

## Episode 3, 2012: Betty Page Slide

Claire Sharp: My name is Claire Sharp. I live in Severna Park, Maryland and I collect suitcases. My husband won this at an auction. It cost 20 bucks. I had it for about five years before I actually looked in it. My son was using it as a high chair. It contains slides, like 1950s style safety slides. And all the way in the very back, I found a negative. So I had this print made. I knew who it was right away. Bettie Page to me is an American icon. There's something about her that has innocence and sexuality melded together in just the right way. So I did a little research. Found out that there was a court case, in the 50s, about pornographic images. A lot of these images were burned, and a lot of them were Bettie Page images. So, I want to know if this is a lost image of Bettie Page.

Gwen: If Claire's negative did somehow escape a pornography crackdown, it might be something special. With her black bangs and naughty-but-nice gaze, Bettie Page is instantly recognizable today as a style icon and pre-feminist sexual heroine. But, in the 1950's she was simply Queen of the "Pin Ups" - a type of photograph made popular by GI's in World War II.

The military encouraged them to have pinups on their lockers. And, even to paint pictures of sexy girls on the airplanes, or on some of the weapons. This is where we got the expression "bombshell".

In post war America, pinups were a booming market in mail order and magazines. Arriving in New York in 1947, Bettie would become the center of that world. But in 1955 Bettie and Irving Klaw, the owner of one of the photography studios she worked for, became the target of a crusading Senator Estes Kefauver. To avoid prison, Klaw destroyed his Bettie Paige images.

Is Claire's negative an Irving Klaw shot that somehow escaped? One person who might know is filmmaker Mark Mori. He spent the past five years researching Bettie Page, and her relationship with Irving Klaw, for his documentary "Bettie Page Reveals All".

Do you know how many pictures Irving Klaw took of Bettie Page?

Mark Mori: Bettie told me, that Irving told her that he had fifteen hundred photographs of her. The cheesecake photographs were published widely, and you couldn't walk past a newsstand in New York without seeing Bettie Page.

Gwen: Mark says Klaw sold the images in his store and through a thriving mail order business.

The object I'm investigating is, is not really the picture itself. But, it's this negative, which is in a slide mount. Do you know how Irving Klaw produced his pictures?

Mark: Irving Klaw generally did not shoot in color, just cause it was more expensive and getting it developed was more of a problem. And I haven't really seen a negative in a slide mounting.

Gwen: So maybe this wasn't produced by Klaw, but rather by another photographer. If so, Mark says it might be hard to trace. Bettie Page was a prized subject for many photo shoots.

Mark: They had what they called camera clubs.

Gwen: Um hmm.

Mark: Guys would get together on the weekend; they'd each pay five bucks. There might be as many as thirty or forty guys with cameras, three or four models. Bettie became by far the most popular model in the New York camera clubs.

Gwen: Even by Bettie standards, Mark says our negative is rather tame. Much of her camera club work was nude. While publishing nude photos was illegal, shooting them was not. But camera clubs did occasionally brush with the law.

Mark: In fact, Bettie was arrested one time for taking nude photographs on a farm in Upstate New York. All of a sudden these cops jump out of the bushes and, and arrest everybody. This was in 1952. And Bettie became very indignant, cause they charged her with indecent exposure. And she says, "I am not indecent. I will not accept that." So, this is a clue to part of who Bettie is.

Gwen: In contrast to the camera clubs, which tried to avoid obscenity laws by claiming the nude photos weren't for sale, businessman Irving Klaw came up with a different workaround.

Mark: No nudity, no men. It was considered pornography to have men in the photographs. But portraying these wild or fetish scenarios, which were looked down upon and controversial, but difficult to prosecute as pornography.

Gwen: Well, it's fascinating that the definition of what's pornographic, of course, changes constantly by time and by place. So, in the early 50s, this was not illegal pornography.

Mark: It was not illegal, but it was not considered acceptable in the mainstream.

Gwen: What were her attitudes about the bondage pictures?

Mark: Well, her attitudes about the bondage pictures were, "It was just a job," "It was no big deal." Bettie, in no way saw herself as taking a stance for freedom. Even though that's what she did. You know, some people like this stuff, didn't matter to her.

Gwen: But, Mark says, it did matter to others. Although Klaw had many models, it was his Bettie images that caught the eye of a crusading senator from Tennessee.

*News Report: In Washington, Senator Estes Kefauver makes the long anticipated announcement that he will be a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president in 1956.*

Mark: He ran for president, and he decided to go after juvenile delinquency and pornography, to kind of ride that political horse. And, it ended up with Bettie Page in his sights.

Gwen: Irving Klaw was subpoenaed to appear before the senate hearings in New York in 1955.

Mark : He took the Fifth Amendment. Bettie was subpoenaed. She was grilled behind closed doors before the hearing. She said she was not gonna testify against Irving Klaw. She considered none of this pornography. And she did not view herself as being exploited.

Gwen: The Kefauver hearings eventually brought an end to Klaw's mail order business for erotic images. Bettie's last photo shoot at Klaw's studio was in 1957. But the Justice Department continued to come after Klaw. In 1963, he finally struck a deal.

Mark: After he was persecuted for these things, a judge said, "I will take away your five year prison sentence if you destroy all the photographs."

