Frank Capra
1897–1991

Born in Sicily in 1897, Frank Capra immigrated to the United States with his family in 1903. The family settled in Los Angeles, where Capra attended public schools, defying his parents, who urged him to instead work and help support the family. After graduating from high school, Capra entered Throop College of Technology (now the California Institute of Technology) to study chemical engineering. It was there that he discovered poetry and decided to write.

After graduating from Throop in 1918, Capra had his first experience in the movies as an extra in a Western. During the next several years, Capra worked as an extra and as a prop boy, and even tried to start a movie production business. He found little success and had to work at a variety of menial jobs to make ends meet. Finally in 1924 Capra was hired by Hal Roach Studios as a gag writer for the “Our Gang” series. He worked as a writer for different studios for several years before being hired as a director for Columbia Pictures in 1927. Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, Capra developed his directing and storytelling style and transitioned with the rest of Hollywood from silent movies to “talkies.”

It was during the Great Depression that Capra proved his ability to connect with audiences. As Americans endured seemingly unending hardship, Capra offered movies in which honest characters endured hardships, too, but everything turned out well in the end. In 1931’s Platinum Blonde, Capra presented the first of what would become his signature character—an honest if unsophisticated man who regains his faith in human goodness with the help of his cynical but honorable girlfriend.

In 1934 Capra directed the comedy It Happened One Night, which won Oscars for best film, screenplay, director, actor (Clark Gable), and actress
The New Deal

(Claudette Colbert). The film made stars of Colbert and Gable, and improved the image and financial status of Columbia Pictures.

In 1935 a religious experience during an illness led Capra to remove every hint of sexuality from his movies. The result was a string of movies so wholesome and hopeful they would be criticized as “Capra-corn.” Mr. Deeds Goes to Town was released in 1936 to great acclaim, followed by You Can’t Take It with You in 1938, and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington in 1939. These films both entertained the viewer and suggested the possibility of better times to come. They tried to reinforce the democratic values that everyday people could improve government.

In later years, Capra again changed with the times. He joined the army during World War II and created the film series Why We Fight, originally made for the armed forces and shown during training. It was later shown in movie theaters to great critical praise. One segment, The Negro Soldier, showed the accomplishments and contributions of African American soldiers during the war. By the time he was discharged in 1945, Capra had received the Distinguished Service Medal, the Order of the British Empire, and the French Legion of Merit.

Capra won three Academy Awards for best director, and directed 10 actors in performances that gained them Academy Award nominations. Unfortunately, Capra would never again see the brilliant success in the movies he had once known. Today It’s a Wonderful Life is a holiday classic, played on television every December, but when it was released in 1947 it flopped and lost money. His next two films failed as well, and Capra faded from Hollywood.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Identify Why were Capra’s Depression-era movies so popular?

2. Contrast In what ways are popular movies today alike and different from Capra’s movies of the 1930s?

ACTIVITY

Choose one of Capra’s movies from the 1930s. Watch it and then write a review of it from the point of view of someone who saw it in the 1930s, when it was first released. Point out ways in which it might give hope for the future and reinforce American democratic values.