: "Dear Brownie, I open in Chicago this coming Monday. . . . Well, we're getting closer to home."

Old Schoolmate

His affection for Owensboro and Owensboroans seems to be mutual. After "The Itch" had played for some time at the Fulton Theater in New York a doorman remarked to Tom, "You must have graduated in the largest class that ever finished at your school. Hundreds of people have come to this door and told me they went to school with you!"

By 1948 Tom had furnished a bachelor apartment which became quite famous among New Yorkers for its tasteful adaptation of antiques and objects of art.

Her son's knowledge of and love for antiques is a pleasant surprise for Martine Tompkins. When Tom was growing up in Daviess County, all of Martine's efforts to interest him in antiques were in vain. Neither could Tom be attracted to the farm which had long been a love of his mother's.

Buy A Farm

Martine was amazed when, after Tom's marriage to Marjorie Sanborn, an attractive New York advertising woman, the two of them bought a 20-acre farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The residence on the farm is a stone house which was built in 1760. Tom says modestly, "All kinds of things are wrong with it bees in the attic, plumbing that won't work but we like it anyway."

The house is furnished in antiques, but nestled among the well-chosen old pieces is a massive new silver cigarette lighter given to Tom by the cast of the movie version of "The Seven Year Itch." The only other similar one was made for Audrey Hepburn.

When Mrs. Tompkins goes to visit the Ewells, she has ample opportunity to exercise her outstanding talents as a Southern cook. She once overheard Tom saying, "We'd been living in Bucks County for ages, and shopped for groceries like everyone else does. But Mother hadn't been at our house 21 hours before she found a farmer who'd sell her day-old eggs by the bucketful, and someone else who let her go to their springhouse for a bucket of cream each day."

Martine doesn't think Tom suffers from malnutrition, though, when she isn't around preparing homemade yeast breads, fried chicken, creamed potatoes, and coconut cakes. "Marjorie

is a wonderful cook," Martine says, "and for a party she sets the most beautiful table you ever saw."

Marjorie is also Tom's best critic, says Mrs. Tompkins. "Ewell never decides on a play until he has taken it home for Marjorie to read and study and pass judgment. Then after a play is in production Marjorie goes into New York once a month to see it. In that way her opinion of the production doesn't become stale, and she can tell Tom whether he is tiring in the role, or retaining a fresh approach."

A New Family Star

The fact that this is the year of "The Seven Year Itch" for the Tom Ewells isn't worrying Marjorie, Tom or Martine. The family has a far more interesting diversion. In November the Tom Ewells adopted tiny Taylor Allen Ewell, who lost no time in replacing his father as the "star" of the family.



A History of Owensboro and Daviess County, Kentucky, Hugh O. Potter, Herr Jones – Paragon Publishing, Montgomery, AL, 1974, pp.189-190 & 220:



Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell in *The Seven Year Itch*

Tom Ewell, who was born Yewell Tompkins on April 29, 1909, achieved the widest fame of any native of Owensboro on Broadway, in motion pictures, on television and radio. He became interested in show business as a youngster in Owensboro and, under the direction of Mrs. J. Eugene Gilbert, became an outstanding star in Owensboro High School Rose Curtain Players productions.

After his high school days, during the mid-1920s, Tompkins went to the University of Wisconsin to study law but soon decided the stage held a greater attraction for him than the courtroom. It was then that he started a long and determined climb to stardom. In New York he adopted the stage name of Tom Ewell and experienced many lean months of successfully reading for parts in plays that became instant failures. He worked at various jobs, including part-time clerking in New York's large department stores, during these discouraging years.

Finally, Tom Ewell found a successful vehicle and "arrived" in a starring role. It was his 28th play, *John loves Mary*, which ran a year on Broadway and brought him major recognition as an actor.

After that came *The Tunnel of Love*, *A Thurber Carnival* and others including *The Seven Year Itch* in which he attained fame and stardom. So outstanding was his portrayal of the husband who suffered from the seven year emotional itch, while his wife was at the seashore for the summer, that he was chosen to play the same role in the movie with Marilyn Monroe. He is widely remembered by moving picture fans for his leering scene in this picture when Marilyn Monroe's skirt was blown hip high as she stood over a New York city sidewalk air grating.

Before and after the *Itch*, Ewell appeared in a number of motion pictures, including *Adam's Rib*, *Lost in Alaska*, *Mr. Music*, *A life of Her Own*, *Finders Keepers*, *American Guerrilla in the Philippines*, *The Girl Can't Help It*, *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts*, *Tender is the Night* in which he was co-starred with Jennifer Jones and Jason Robards, Jr., *State Fair and Up Front*, a comedy based on the humor of World War II Cartoonist Bill Mauldin. This picture was so successful he appeared in a sequel-to it, *Willie and Joe Back Up Front*.

