

Jackie Cooper

Titles: 49+ Sources: 10 Stills: 52
aka: Leonard Cooper

Born: John Bigelow; Los Angeles, California; September 15th 1921/22
Son of studio production manager C.J. Bigelow; nephew of director Norman Taurog



Homely puppy hits the Big Time – Cooper's big break was in "SKIPPY"

Source: indeterminate



"One day I'll be editor of the Daily Planet!" – Studio publicity shot

Source: indeterminate website

The *snub-nosed tyke with truculent pout* look was evidently a real winner in the thirties. Jackie Cooper had none of Coogan's soulful vulnerability, none of Bartholomew's precious decorousness. He hadn't the sheer energy and vaudevillean versatility of Rooney, or the offhand prettiness of Dickie Moore and others. Analysing Cooper's appeal is a puzzle. It cannot even in fairness be said of him that he was a talented child actor. In titles like **"THE BOWERY"** or **"TREASURE ISLAND"**, for example, his performance is servicable at best. Jackie Cooper was, as James Cagney famously characterised himself, a "bread and butter" actor, his everyman face and voice struck a chord with Depression-era audiences. He had few pretensions, worked hard, and put the bacon on the table. Behind him, as ever, a mother determined to get her son on the screen, in this case by a judicious fiddling of the studio books.

In many of his best-remembered titles the young Cooper was teamed with burly aw-shucks Wallace Beery, and the studios obviously regarded them as something of an item, but in a revealing aside during a recent interview, Cooper indicated that Beery was actually quite offhand towards him when the cameras weren't turning, so they didn't hit it off at all so well as the screen gave out. Not that that hurt Abbot and Costello much either. Beery and Cooper were the old dog and loyal pup, united in face of all adversity.

Reviewing **"DINKY"** (35), *Variety* wrote "A rapidly maturing Jackie Cooper is revealed here as lacking the strength to stand alone". He ploughed on for a good few years before coming to the same conclusion. The adult Jackie Cooper, like the adult Mickey Rooney, was some way short of natural charm, but had a solid, assured on-screen presence forged by a career stretching back to earliest infancy. They had no superstar conceit of themselves, and neither wealth nor celebrity took away their instinctive empathy for the ordinary man.



Cooper right, with a bevy of **OUR GANG** bathing beauties

Source: indeterminate website

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion entry:

“ "Little Tough Guy" American child actor who in adult life found roles getting rarer and became a powerful TV executive.”

Motion Picture Almanac 1994 entry:

“Actor, director, producer. Began theatrical career at age of 3 as motion picture actor, was a member of the "**Our Gang**" comedies. First starring role in 1930 in "**SKIPPY**". Worked at every major studio, always with star billing. At 20 enlisted in the navy. After a three-year tour of duty went to New York to work in live TV. Appeared on the Broadway stage in "Mr Roberts" and on national tour and in London. Directed as well as acted in live and filmed TV. Served as vice-president in charge of production for Screen Gems 1964-69, when he resigned to return to acting, directing, producing. Won 2 Emmy awards for directing "**M.A.S.H.**" and "**THE WHITE SHADOW**". Retired in 1989.”

Picturegoer Film Annual 1949 biographical note:

“It used to be a maxim of the cynics that child stars retired at twelve or so and supported their parents in luxury for the rest of their lives. Of recent years the steady progression of such youngsters as Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Deanna Durbin and Shirley Temple makes nonsense of that quip... [*Mickey Rooney*] has always been a first-rate actor, and.. when he has put his somewhat protracted adolescence behind him he will be a performer with a wide range and a sure dramatic touch. The rivals of his youth, the sensitive Freddie Bartholomew and the forthright Jackie Cooper, are still working in pictures, although they have not progressed as smoothly to adult roles as Rooney nor are they as successful. Of the two I feel that Cooper, in his day the best of all the boy actors of Hollywood, has the better chance of future stardom.”

Sunday Times "Milestones of the Cinema" entry:

“Among the male stars of the 1930s, Cooper's cute/tough stance made him an acceptable

movie brat for the "**Oor Gang**" series. He was nominated for the Oscar as "**SKIPPY**" (31), directed by Norman Taurog, his uncle, and was then a droll contrast to Wallace Beery in "**THE CHAMP**" (31) and "**THE BOWERY**" (33). His Jim Hawkins in "**TREASURE ISLAND**" (34) was memorable casting. He became a TV producer and played the Daily Planet editor in all four "**SUPERMAN**" films (78-87)."

