

B I N G

by Blythe Thimsen

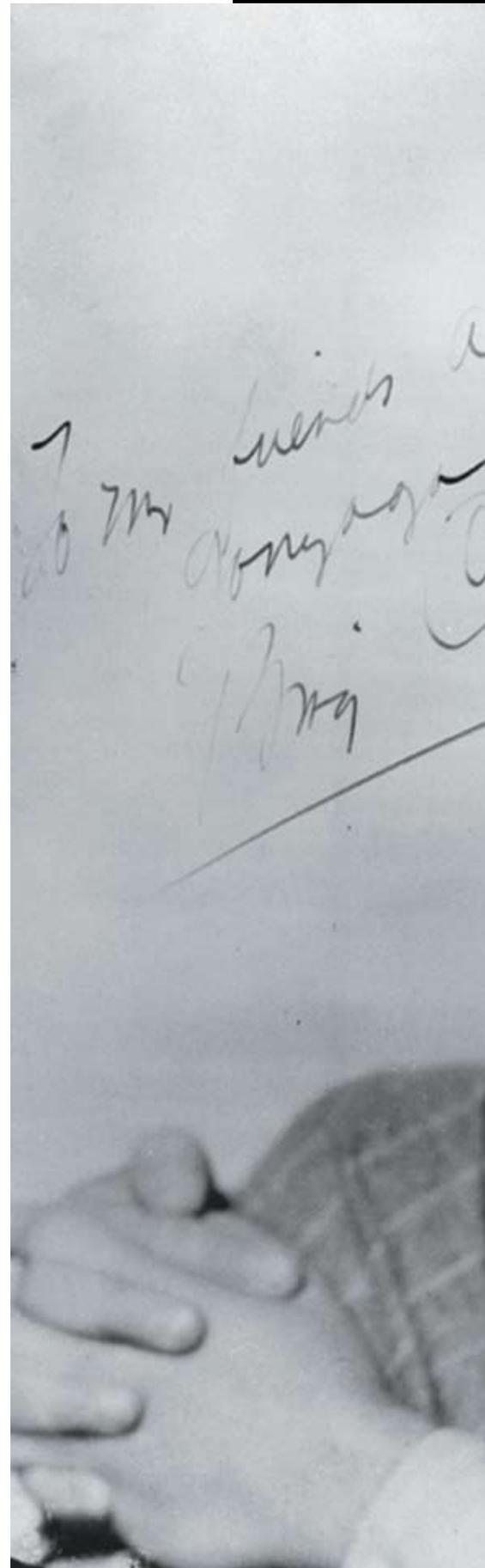
"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know, where the treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow..."

AN IMAGE OF AN IDYLIC snow-covered town is surely painted in the mind of anyone who hears the words of this beloved Christmas song, made famous by Bing Crosby. With his clear, smooth voice, Bing paints a picture of a snow globe village in which many would like to live. It sounds a little bit like our beautiful Spokane, which also happens to be the home of Bing.

Born May 3, 1903, in Tacoma, Washington, Harry Lillis Crosby (Bing) was named after his father as a consolation for not being the daughter for whom his father hoped. He was the fourth of seven children born to parents Harry and Kate, with three older brothers, and eventually two younger sisters and a younger brother.

After coming into tough financial times in Tacoma, Bing's father, Harry, found a job as a bookkeeper at Inland Brewery in Spokane. Harry moved east, across the mountains to begin his job, while Kate, who was close to the end of a pregnancy, stayed behind with the children. He found a home for rent in an area of Spokane which was referred to as "Holy Land" because it was a dominantly Catholic neighborhood. With his father settled into the home and his job, and the new sibling born, the rest of the Crosby family moved to Spokane in the summer of 1906.

They settled into a yellow, two-story house located at 303 E. Sinto Avenue. This was the first house the Crosbys lived in that had both indoor plumbing and electric lights. On the second floor were three bedrooms housing two-children per room (the youngest child was not yet born). Bing and his older brother Edward (Ted) were put





Bing Crosby portrait. Note the autograph and message: "To my friends at Gonzaga, Bing Crosby." Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - cn179



Gonzaga Baseball team, 1920. Bing is standing third from the right in the top row. Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - cn169

together in a room. While Bing was outgoing and jovial, his brother had a quiet, introverted personality. He found solace in writing, while Bing found his spot in singing and performing.