In network television Tom Ewell appeared in various roles and on talk shows including the *Jack Paar Show*, the Alcoa Hour's drama, *Man On Fire*. For one season he had his own series, the *Tom Ewell Show*, in which he portrayed a real estate broker beleaguered by an entirely feminine household, his wife, mother-in-law, three daughters, a female dog and a female bird.

Teamed with his real-life wife, Margie, he starred on an NBC man-and-wife talk show on radio in New York. This daily program, in which the Ewells ad-libbed their observations on topical subjects, was given favorable reviews by the metropolitan press and a warm acceptance by the radio audiences.

It was during this period that the Tom Ewell Drama Scholarship was established at Kentucky Wesleyan College in 1964. In an interview broadcast by WOMI in Owensboro in connection with the announcement of the scholarship, Tom was asked what Marilyn Monroe was "really like." His reply, which shed a new light on the character of the blonde sex symbol, was:

"I couldn't tell you what Marilyn really was like, because truthfully I do not know what Marilyn was really like. I can only tell you that when I worked with her I found her very easy to work with. I found her fun to have lunch with; I found her the sort of person, for example, when she read the Bible, which she did quite a bit, she always read it with the *Life Magazine*, for example, on the outside covering it up because she didn't want people to think she was reading the Bible as a publicity stunt. And I can remember one day at lunch when I saw her with the Bible and she said that 'You know if anyone saw Marilyn Monroe reading the Bible they would say, well that stupid blonde is just trying to crack the papers and get another publicity angle.' It's very difficult to live in a fish bowl because when you really look in the fish bowl you don't know what the person's like."

In the autumn of 1970 Tom Ewell decided to return to his county on a part-time basis. His decision was motivated by the fact, as he explained, that he had "always liked Owensboro and the farm" in the Green river country near Curdsville, and he wanted to spend more time with his mother, Mrs. Martine Yewell Tompkins of Curdsville. Upon his return he was made an Owensboro Ambassador at Large by the Chamber of Commerce and an honorary citizen of Owensboro by the board of city commissioners. The resolution adopted by the mayor and commissioners cited Tom as "an artist of national repute and recognition in the theatrical world".

For the first time since he appeared in Rose Curtain productions at Owensboro High School, Tom Ewell returned on December 7, 1967 to appear before an Owensboro audience in *The*

Impossible Years, a road show which played to a capacity audience in the Daviess County High auditorium.

During the 1972 outdoor theatre season in Kentucky State Parks, Ewell was in charge of all productions, and early in 1973 it was announced he would return to Broadway in a revival of a former hit play.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 13 September 1994, p.1A

**Owensboro's
'Itch' actor
Ewell dies**

Tom Ewell, a Daviess County native best known for his role in the classic Marilyn Monroe movie "The Seven-Year Itch," died Monday at the Motion Picture and Television Country House and Hospital in Woodland Hills, Calif. He was 85.

Ewell, born Yewell Tompkins in Owensboro on April 29, 1909, reversed and shortened his name when he was a struggling actor in New York City during the 1930s. He is survived locally by his mother, Martine Tompkins of Curdsville, and in California by a wife and son.

Despite a stage, film and television career that spanned nearly half a century, Ewell found little joy in his success.

In a 1983 interview with the *Messenger-Inquirer*, Ewell said, "I'm not really proud of anything I've done. I think I've been lucky. But I never really took pride in my work. I was always afraid I wasn't doing it as good as I could." Ewell made his Hollywood debut in 1949's "Adam's Rib" with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.

Appearances followed in such films as "American Guerilla in the Philippines" (1950), "Up Front" (1950), "The Lieutenant Wore Skirts" (1955), "The Girl Can't Help It" (1956), "Tender Is The Night" (1962), "Suppose They Gave A War And Nobody Came" (1970), "To Find A Man" (1972), "They Only Kill Their Masters" (1972) and "The Great Gatsby" (1974).

The only movie role Ewell would acknowledge pride in was opposite Monroe in Billy Wilder's 1955 classic, "The Seven-Year Itch." He appeared in 750 performances of "Itch" on Broadway, beginning in 1952.

Still, he admitted he was surprised when he was chosen over Gary Cooper, William Holden and other potential candidates for the prize role opposite Monroe, then the nation's most popular sex symbol.

