

Other Cooper set for 'Today Show'

By Kelly Hoffman
The Republic

The other Gary Cooper — the one who graduated from Columbus High School in 1970 with the other Liz Taylor and Jimmy Stewart — will be on NBC's "Today Show" Thursday.

With him will be 24 other regular guys who just happen to share a name with some of Hollywood's most famous leading men.

American Movie Classics conducted a nationwide search for men with the same name as Hollywood leading men.

The search uncovered more than 3,000 candidates, including 804 Gary Coopers, said Pamela Aniello, who conducted the search.

Aniello interviewed every candidate and said Cooper was chosen because of his positive approach to living life with a famous name.

"It was a combination of his personality in conjunction with some really good life experiences," she said.

"Everything about him was intriguing."

Cooper, the son of Ralph and Wanda Cooper, was born and raised in Columbus, where his father served on the police force during the 1950s. As a policeman's wife, Wanda could see movies for free at the three local theaters.

The impressionable coal miner's daughter named her children Gary and Susan (named for Susan Hayward), after two of her favorite movie stars.

"I liked Gary Cooper movies, and he seemed like a good, proud man," Wanda said.

Cooper, who now lives in Thomasville, Ga., said he feels somewhat obligated to live his life to the standards of the on-screen heroes the film star portrayed.

"He represented the characteristics of being a gentleman and a man that I like," Cooper said. "But it doesn't matter what your name is, it's what your life is that counts."

Following in the footsteps of the big-screen hero, a few years ago Cooper saved a boy from drowning in a pond during a camp-out he hosted for underprivileged boys.

Also, as a bail enforcement agent, or bounty hunter, Cooper

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travels throughout the United States, donning many disguises and hunting sometimes dangerous criminals.

One routine pickup of a man who owed a small traffic ticket bond turned into a gun-wielding capture of a three-time serial killer.

He said many of the fugitives he helps bring to justice tend to remember him by name — as do store clerks, airline ticket agents, restaurant maitre d's, high school teachers and people he doesn't even remember meeting.

"There's always some kind of notoriety that goes along with a name like this," Cooper said. "Especially with people I don't know, because they think I must be *somebody*."

If he wasn't famous before, he may be now. Along with a scheduled "Today Show" appearance, Cooper and the other "leading men" will spend five days in New York, tape a segment for Entertainment Tonight, catch a Broadway musical and ring the opening bell of the American Stock Exchange on Friday.

AMC conducted the search through the Internet, phone books from across the country, ads in USA Today and the services of a search agency, Aniello said.

The campaign is to promote AMC's "From Grit to Grace: A Celebration of Hollywood's Leading Men," a festival featuring 16 classic movies from 1940 to 1970.

"This just tops it all," Cooper, who lives on Cooper Lane, said. "Wait 'til I tell people I'm sponsored by AMC, they'll think for sure I'm some kind of celebrity then."