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# **ARTICLES**

#### I Am An American (1944)

Released at the height of World War II, I Am an American (1944) is typical of the patriotic, flag-waving propaganda films of its time but with a slight twist. This sixteen minute short subject, produced by Warner Bros. for theatrical distribution, is both a valentine to a nation which has welcomed countless immigrants to its shores but also a call to arms to all immigrants who have become American citizens and created better lives for themselves in the U.S. Using a fictitious couple from Eastern Europe identified as Fyodor and Maria Kanowski as the protagonists, this dramatized approach to the assimilation of immigrants into America follows the couple from their arrival at the New York port of Castle Garden to their new home

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in a rural Ohio town; they arrive on the fourth of July and think, at first, the town parade is in honor of them. Fyodor becomes a farmer, raises a family (naming his sons after George Washington and Thomas Jefferson), loses an arm in the Civil War while fighting for the Union and sees the Kanowski clan expand as his descendents become judges, ranchers, scientists, surgeons, priests and printers.

On his death bed, as America enters World War I, Fyodor imparts this final message to his survivors: "We must fight with everything we have. Like all Americans, you are the sons and daughters of immigrants. You are the new blood that keeps fresh the lifestream. You are the hope of today and tomorrow and all of the tomorrows to come." This message of sacrifice and commitment is reinforced by the narrator who tells the viewer: "Remember, the story of the Kanowskis could have been taken from the records of a hundred other families that had their humble beginnings with the arrival of two immigrants from the old world." At this point, we are treated to a montage of famous Americans, all of whom came from other countries: John Ericsson (Sweden), the inventor and engineer responsible for the ironclad warship known as the USS Monitor; Andrew Carnegie (Scotland), the steel industry tycoon and one of the major philanthropists of his generation; Arturo Toscanini (Italy), the renowned musician/conductor; Alexander Graham Bell (Scotland), the inventor of the telephone; Joseph Pulitzer (Hungary), the newspaper publisher whose fortune created the Pulitzer Prize for excellence in the field of journalism, and many more

The final segment of the short subject presents a celebration of "I Am an American" Day, which was designated by Congress in 1940 as the third Sunday in May. The holiday was later renamed Citizenship Day by Congress in 1952 with the new date of September 17th. In I Am an American, we are shown newsreel footage of this patriotic celebration during WWII in which such Hollywood stars as Danny Kaye, Ava Gardner, Humphrey Bogart and Dick Haymes make appearances. The film concludes with Dennis Morgan addressing the camera with a final message of national pride. One of the more intriguing aspects of I Am an American is the fact that it was written and directed by Crane Wilbur, the nephew of Tyrone Power, Sr., and a filmmaker of some distinction in the world of film noir and B-movies. Not only was he the director of the controversial 1934 exploitation film Tomorrow's Children (the film's poster touted "Forced sterilization programs run amuck!"), but he wrote the screenplays for such influential noirs as He Walked by Night (1948) and The Phenix City Story (1955) as well as the Vincent Price thrillers, House of Wax (1953) and The Mad Magician (1954). His other directorial credits include the prison dramas Canon City (1948) and Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison (1951) and the 1959 movie adaptation of Mary Roberts Rinehart's gothic thriller, The Bat, also starring Vincent Price.

Producer: Gordon Hollingshead Director: Crane Wilbur

Screenplay: Crane Wilbur

Cinematography: Sid Hickox

Art Direction: Roland Hill

Film Editing: Thomas Pratt

Cast: Humphrey Bogart (Himself, uncredited), Gary Gray (Thomas Jefferson Kanowski, uncredited), Gordon Hart (Judge Kanowski, archive footage, uncredited), Dick Haymes (Himself, uncredited), Danny Kaye (Himself, uncredited), Joan Leslie (Herself, uncredited), Mary Lee Moody (Little Girl, uncredited), Dennis Morgan (Himself, Host, uncredited), Knute Rockne (Himself, archive footage, uncredited), Jay Silverheels (Indian, uncredited) BW-16m.

by Jeff Stafford

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