"I never expected to get the part," Ewell said of his role as an urban husband who fantasizes about an affair with the sexpot upstairs while his wife is on vacation. "In fact, I had already taken a house on Martha's Vineyard for a vacation. Needless to say, I'm happy they did choose me." Ironically, however, Ewell said he never saw "The Seven Year Itch," a movie in which he stood beside Monroe when a blast of air blew up her skirt in a moment that created the film's most enduring image.

"I have an inferiority complex that is at times devastating," Ewell said. "I always wanted to look like Henry Fonda, but I never did." The acting bug bit in 1915 when he was 6 years old, visiting his grandfather, former Owensboro Mayor Martin Yewell.

A passing minstrel show parade filled the boy with a desire to perform, he said.

Ewell made his stage debut as a third-grader in Owensboro, playing "Father Time." At Owensboro High School, he became a charter member of the Rose Curtain Players in 1923.

After graduation in 1927, Ewell left Owensboro to study law at the University of Wisconsin.

But an appearance in a college play led him to work in summer stock with Don Ameche - a classmate.

He arrived in New York in 1931 and enrolled in Actor's Studio. Classmates included Marlon Brando, Montgomery Cliff and Karl Malden.

Ewell spent his first years as night manager of a hotel, a dishwasher, a ticket seller and a wrapper in Macy's basement. There were times, he recalled, when he slept on the ledge of a New York subway toilet, too broke for even a flophouse room.

"There were years when I spent more time in Macy's basement with the toy trains than I did on the stage," he recalled.

Ewell served three years in the U.S. Navy during World War II, rising to the rank of lieutenant. His break came two years after the war - with Josh Logan's 1947 play, "John Loves Mary." "So much of it is chance," Ewell said. "Being in the right place at the right time. There are always more people trying to get in than there are parts." On his birthday in 1948, Ewell married the former Marjorie Sanborn, who survives him. They have one son, Taylor Allen Ewell of Brentwood Glen, Calif.

Ewell starred in three television series later in his career: "The Tom Ewell Show," 1960-61; "Baretta," where he was Billy, the ex-cop who managed a hotel, from 1975-78; and "Best of the West," where he was the town doctor, 1981-82.

"Baretta," which featured Robert Blake and a 20-year-old cockatoo named Fred, was Ewell's favorite. "That bird was a mean SOB," he recalled. "But Robert is a wonderful man to work with." In 1970, during a lull in his career, Ewell moved back to Daviess County. He worked in Wendell Ford's campaign for governor and Ford found him a job in the state parks department. But within a year, the bright lights beckoned again and Ewell returned to the West Coast.

In 1975, he came back to Owensboro to serve as grand marshal of the Veterans Day Parade. It was one of his last public appearances in his hometown.

A memorial service is scheduled for 2 p.m. today at Trinity Episcopal Church, 720 Ford Ave.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 21 September 2004, p.2S:

Owensboro's Tom Ewell had itch for acting

By Keith Lawrence

There were times when he slept on a ledge above a New York City subway toilet, too broke for even a flophouse room. And there were times when he entertained presidents and kings in his Broadway dressing room.

But today, Owensboro-born Tom Ewell is best remembered as Richard Sherman, the middle-aged book publisher who lusted for Marilyn Monroe in the 1955 movie, "The Seven-Year Itch."

Despite his success on stage, screen and television, the man born Yewell Tompkins in Owensboro on April 29, 1909, never learned to enjoy his fame.

"I'm not really proud of anything I've done," Ewell said in a 1983 interview. "I think I've been lucky. But I never really took pride in my work. I was always afraid I wasn't doing it as good as I could."

But film critic Leonard Maltin's "Movie Encyclopedia," says, "He's frozen in time, a bemused grin on his rough-hewn face, hands stuffed in the pockets of his rumpled suit, watching Marilyn Monroe's skirt billowing up in that classic moment from 'The Seven Year Itch.' ... While hardly a leading-man type, he proved an ace comic foil opposite some of the 1950s' top screen sexpots ... and was one of the better things about the lackluster 1962 remake of 'State Fair.' "

Actors, Ewell said, "get more credit than we're due. We're just communicators. The actor is a puppet. The writer is the creator."

He appeared in more than 40 Broadway plays, more than 1,000 television roles and never bothered to keep track of the movies, saying, "I never thought movies counted enough to keep up with."

Adam's Rib' film debut

For the record, Ewell made his big-screen debut in 1949 in "Adam's Rib" with Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn.

Appearances followed in "American Guerilla in the Philippines" (1950), "Up Front," (1950), "The Lieutenant Wore Skirts" (1955), "The Girl Can't Help It" (1956, with the other '50s sex symbol, Jayne Mansfield), "Tender is the Night" (1962), "Suppose They Gave A War And Nobody Came" (1970), "To Find A Man" (1972), "They Only Kill Their Masters" (1972) and "The Great Gatsby" (1974).

