

Attorney Builds Reputation for Representing Dead Stars

By Stefanie Knapp

The most memorable moment of Bill Wegner's career came when the litigator put Marilyn Monroe on the witness stand ... well, sort of.

At the time, Monroe had been dead for more than 30 years, and her stint on the witness stand was a hypothetical question Wegner posed during his closing arguments.

"The only thing that would make you feel comfortable is if you could hear from Marilyn herself," Wegner told the jury.

Wegner, a partner at Los Angeles' Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, represented Anna Strasberg, the executor of Marilyn Monroe's estate, as she sued a family member of Monroe's former secretary for selling Monroe's personal items. *Strasberg v. Odyssey Group Inc.*, B095962 (Cal. App. 2nd. Dist., filed Dec. 17, 1996).

The family of Monroe's secretary, Inez Melson, claimed the items her nephew tried to auction were gifts given to her by Monroe.

"When Monroe died, [the secretary's] job was to collect her effects and turn them over to the estate," Wegner says. "She kept some things."

Wegner argued that the items, such as Monroe's driver's license and letters to her psychiatrist, were not things that Monroe would have given to her.

During his closing remarks, Wegner walked to the edge of his table and opened the turnstile as if someone was walking to the witness stand.

He then walked to the stand and said to the empty chair, "Marilyn, did you gift any of this property to your secretary before you died?"

"She would say no," Wegner told the jury.

Bill Wegner represented the executor of Marilyn Monroe's estate when she sued a family member of Monroe's former secretary for selling Monroe's personal items.

Photo by Robert Levins



Wegner sat down, and after 2 1/2 days, the jury came back and found in favor of Wegner and Monroe's estate. All the items were returned to Strasberg.

"[That was] the most fun I've ever had with a closing," Wegner says.

The case had more than 200 hearsay objections, and all the witnesses were dead. But when it came time for the closing, something clicked for Wegner.

He informed the jury that the judge would instruct them to listen to a series of presumptions. One states that, if the gifts in question are items a person would not

give if she were alive, then they are not gifts and should be returned.

In addition to Monroe, Wegner works with James Dean's family in numerous actions and has created a reputation for representing dead celebrities, including Fred Eastaire.

While his relationships with the estates of both Dean and Monroe started out in lawsuits, he's often advised them on intellectual property matters, such as new products that will bear the Monroe or Dean name, which continue to bring in money for the celebrities' estates.

Monroe was 11th on Forbes Magazine's list of top earning dead celebrities in 2002, bringing in \$7 million. Dean just missed the list with only \$3 million. Elvis Presley topped the 2002 list, earning \$37 million in the year.

Wegner says that those two clients have a special place in his practice.

"Dean and Monroe are the spice in my practice," Wegner says.

Wegner's popularity in representing dead celebrities has traveled by word of mouth, and he claims the word originated with Craig Darian, co-chairman and chief executive officer of Tricor Entertainment. Wegner also serves as general counsel to Tricor Entertainment. "All roads lead to Craig Darian," Wegner says.

Wegner claims that Darian was responsible for Wegner's involvement with the Dean case that went to trial in 1992 and that same year, with him representing the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce to protect the Hollywood Sign and the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

In the Dean case, Warner Bros. Inc. claimed that the Dean family owed them \$90 million because the company owned the rights to his name, not Dean's heirs. *Warner Bros. Inc. v. Curtis Management Group Inc.*, CV91-4016 (C.D. Cal., filed July 25, 1991).