While the house was comfortable, they were not a wealthy family. Harry, Bing's father, came from a well-to-do family and had been raised with servants and luxuries, never having to worry about finances. Without a strong work ethic, he dropped out of college his senior year, taking odd jobs, mainly in bookkeeping. Harry had a tendency to spend ample amounts of money, despite the fact that he did not make much. This was a great source of stress for Kate, Bing's mother, who ran the family with an iron fist. One of the wild purchases Harry made was an Edison Phonograph on which music could be played. A member of a men's choir, Harry also played the mandolin and four-string guitar. His love of music was passed along to the entire family, but particularly to Bing. The family spent Sunday afternoons and evenings, gathered in their living room singing, while Harry played the mandolin.

Bing's love of music was equally matched

by his love for mischief. As a young boy, Bing and his group of friends called themselves the Boone Avenue gang. They got into a few scrapes, with Bing even being arrested on occasion for petty crimes.

According to author Gary Giddins' book, *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams the Early Years 1903-1940*, "He was given more leeway than his brothers," his father conceded. "We were both so lenient that it's no wonder our other boys call Bing "Mother's and Dad's pet." Not that he was spoiled; he got his tannings. But he – well, he was different in a way. Made it sort of hard to spank him much."

When the summer of 1908 drew to an end, Bing joined his siblings at Webster Grade School. A devout Catholic family, the Crosbys enrolled their children in the public school system for the start of their education because a parochial elementary school was not yet built.

Despite being only five years old, Bing was enrolled in first grade. Though there was not a kindergarten program available, Giddins suggests that Kate was "impatient to get him out from under her feet" and enrolled him in school despite his young age.

Bing may have been a handful, but Kate was a strong-willed mother who always held high hopes for her children to attain "greatness." According to Giddins, "When Bing was young, Kate was the powerful center of his life. Her will ultimately helped drive him from Spokane, but he left with an armor of independence and raw nerve."

While the greatness of his talent was not yet known, his nickname, Bing, was emerging in 1910. The then seven year-old Harry would pester others to read him the *Bingville Bugle*, a parody newspaper, which was an insert in each Sunday issue of the *Spokesman-Review*. He would chant "Bing! Bing! Bing!" until someone would read it to him. The nickname stuck when a neighbor boy, Valentine Hobart, who also liked the *Bingville Bugle*, took to calling him "Bingo from Bingville." Others caught on, and it was shortened to Bing, which he was called by everyone – including his parents and siblings.

In 1911, the Crosbys built a family home after having spent five years renting their house. The finished home was a two-story clapboard house located on East Sharp Avenue. A description of the home is given

in Giddins' book:

"They could see the church steeple through their rear windows. In the front of the house, a concrete walk led to wooden steps and a porch that ran the full width. The house, painted dark brown and overhung with deep eaves, had four bedrooms plus a sleeping porch on the second floor. The amenities included a coal and wood furnace and two bathrooms. The living and dining room area was appointed with a small fireplace trimmed in brown stained fir, a bookcase and a window seat. The modest backyard, ringed with climbable locust trees, abutted an alley-like pathway through which the boys could cut to school. Bing carved his mark on a supporting two-by-four in the basement: H.C.'16." The house still stands today, serving as the home of the Gonzaga University Alumni Association.

That modest backyard and the surrounding neighborhood gave Bing plenty of space in which to run and play sports. He served as the captain of the Dreadnoughts, his Junior Yard Association Midget Football League team, which had an impressive record. Later, at Gonzaga, he played third baseman on the baseball team.

Bing also used his love of different sports to find himself employment. An avid swimmer who won seven medals in a citywide swimming contest, he worked as both a towel boy and a lifeguard at Mission Pool, starting in 1915. In 1916, he started caddying at local golf courses. Intrigued by the game, he scraped together some old clubs and learned how to play. This started a life-long love affair with golf, one that lasted literally until his dying day (on which he finished eighteen holes of golf minutes before suffering a fatal heart attack).

His employment was not limited to the sports realm, though. The summer of 1917, Bing spent working as a prop boy at the Auditorium theatre, one of Spokane's most impressive theatres. It was there, while watching entertainer Al Jolson perform, that many think he first got the itch to perform publicly and professionally.