Those Endearing Young Charms entry:

"Hazel eyes and brown hair. Jackie Cooper grew up in the cinematic showcase with Hollywood blood flowing in his veins. His father, C.G. Bigelow, was a studio production manager, while his mother, Mabel Bigelow, won prominence as a stage pianist.

Jackie received his first chance at a movie career by passing a singing audition for a bit part in a movie that was to be directed by his uncle Norman Taurog. Soon afterwards, at the age of three, he appeared in a number of educational short comedies and a few "**Oor Gang**" features.

Then in 1929 Jackie took part in "**THE FOX MOVIE TONE FOLLIES**" when his mother, who was a secretary at the Fox Film Company, added his name to the list of children who were to be called for the shorts. After his appearance in a few more "**Oor Gang**" comedies, he landed his first big role in the movie "**SKIPPY**" which reunited him with his uncle and, more importantly, won him an Academy Award nomination.

Jackie was educated by private tutor, and he spent his free time playing the drums. He was a frank and open little boy who radiated a tremendous amount of self-confidence, which in later years was an asset to his being chosen Vice-President in charge of West Coast operations for Screen Gems. In the late fifties, Jackie starred on television in "**The People's Choice**", and in the early sixties he was producer-director of the series "**Hennessy**".

The Moving Picture Boy entry:

"His name has been variously rendered as (1) John Cooper Junior (2) John Cooperman Junior, and (3) James Bigelow. His father, at any rate – who left home when Jackie was two – acted in silent film comedies as Jack Cooper; his mother, Mabel Bigelow, was a professional



with Mitzi Green in "**SKIPPY**"

Source: [indeterminate website](#)

pianist, later a secretary at 20th Century Fox; and his uncle was the prolific director Norman Taurog. So there was no lack of screen pedigree.

Taurog, who had himself been a boy actor, was busy around 1925 directing Lloyd Hamilton's two-reel comedies, and cast his characterful nephew in some of them, billing him (this does not get easier) as Leonard Cooper. Jackie – as we shall continue to call him – also appeared with the comedian Bobby Clark.

In 1929 he graduated to feature films (not his uncle's) and also became a leading member of "**Oor Gang**", with whom he remained till 1931 and his break into the big time with "**SKIPPY**" and its sequel, "**SOOKY**". Both were directed by Taurog, and both also featured Jackie Coogan's kid brother Robert. Between them came "**THE CHAMP**", directed by King Vidor.

"**SKIPPY**", which won Cooper an Academy Award nomination, was a huge popular hit, and until the mid-Thirties he was big box office – in fact he and Shirley Temple were to

be the screen's last child superstars. No later child has approached their universal acclaim.



Above: **"THE BOWERY"** (33)
Below: **"TREASURE ISLAND"** (34)
Left and Top left: unknown

Sources: indeterminate websites





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"THE CHAMP"
An M-G-M Release

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R62/215

Ahm... he's the one in the middle

Source: indeterminate website

Unlike Temple, Cooper had neither beauty of face nor of voice. He achieved what he did solely through personality and talent. His tough, vehement ten-year old manner was endearingly comic, and when he jerked the tears (as he was doing even, now and then, with "**Our Gang**") he did so with genuine pathos and a certain tact - not the maudlin barnstorming which Rooney would sometimes lay on. With an "Aw, gee.." the defiant face would begin to melt, the lower lip stick out still further¹, and he would weep like a man. The world wept with him.

His four-time partnership with Wallace Beery (from "**THE CHAMP**" to "**TREASURE ISLAND**" and "**O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BOY**") was an inspired pairing of rough diamonds - often, as in "**THE BOWERY**", almost like a married relationship, with tantrums, jealousies, stormings-out and tearful reconciliations. (There are even "infidelities": on one occasion Jackie storms out and shacks up with George Raft instead.) When disreputable Beery totters home after a late night out, Cooper the homemaker is virtually

waiting behind the door with a frying pan poised. It's a funny and tender parody of the real thing, though to imply it's *not* real is to underestimate it.