Ewell dismissed those roles. "The theater is the actor's medium," he said. "Movies are the director's, and television is the technician's."

But "Itch" was the one movie he didn't dismiss.

"People have such wild ideas about Marilyn," Ewell said. "They see in her what they want to see. They confuse the person with the roles she played. I adored Marilyn. She was such a lovely person, so easy to work with."

But Ewell had never seen the movie.

"I have an inferiority complex that is at times devastating," he said. "I always wanted to look like Henry Fonda, but I never did. I try to act from the inside out, to think 'if I was this person how would I look, how would I be?' I try not to have a mental image of myself, but of the character."

Ewell said he never sat down to watch a movie or a television show in which he appeared.

"I've peeked a couple of times when my wife was watching," he said, "at times when I think I've been pretty good. But I'm always disappointed."

The thousands of characters he played were easily discarded from his mind.

"I don't remember any of their names," Ewell said. "And I don't remember a single line from any play."

Smitten at 6

The acting bug bit him hard in 1915, when he was 6.

"I was visiting my grandfather (former Mayor Martin Yewell) down on Frederica Street," Ewell said. "I heard a band coming, and I rushed out to the street. It was Al G. Field's minstrels,

coming to play the Grand Opera House. There were all these people in costumes, all these people laughing. That's when the bug bit."

He went before the footlights for the first time as a third-grader, playing Father Time in a school play.

At Owensboro High School, Ewell was a charter member of the Rose Curtain Players in 1923.

In 1927, he headed for the University of Wisconsin to study law. But the theater won his heart.

During his sophomore year, Ewell filled in for a sick friend in the part of a janitor in a stock production of "The Spider."

His line was supposed to be, "What the hell's going on here?" But Ewell shouted, "What am I doing here?"

"The first time I was paid for acting was in 1928," he said. "I did summer stock with Don Ameche until we graduated."

Looking back, Ewell said, "I wasted time in college. I could have been a better actor if I had gone to New York earlier."

When he did get to New York in 1931, he enrolled in Actor's Studio. Classmates included Marlon Brando, Montgomery Cliff and Karl Malden.

"Of the 40 in the class, 20 became stars," Ewell said.

But Broadway wasn't waiting with open arms. And America was in the depths of the Great Depression.

He slept on a ledge over the toilets in the men's room in the subway because he didn't have enough money for a room. Then, he graduated to living on \$1.80 a day - \$1 for a room and 80 cents for oatmeal and two eggs.

Ewell found work as a night manager of a hotel, a dishwasher in a restaurant, a ticket seller for a stock company and a wrapper in Macy's basement.

"It was an exciting life," he said. "In time, I met presidents, kings and Supreme Court justices and some of the richest men and women in the country."

Broadway debut in 1934

His Broadway debut came on Feb. 21, 1934, as a hobo in John Wexley's "They Shall Not Die," based on the real-life 1931 Scottsboro Boys rape trial in Alabama. But Ewell almost lost the part - because the director thought his accent wasn't southern enough.

The play ran eight weeks and folded. That was a pattern that would last for several years.

"I was in 27 plays before my first hit," Ewell said.

His credits include "Tobacco Road," "Let Freedom Ring," "Ethan Frome," "Brother Rat" and "Family Portrait."

"Owensboro people were always wonderful to me," Ewell said. "They came to see me so much. I remember one year, we opened a play just before Christmas and several people came from Owensboro. It folded two days later. And I was back at Macy's, in the toy department with the trains. There were years when I spent more time in Macy's cellar than I did on the stage."

World War II came along and the redheaded actor with the big brown eyes won a three-year engagement as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy.

Back to Broadway

Then, he headed back to Broadway, picking up where he left off - looking for work.

Ewell's big break came in 1947.

Oscar Hammerstein's wife had taken a liking to the young actor and wanted him in her husband's new play, "John Loves Mary."

But director Josh Logan "didn't want any part of me," Ewell said.

Mrs. Hammerstein slipped Ewell a copy of the script, along with the time and place of auditions. He crashed the auditions and got the lead.

"So much of it is chance," Ewell said. "Being in the right place at the right time. There are always more people trying to get in than there are parts."

In November 1952 he won the lead in the Broadway version of "The Seven-Year Itch" and appeared in 750 performances before making the movie.

He recalled a hot May matinee when the audience wasn't responding to "Itch," and he decided to just walk through the part.