Bing also worked as a paperboy, delivering early morning editions of the *Spokesman-Review*. It was said that you could hear Bing coming, as he whistled and sang while he delivered the papers. "Everyone who knew young Harry would speak of his constant singing and whistling that heralded his arrival," wrote Giddins.



Bing Crosby on his graduation day, 1920.
Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University
Library - bc_bc0301_01 -

One of Bing's best friends from Gonzaga was Ray Flaherty, who later went on to play and coach in the NFL. Flaherty said of Bing, "He was always a happy kid and was always singing a song. Even though he was a little kid, he was singing. He just was full of music and he was a great whistler. He could really whistle...Hell, he could sing like nobody else, sing and whistle. He had a hell of a whistle."

That whistling and singing was put to use when Bing, Flaherty and their friend Francis Corkery (who later became a president of Gonzaga University), were the charter members of the Gonzaga Glee Club, in 1914.

By 1920, Bing reached a milestone when he and fifty-one members of the High School Department of Gonzaga University graduated on June 9, 1920. Bing was one of two students from his class selected to speak at graduation, delivering a speech entitled "the Purpose of Education."

The summer after graduation, but before he started at Gonzaga University, proved to be a summer of fun for Bing and his good friend, Paul Teters. That summer they signed on to work as laborers on a farm in Cheney. From Spokane, it was a half hour train ride and a two dollar daily fare, so they planned on staying in Cheney for the entire summer. Growing disillusioned with the work after two weeks, though, they abandoned their jobs, taking a train to Portland, where Bing's oldest brother, Everett, was working. Not able to find him immediately, they snuck onto a train

headed for Los Angeles, but were caught and sent back to Portland on a cattle car. After getting arrested in Portland for sneaking out of a restaurant without paying for their meal, the boys were sent by Bing's Uncle George to work at a logging camp, operated by Bing's cousin.

While that summer job did not work out, Bing found plenty of other ways to employ himself while in school. He worked part-time for his father's employer, Inland Brewery (which, because of prohibition, no longer produced beer, but pickles, among other things), as an office worker for local attorney Charles Albert, as a part-time night watchman for the Great Northern Railway and a janitor at Everyman's Club. Bing wanted to work hard because his parents were sacrificing in order to send him to school, and he didn't want to waste their money.

While millions of people enjoy the sound of Bing's music to this day, it was a talent and career that almost wasn't. When Bing first entered Gonzaga University, it wasn't a career in music he envisioned, but one in law. (He ended up quitting law school during his fourth year of the six-year program – undergraduate and law all in one.)

As a student at Gonzaga University, Bing was part of the group of students known as "townies." These were students who lived in town and did not reside at the school. As such, they were often looked down upon, and "townies" were not allowed on campus after 4:30 p.m. Despite his "townie" status, Bing's gentle and spirited personality won him many friends.

A total of eight years of Bing's life were spent at Gonzaga. After graduating from Webster Grade School, he attended four years at Gonzaga High School, and then another four years at Gonzaga University. Bing's mother was a devout Catholic, and his father converted to Catholicism in order to marry her. Kate's deep faith played a role in the way she and Harry raised their children. That, combined with his eight years spent around the Jesuit priests, gave Bing a solid background from which to draw when it came to developing his character, Father O'Malley, who appeared in both *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's*.

Even with his wild streaks, Bing understood the importance of church and his faith. Long after the years of fame and success began, he still attended mass every Sunday. In a radio interview with a priest,



Bing Crosby at GU Alumni event, 1951. Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - cn193

he said, “I get a great deal of consolation from my religion, Father, and I think it was firmly embedded in me somehow back there at Gonzaga High and Gonzaga University by the good Fathers.”

His experience at Gonzaga not only strengthened his faith, but his skills speaking and performing in public. “We had a lot of experience in public speaking and debating societies, standing on your feet and talking, and doing plays,” he later said, “and if I have ability as an actor, that’s where I got it.”

He had plenty of chances to demonstrate that ability while in school. Among his performances, he played the role of Max, the crooked Mayor’s man “Friday” in *Seven Keys to Baldplate*, and Ambrose Peale in the sophomore class play, *It Pays to Advertise*. An article in the April 1922 issue of the *Gonzaga Chronicle* stated, “Making the most of the play, replete with comical situations, the cast time and time again caused gales of laughter to sweep through the house. Harry Crosby, as the genial press agent “Ambrose Peale” kept the audience in a constant uproar.”