By 1936 Cooper was becoming too big to be cute, but his popularity lasted through the Thirties, with characteristic leads in "**BOY OF THE STREETS**" (37), "**GANGSTER'S BOY**" (38) and the serial "**SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE**" (39). Also in 1939 he played Henry Aldrich in "**WHAT A LIFE**", when Clifford Goldsmith's successful Broadway play was filmed, and again in "**LIFE WITH HENRY**" in 1941. Thereafter, Jimmy Lydon took over the role for the nine remaining "**Henry Aldrich**" movies.

In the late Forties, having returned from the war, Jackie was reunited with both Coogan brothers in the dismal comedies "**KILROY WAS HERE**" and "**FRENCH LEAVE**". These depressed him so much that for a decade or so he devoted himself to the stage, including a nationwide tour with Mr Roberts. Then in 1955 he got the chance to direct and star in a TV sitcom called "**The People's Choice**" (sharing the limelight with a "talking" basset-

¹ *if humanly possible*

hound called Cleo). It ran for three years, and he followed it up with "**Hennessy**" (a further three years) in which he was a Navy doctor. He directed his first feature film, "**STAND UP AND BE COUNTED**", in 1972, and occasionally appears as an actor in the cinema – for instance in "**CHOSEN SURVIVORS**" (74) and the "**SUPERMAN**" films – or on TV. Jackie Cooper is still very much in the business."

What the Critics said:

In "**SKIPPY**":

"Appealing nine-year old imp Cooper played his first major role in this film about Percy Crosby's comic strip character, the mischievous Skippy. **½ "

- **Movies on TV & Videocassette**

"Jackie Cooper plays an important rôle for the first time here as a character from Perry Crosby's comic strip, namely Skippy. ** "

- **Speelfilm Encyclopedie**

"All credit to the kid players... Cooper's playing could not be improved upon. He does everything well, never camera conscious and never suggesting it's only a picture."

- **Variety Movie Guide 1993**

"There are many wonderful moments in the picture, and watching Cooper cry is worth the price of admission. There have been few child actors who have been as convincing as he could be."

- **The Virgin Film Guide**

In "**SOOKY**":

"Cooper is delightful, as always."

- **Speelfilm Encyclopedie**

In "**THE BOWERY**":

"The Cooper kid, obviously outgrowing the baby type, is still a trouper and sends in another gem performance."

- **Variety Movie Guide**



*with his mother on the set of "**SOOKY**" - 1931*

Source: indeterminate website

" "**THE CHAMP**", in 1931, made Cooper a super-star, and his unique blend of toughness and pathos took him triumphantly through another dozen starring roles in the next few years. "**THE BOWERY**" brought Beery and Cooper together again, this time in an 1890s setting, as a tough, swaggering saloon-keeper and his admiring young protégé..."

- **NFT Bulletin**



"Hit the road, kid. We don't need no 'shappyrooms'!" (Film unknown)

Source: indeterminate website

FILMOGRAPHY

Year	Age	Title	Role
c25	3	- Lloyd Hamilton comedies -	
c25		- Bobby Clark comedies -	
27-28		- Our Gang shorts [x5] -	
29	7	SUNNYSIDE UP	
29		THREE LIVE GHOSTS	
29		FOX MOVIE TONE FOLLIES OF 1929	
		with <i>Bobby Connelly</i>	
29		- Our Gang shorts [x4] -	
30	8	- Our Gang shorts [x8] -	
31	9	- Our Gang shorts [x3] -	
31	9	SKIPPY †	in title role, Skippy Skinner
		with <i>Robert Coogan, Jackie Searl, Mitzi Green, Douglas Haig, Donald Haines</i>	
31		<u>THE CHAMP</u> ⚡	
31		SOOKY	as Skippy Skinner
		with <i>Robert Coogan</i>	
31		YOUNG DONOVAN'S KID	in title role
31		<u>JACKIE COOPER'S CHRISTMAS PARTY</u>	as himself !
32	10	<u>WHEN A FELLER NEEDS A FRIEND</u>	
32		A DIVORCE IN THE FAMILY	
33	11	BROADWAY TO HOLLYWOOD / RING UP THE CURTAIN	
		with <i>Mickey Rooney</i>	
33		<u>THE BOWERY</u> ⚡ ⚡	as "Swipes McGurk"