Later, a woman came up to him with tears in her eyes to tell him that performance was the first time she'd seen her friend smile in years.

"I felt so low," Ewell said. "You should always give your best and never let your feelings get involved."

He starred in three television series - "The Tom Ewell Show," 1960-61; "Baretta" 1975-78; and "Best of the West," 1981-82.

"Both the first and last were quickly canceled - fortunately," Ewell said. "They were pretty lousy."

But of "Baretta," in which he co-starred with Robert Blake, Ewell said, "I don't think I ever enjoyed anything as much as that show."

On Sept. 12, 1994, at age 85, Ewell took his final curtain call at the Motion Picture and Television Country House and Hospital in Woodland Hills, Calif.

In November 1999, he was inducted into the Owensboro-Daviess County Tourist Commission's Hall of Fame. And in September 2003, Ewell was inducted into the Owensboro High School Hall of Achievement.





Tom Ewell and Marilyn Monroe in classic scene from the 1955 movie, "The Seven Year Itch"



The following are just a sampling of articles about Tom Ewell that appeared in the Owensboro and Louisville, KY newspapers. He is probably the most publicized and written about person over the years in the Owensboro newspapers:

- Owensboro Messenger – 1925 5/2 p.5 (Yewell Tompkins placed second in a 'declamatory contest' at Owensboro High School)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1926: 5/19 p.10 (elected president of the Rose Curtain players at Owensboro High School)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1927: 4/19 p.10 (highly praised)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1927: 5/26 p.8 (awarded the Owensboro Senior High School honor medal)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1929: 6/16 p.16 (makes good in dramatic roles at University of Wisconsin)

- Owensboro Messenger – 1934: 1/31 p.10 (engaged to perform in play, “They Shall Not Die”; first appearance of stage name, “Tom Ewell” in the Owensboro newspapers)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1936: 3/8 p.1B (“Yewell Tompkins, Under Stage Name of ‘Tom Ewell,’ Makes Good On Broadway”)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1942: 3/31 p.5 (“Yewell Tompkins, Well Known Young Actor, Training For Theatre of War”)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1943: 2/21 p.3A (joined the Navy as an apprentice seaman a year ago, has been commissioned an ensign)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1945: 11/11 p.1B (picture with 1924- 1925 Rose Curtain Players)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1948: 4/30 p.24 (married New York girl, Marjorie Sanborn, on 29 April 1948 in Crown Point, Indiana, the son of Mrs. M. Y. Tompkins of Owensboro)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1949: 10/16 p.10D (“Owensboro Boy Leaves New York For Hollywood”)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1949: 12/11 p.4B (“Owensboroan, Who Has Become Broadway Star, Has Fourth Billing In Screen Hit”)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1955: 5/1 p.1E (“It’s Still Yewell Tompkins to Owensboro Friends of Tom Ewell, Star of Hit Play ‘Seven Year Itch’”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1955: 5/8 p.13A (“Welcome Mat Would Be Out If Ewell Were Coming Home”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1964: 10/26 p.1B (“KWC Announces Establishment of Tom Ewell Drama Scholarship”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1967: 12/9 p.1B & 6B (“Tom Ewell Plays For Home Town”, ‘Tom Ewell Day’ in Owensboro, he is making his first stage appearance here since his Rose Curtain days at OHS, he is performing in the "Impossible Years" at the Daviess County High auditorium)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1970: 9/29 p.1B (“Tom Ewell Swaps Big City For Country – Returns Home”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1972: 4/14 p.1B (to manage the Kentucky State Park’s theatres)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1975: 11/9 p.1A (“Senator Ford, actor Tom Ewell come home, pay tribute to vets”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1978: 11/16 p.2C (“Still Drawing: making them laugh in Baltimore”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1983: 11/11 p.1D by Keith Lawrence (“Owensboro native ‘not really proud’ of his acting success”)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1984: 8/20 p.10B (“Kentucky's Tom Ewell recalls the lonely star as 'Seven Year Itch' plays a local theatre”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1994: 9/13 p.1A (died 12 September 1994 in Woodland, CA)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1999: 11/28 p.2A (inducted into the Owensboro-Daviess County Tourist Commission Hall of Fame on 27 November 1999)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2004: 2/12 p.1B (“We should celebrate 50th anniversary of 'Itch'”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2004: 8/12 p.1B (“Effort under way to place plaque at actor Tom Ewell 's birthplace”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2004: 9/21 p.2S (“Owensboro's Tom Ewell had itch for acting”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2012: 5/17 p.1B (“Ewell never felt joy his work gave others”)





Southampton Cemetery
Southampton, Suffolk County, New York

