



Marilyn Monroe during her visit to Bement in August 1955.

HOLLYWOOD CALLING

SIXTY YEARS AGO, **MARILYN MONROE** TRAVELED TO BEMENT, ILLINOIS, IN HONOR OF THE TOWN'S CENTENNIAL AND HER ALL-TIME IDOL, PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN. **BY DAWN REISS**

Marilyn Monroe would probably never have visited the downstate village of Bement, Illinois, in early August 1955—just two months after the release of *The Seven Year Itch*—had it not been for a chance encounter with Robert Carleton Smith, a native of the rural town who founded the National Arts Foundation and counted then-President Harry Truman among his friends. “Carleton met her at a New York hotel,” says Harry Porter, 79, who met the actress himself soon after his graduation from high school. “She didn’t have enough money to pay for her room because her manager screwed up, so Carleton told her he’d pay for the room ‘if you come to Bement for me’” for the town’s centennial.

After flying to Champaign and being escorted the 30 miles into town for the celebration, Monroe “went to the nursing home and hugged all the ladies like she was their friend,” Porter says. The soft-spoken actress visited Bryant Cottage, where her hero, Abraham Lincoln, and Stephen Douglas met to discuss their 1858 debates; toured Bement High School, where she browsed a national art exhibit Smith had procured for the centennial; and rode in a

parade in a yellow Studebaker convertible. A wooden plank was added to the football field, which Monroe cat-walked, touching the faces of the men who had entered a “Brothers of the Bush” beard contest. Sporting a top hat, dark tinted glasses, and a snowy beard, Porter’s father, William “Cotton” Porter, took the honors, landing a kiss from Monroe and a spot on the television show *I’ve Got a Secret*.

Bement’s current village president and barber to the town of 1,726 people, Pat Tieman, bought the two-story Victorian home where Monroe rested her swollen ankles and took a nap on a cot in an upstairs bedroom. Locals guarded the back door, Tieman says, but it was still kicked down while others stormed the roof to peer over and catch a glimpse. “It is the biggest thing that’s ever happened here,” says Tieman, 50, who flew to New York to a Christie’s auction in October 1999 and tried, unsuccessfully, to bid on the white sleeveless dress Monroe wore for the occasion. “I don’t think you could get a star to do that today.” **MA**