Gwen: He destroyed his negatives and avoided prison, and Bettie traded her bikini for a bible.

Mark: She thought she heard the voice of God calling her to come into this church that she happened to be walking by. She came in, and she started crying and said, "I think maybe God doesn't like the fact that I was posing nude." But, by the time I talked to her later in life, she was not ashamed of the nudity. I think that was an episode where she had a crisis of conscious about it.

Gwen: Looking closely at several images, we spot a clue.

Mark: Here's a Klaw photograph that could be similar to what you have.

Gwen: The red wall is similar. And it might be the same lamp, but it's something else that catches my attention.

Gwen: She wears those shoes, you know, those---

Mark: Well, Klaw...

Gwen: eighteen inch high...

Mark: Klaw had a specially made pair of seven inch heels for her.

Gwen: So those were made especially for her?

Mark: Yeah.

Gwen: So if this is an original Klaw negative, how is it still around today? Mark thinks if anyone would know it would be Rick Klaw, Irving's grandson.

Rick Klaw: Welcome to, uh, Movie Star News.

Gwen: This is a fabulous place.

Since 1939, Movie Star News has been selling Hollywood publicity stills and posters. Today, the store has over two million images under its roof.

Now you have a lot of Irving Klaw pictures here too, right?

Rick: Well, yes and no. Irving Klaw didn't take any of these pictures. First of all he wasn't a photographer. It's a popular misconception. He hired photographers to take the pictures. It was more like a studio system. Paula, his sister, took a lot of the pictures.

Gwen: Rick thinks Paula might have taken our picture. She's not around to ask, but her son Ira is.

Hi Ira, nice to meet you.

Ira Kramer: Hi Gwen, nice to meet you too.

Gwen: Have you ever seen this picture?

Ira: Well, I haven't seen it, but it's one of ours.

Gwen: How do you know it's one of yours?

Ira: That duvet is definitely a Klaw duvet.

Gwen: You mean you know, you know this furniture?

Ira: That furniture was from my house. After we would get a new one, new chair or new lamp, we would bring the old stuff into the studio.

Gwen: Do you think Paula Klaw took this one?

Ira: Oh, I'm positive.

Gwen: But Ira has another twist for me: not all Klaw negatives of Betty Page were destroyed.

Ira: Irving was told to destroy them, and he told my mother to destroy them. And, because it was her work, in her artistry, she didn't want to kill everything. So she saved some of it. And it's because she saved some of it that people can see these today.

Gwen: Ira spots a clue.

Ira: We used to sell, you'd put 'em in a, uh, stereo viewer.

Gwen: So you could either look at a mountain scene or you could look at Bettie Page in 3D.

Ira: Exactly.

Gwen: Ira thinks that was the original purpose for our image. But a few details convince him that Claire's negative is a copy someone made of one of the 3D slides.

Ira: So, somebody probably had that and made a copy negative, or an internegative from that viewer.

Gwen: It's not an original lost negative, but Ira does think it's something special.

Well, Claire, I learned a lot about Bettie Page.

I tell Claire that her negative was not a Klaw original. It was however an image that had originally been shot in the Klaw studios by his sister, Paula.

Claire: Oh, ok.

Gwen: Now he doesn't have the original. But he did have something really fascinating.

Claire: Really?!

Ira: This was taken from the same shoot. It's a little sharper.

Gwen: As far as Ira knows, Claire's negative is the only other image that exists from this photo shoot.

Ira: It would have been one of the last Klaw shoots, certainly that. And, we don't have it. And I've never seen it before. The original does not exist as far as I know. It's destroyed. What makes this so special is I've never seen this picture. And I've been working here full time since 1976. So what you have here is a piece of the Klaw legacy.

Gwen: And he said this shoot was probably one of the last ones she did before she quit modeling in 1957.

Claire: So it's kind of like an end of a legacy.

Gwen: Ira also showed me something truly surprising.

Ira: This is Irving's suitcase. Still has his address from when he lived in Brooklyn.

Gwen: Um hmm.

Ira: Holcrest Avenue.

Gwen: Um hmm.

Ira: And this hasn't been opened since the 80s. But for some reason, I've taken a liking to you.

We have---

Rick: Wow.

Ira: some of the props....

Gwen: Oh!

Ira: ...that Bettie used.

Claire: Oh my God.

Ira: Let's see what we have, I don't know. Here's some of the shoes.

Claire: The shoes!

Ira: He had those custom made in Italy.

Gwen: Look at that. Ira, this is the shoe she's wearing in this picture.

Look at that little scallop on the side.

Ira: So how do you like that?

Claire: Well, it's a nice piece of history, and a different piece of history. And, uh, it's definitely something I'll keep for a long time.

Gwen: In the 1957, just two years after Bettie Page and Irving Klaw testified at the Kefauver hearings, the Supreme Court crafted its first legal definition of obscenity. Ruling on the erotic journal "American Aphrodite" in Roth v. the United States, they defined obscenity as content that "using community standards...appeals to prurient interest and which is utterly without redeeming social importance..." Then as today, attempts to rule on obscenity remain difficult. As summed up by former Justice Potter Stewart in 1964, who wrote, "I know it when I see it."