More productions came over the next few years, but it was music that was taking up most of Bing’s attention. In 1924, which was his fourth year in the University’s law program, Bing had saved enough money for a set of drums. Hearing of this, a North Central student named Alton Rinker asked Bing to join his music group. Though the other members were in high school, Bing was excited to be in a band and jumped at the chance. The band grew, added a few members, and named themselves the Musiclanders. They

were fairly successful, holding steady gigs around Spokane until 1925, when most of the band members went off to college, except for Al and Bing. The two of them ended up developing an act and performing it at the Clemmer theatre in downtown Spokane. This was a chance for Bing to showcase his voice and become a local fan-favorite.

Buoyed by their success, on October 15, 1925, at the age of 22, Bing and Al left for Los Angeles in a Model T, for what turned out to be a three-week journey. Within weeks of arriving in Los Angeles they landed small gigs, which grew to larger ones, and soon they were on traveling circuits, making a name for themselves. Within a few months they received an invitation to perform with Paul Whiteman and His



Bing Crosby and his second wife, Kathryn Crosby, on campus, 1974. Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - cn193

Orchestra, one of the most famous entertainers of the time. In the fall of 1926, before they started touring, Bing and Al traveled back to Spokane for a visit and to perform in front of their hometown. After this visit, it was an eleven-year stretch before Bing’s next trip home to Spokane. For the next three years they toured with Whiteman, developing a great reputation. It was just the tip of the iceberg.

Record deals, radio shows and eventually movie roles all came Bing’s way, securing him as a Hollywood favorite. In 1937, he returned to Spokane to host a talent search called the Bing Crosby – Fox Theatre Talent Quest, which was sponsored by the *Spokesman-Review*. On October 21st, Bing visited Spokane and the four finalists. The winning male and

female got to go to Hollywood with Bing for screen tests. In 1944, Bing himself was the winner of a contest of sorts; he won an Oscar for his role in *Going My Way*.

What the crooner’s sweet, clear voice may be best known for, though, is the classic holiday song *White Christmas*. The song first premiered in Bing’s 1942 film *Holiday Inn*. Not expected to be the breakout song of the movie, it was a huge hit, topping the charts and staying at number one for eleven weeks. It was so popular, a movie entitled *White Christmas*, based on the song, came out in 1954. This only increased Bing’s popularity.

“There was a time, not so long ago, when it was truthfully said that no hour of the day or night, year after year, passed without the voice of Bing Crosby being heard somewhere on this earth,” wrote author Gilbert Seldes in *The Public Arts*.

Though Bing was a huge star by this time, he never forgot his hometown of Spokane, nor his deep gratitude toward the Jesuits and Gonzaga. Returning to Spokane on May 26, 1951, for homecoming weekend at Gonzaga University, the *Spokesman-Review* reported, “A rousing cheer from the several hundred alumni and their wives greeted Bing as he entered the union building. Stepping up on stage, he thanked them and recalled that he made his first public appearance from that very stage...Bing was nattily attired.”

Bing’s love for Gonzaga was not limited to appearances; he also supported the



Bing Crosby and Miss Spokane, 1950. Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - cn201



Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney, singing *White Christmas* in the final scene of the movie *White Christmas*. Perhaps he was thinking of Christmases spent in snowy Spokane. Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Library - Bing 90

school financially and with other donations. He appeared as a spokesman on behalf of 3M Corporation, and persuaded them to donate a microfilm research center to Gonzaga. Proud of their famous alum, and appreciative of his generosity, a newspaper article proclaimed, "Regent Bing Crosby of Gonzaga University... will donate a Microfilm Research Center to Gonzaga." In all, Bing's donations to

Gonzaga University were just shy of \$1 million, demonstrating his devotion to the school and the Spokane community.

In the closing scene of *White Christmas*, Bing, dressed in red velvet Santa suit, along with his similarly dressed co-stars Danny Kaye, Vera Ellen and Rosemary Clooney, sings the title song as a barn door opens revealing a snow-globe scene of gently falling flakes. As Bing sings "I'm

dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the one's I used to know..." it is easy to imagine he was thinking back to Christmases-past in Spokane, where the snow would fall softly upon the streets and sidewalks of the place he loved; the place where he was born and raised. It is easy to image Bing singing the final verse of the song to the people of his great Spokane, "*And may all your Christmases be white...*" **5**