↓	↓	↓		
33		LOST		
34	12	HOLLYWOOD ON PARADE		
34		LONE COWBOY		
34		TREASURE ISLAND ‡	as Jim Hawkins	
34		PECK'S BAD BOY	in title role	
		with Jackie Searl		
35	13	DINKY	in title role	
35		O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BOY ‡	in title role	
		with Spanky McFarland		
36	14	TOUGH GUY	in title role	
36		THE DEVIL IS A SISSY		
		with Freddie Bartholomew, Mickey Rooney		
37	15	BOY OF THE STREETS	in title role	
38	16	WHITE BANNERS		
38		GANGSTER'S BOY	in title role	
38		THAT CERTAIN AGE		
		with Jackie Searl		
39	17	NEWSBOYS' HOME		
		with Billy Benedict, David Gorcey		
39		SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE	12x serial	
		with Frank Coghlan Jr (Junior Coghlan)		
39		SPIRIT OF CULVER		
		with Freddie Bartholomew, Gene Reynolds		
39		STREETS OF NEW YORK		
39		WHAT A LIFE	as Henry Aldrich	
39		TWO BRIGHT BOYS		
		with Freddie Bartholomew		
39		THE BIG GUY		
40	18	THE RETURN OF FRANK JAMES		
40		SEVENTEEN		
40		GALLANT SONS		
		with Gene Reynolds		
41	19	LIFE WITH HENRY	as Henry Aldrich	
41		ZIEGFELD GIRL		
41		GLAMOUR BOY / HEARTS IN SPRINGTIME		
		with Darryl Hickman		
41		HER FIRST BEAU		
42	20	SYNCOPE		
42		MEN OF TEXAS		
42		THE NAVY COMES THROUGH		
43	21	WHERE ARE YOUR CHILDREN?		
		† won him an Academy Award nomination as Best Actor		
		‡ teamed with Wallace Beery		

A slippery situation for Jackie in the Our Gang short "**WHEN THE WIND BLOWS**". In fact he had to shoot the scene twice, over the knee of two different dads – one for the English language version, and one for Spanish audiences. Wheezer Hutchins looks on, highly amused.





Publicity shot (in very flattering backlighting)

Source: indeterminate website

The stills here are obviously only a small selection of what the archive currently holds. There are more than a dozen stills of Cooper from **"TREASURE ISLAND"** alone, for example. See the images section for these, either by respective film title, or under Boys - C .

ADDENDA

NAMBLA Bulletin vol. 6/8 – October 85 – media note:

“NOSTALGIA: From the March 1979 Boys in the Performing Arts. “**THE CHAMP**” had just been released, and the cover boy was the original boy in it, Jackie Cooper. Cooper also made “**WHEN A FELLER NEEDS A FRIEND**”, “**TREASURE ISLAND**”, “**PECK’S BAD BOY**”, “**LONE COWBOY**”, “**SOOKY**”, and many more...”

In “**THE CHAMP**”:

“A good picture, almost entirely by virtue of an inspired performance by a boy, Jackie Cooper. There is none of the usual hammy quality of the average child actor in this kid...”
- **Variety**

“Superb tearjerker about a washed-up prizefighter and his adoring son, played to perfection by Beery and Cooper (in the first of their several teamings)...” – **Leonard Maltin**

“...worth watching thanks to the good performances of Cooper and Beery (who won an Oscar).” – **Speelfilm Encyclopedie**

“...Two terrific leading performances and Vidor’s almost documentary-style direction made this predictable father-son melodrama a very effective tear-jerker in its day – and it still works, for all but the most cynical.”
– **Critics’ Film Guide**

“...This third ideal role Miss Marion wrote for Beery was that of a broken-down boxer who made a comeback for the sake of his idolising son, Jackie Cooper. The nine-year old graduate from **Our Gang** got even greater praise than Beery from the critics, and audible sobbing from audiences. King Vidor extracted genuine pathos from both stars...”
– **The M-G-M Story**

“MGM had noted Jackie Cooper’s appeal in “**SKIPPY**” and fashioned its own vehicle for the young actor, including another sad ending. He played the son of a washed-up ex-fighter (played by Wallace Beery); his shining faith in his father encourages the old derelict to attempt a comeback... The studio was next trying to figure out a way to team Jackie with Marie Dressler...”

– **That Was Hollywood, the 1930’s**

“...Cynics are advised to keep their distance, but in defense of this extremely sentimental film one should note the genuine rapport between Beery and Cooper and the quiet skill of director Vidor...” – **Virgin Film Guide**