CONNECTICUT IN THE MOVIES



Christmas in Connecticut (1945). (Photofest)

CONNECTICUT IN THE MOVIES:
FROM DREAM HOUSES TO DARK SUBURBIA

ILLEANA DOUGLAS



Essex, Connecticut



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Connecticut gets sexy. Joan Collins and Paul Newman in *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* (1958). (Photofest)

CHAPTER 5

SUBURBAN SEX COMEDIES

If *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* lured New Yorkers into moving to Connecticut, there would be a period of adjustment as they adapted to life in suburbia. A crop of films in the late 1950s through the 1960s satirized everything that had once been sacred. Home ownership, love and marriage, even children, were now all fair game. Suburban sex comedies, like *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* (1958), *The Tunnel of Love* (1958), *Wives and Lovers* (1963), *My Six Loves* (1963), and *The Secret Life of an American Wife* (1968), portrayed life in Connecticut in a new way. Good-bye, Currier and Ives. Life in Connecticut was now a well-heeled playground where nonstop cocktail parties and extramarital affairs kept away the boredom. Children no longer fit into these adult-themed activities. They were scarce, for sale, or disposable, and often used as punchlines throughout these films.

Women's roles, too, shifted dramatically. They were portrayed as housebound wives who worried about their weight or attractiveness, slave housewives who chauffeured their commuting husbands, or lecturing mothers who told their children not to bother their father when he came home because he was tired from working hard to give them a better life.

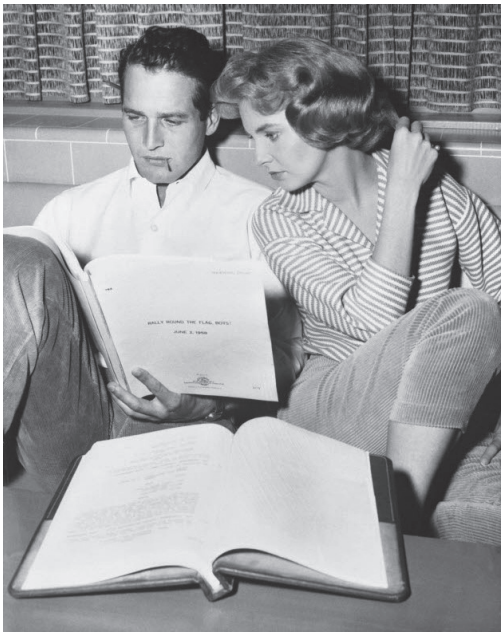
Men's roles, on the other hand, expanded. They gained their freedom, commuting back and forth to their jobs away from their spouses, often drinking to excess, chasing women on the side,

living an almost entirely separate life in New York away from their families. Screenwriter George Axelrod (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961), who worked uncredited on *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* and later wrote and directed *The Secret Life of an American Wife*, summed up the era of suburban sex comedies this way: "I like to see rich people saying witty things and screwing." Why were so many sex comedies set in Connecticut? Was there a loosening up of rigid New England morality as more people from the entertainment industry moved here? Or was the entertainment industry satirizing immorality with its portrayal of the suburban bourgeoisie?

RALLY 'ROUND THE FLAG, BOYS! (1958)

Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward became a married couple the same year they played a married couple in *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys! (1958)*, a Connecticut suburban sex comedy directed by veteran comedy maestro Leo McCarey (*The Awful Truth*, 1937; *Love Affair*, 1939). The farce was quite a departure for the serious acting duo, who were also members of the Actors Studio. It's not surprising that they never made another comedy together—but the Newmans did relocate to Westport, becoming Connecticut's most famous residents.

Grace Bannerman (Joanne Woodward) is an overly blonde, shrill, clingy housewife who suspects her husband Harry (Paul Newman) is cheating on her with their oversexed neighbor, Angela (Joan Collins). The latter role had been originally written for bombshell Jayne Mansfield, who specialized in playing cartoonish sexpots. *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* is a preview of the kinds of





Husband and wife Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward play husband and wife in *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* (Photofest)

one-dimensional roles women were now relegated to, with wincing helpful hints, like don't feed your husband TV dinners, don't join too many committees, don't neglect your husband's "needs," or Joan Collins will come around doing the dance of the suburban seven veils and force him to stray.

The movie was also a preview of a new brand of suburban comedy set in Connecticut. The action takes place in fictional Putnam Landing (although Putnam is a real town in Windham County). When Putnam Landing, Connecticut, discovers the US Army is secretly planning to build a base in their town, Grace is elected head of the Women's Safety Committee for the Protection of Putnam Landing. Hilarity ensues when her husband, Harry, who's been trying to get away for a romantic weekend with her, is recruited by the army to create goodwill in Putnam Landing.

Grace surprises Harry in Washington but discovers her neighbor, Angela (Joan Collins), undressed in his hotel room. Harry comes up with a plan to win back his wife and fulfill the army contract. He and Grace stage a Thanksgiving pageant, where Putnam Landing residents are dressed as American Indians and the army soldiers are dressed as Pilgrims, to reenact the smoking of a peace pipe. *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* has not aged well, with the Thanksgiving pageant probably the most tasteless depiction of Native Americans you will ever see.

The original screenwriter, George Axelrod—who would make his own suburban sex comedy, *The Secret Life of an American Wife*—had a completely different take on the Max Shulman novel, and had his name removed, giving sole screenwriting credit to McCarey and Claude Binyon.

THE TUNNEL OF LOVE (1958)

Director Gene Kelly's *The Tunnel of Love* (1958) is a romantic comedy about a couple, Isolde (Doris Day) and August Poole (Richard Widmark), who move to Westport from Greenwich Village in New York City so Augie can fulfill his dream of becoming an artist. Westport itself appears in the film through stock shots, but the film was made on a soundstage.

Augie and Isolde live in a converted barn on her family's property, surviving on her inheritance from her wealthy grandmother. Isolde wants children, but after failing to conceive they pursue adoption with the Rock-a-Bye Foundation. *The Tunnel of Love* hints that life in suburbia may have caused Augie to lose interest in making love to his wife. Augie's helpful but often tipsy neighbor, Dick Pepper (Gig Young), has some advice for Augie—cheat. With a name like Dick Pepper, that comes as no surprise. Dick is married but has a penchant for chasing women. He has four children and a fifth on the way, which he attributes to his fooling around. "I have to suffer for chasing around . . . at least that's what I say to my analyst," he says.

Dick does have a way with his kids. Here's one of the examples where children are used as punchlines: One of Dad's more endearing quips is when he yells at them over breakfast, "Shut up or



Elisabeth Fraser, Doris Day, Richard Widmark, and Gig Young drink up in *The Tunnel of Love*, which takes place in Westport. *The Tunnel of Love* was originally written by Peter De Vries, first as a novel, and then, with Joseph Fields, as a stage play. De Vries and his wife had moved to Westport, Connecticut, in 1948, where they raised their family. He is buried in Willowbrook Cemetery in Westport. (Photofest)

I'll send you to reform school." Dick—who is either drinking or mixing a drink in every scene he is in—encourages Augie to follow his lead and fool around. He feels this will get the motor running, spice things up in the bedroom, and get his wife pregnant. This is an example of 1960s sex comedy logic. Augie wants to cheat in theory, but he can't. He complains to Dick, "I'm the laughingstock of Westport, I'm so inhibited."

Isolde—played by the perfect image of American beauty, Doris Day—is not considered sexy anymore. This becomes obvious when the Rock-a-Bye adoption agency sends pretty young Miss Novick—played by the sultry Italian actress Gia Scala—to interview Augie and Isolde for an adoption. The plot gets a little wacky here, so hold on. Augie and Dick don't realize Miss Novick is from the adoption agency because she's so unexpectedly attractive. Then Dick gives Augie a tranquilizer,

which he downs with scotch so he won't be nervous. Between the drinking and pill taking, this film needs a warning label. Who knew Westport was this exciting?

Dick Pepper—no surprise—starts hitting on Miss Novick, and Augie, who's now high from pills and booze, starts making crazy, drunken statements about raising children. By the time Isolde shows up, Miss Novick has had enough and decides they are not suitable parents. Isolde is fuming and storms off, while Augie goes after Miss Novick to apologize and ask for a second chance. Then, figuring Isolde is angry with him anyway, Augie invites sexy Miss Novick out to dinner. Next thing you know, it's morning in Westport. Augie wakes up alone in a motel on Route 22, and there's a good-bye note from Miss Novick: "Thank you for a lovely evening. You were wonderful."

Nine months later, Rock-a-Bye has a baby for them, and it looks a lot like Augie. Is Augie the father? *The Tunnel of Love* teases us with a possible affair, but he can't remember (always a convenient alibi). Isolde becomes convinced that he cheated on her, that the baby is his, and she packs to leave. Before she can go, though, Miss Novick turns up to see the baby boy she had arranged for them to get. Isolde is incensed at her nerve, but then Miss Novick points out that she, herself, also had a baby—a girl—and that they are now on their way to Australia to rejoin her husband there.

As she goes on her way, all is well again with the Pooles, and apologies are made all around, but then Augie and Isolde realize that she's finally actually pregnant, so we're left to assume that maybe Dick Pepper's logic was correct. Augie has had enough of the suburbs, though, and he tells Isolde, "Let's put this house on the market and move back to the city. The country's no place to bring up kids! Our baby's gonna be born in Manhattan!"



WIVES AND LOVERS (1963)

Like *The Tunnel of Love*, *Wives and Lovers* was also based on a play, this one being Jay Presson Allen's *The First Wife*. Allen, who was married to the famed theater producer Lewis Allen, lived in a country house in Bridgewater. In *Wives and Lovers* (1963), Bill Austin (Van Johnson) is a struggling writer living with his

Five years after making *The Tunnel of Love*, Widmark and his wife, screenwriter Jean Hazlewood, purchased a home in Litchfield County. The 28-acre estate included a 1790s gristmill from its days as a working farm called Heron Mill Farm and a barn they turned into a guesthouse. Widmark thrived as a gentleman farmer and found the home a welcome retreat from Hollywood living. Richard Widmark is buried at Great Oak Cemetery in Roxbury, near his friend Arthur Miller.



Was Connecticut ever this exciting? Janet Leigh, Van Johnson, Ray Walston, Shelley Winters, Jeremy Slate, and Martha Hyer all get very close in *Wives and Lovers*. Janet Leigh has a significant tie to Connecticut: On June 4, 1951, she married Tony Curtis in a private ceremony in Greenwich. Curtis's best man was Jerry Lewis. (Photofest)

wife, Bertie (Janet Leigh), and young daughter, Julie (Claire Wilcox), in—you guessed it—a cramped New York City apartment. He's a stay-at-home dad working on a novel. She's a dental assistant. Bill's literary agent, Lucinda Ford (Martha Hyer), finally gets Bill's novel published and secures a deal for him to adapt the book into a Broadway play. Success means one thing to Bill: "We're moving to Connecticut!"

Bertie reluctantly gives up her job and soon she's a suburban housewife worried about what her toney neighbors think of her. With success, Bill starts to put on airs. He buys a sports car and begins dressing like a country gentleman in tweed and camel hair and spending more nights in the city with his agent, Lucinda. Here is the contrast: In *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, Jim Blan-