Film Series @Graham: “It Happened One Night”
Guiding Questions

1. This movie takes place during the Depression, yet it begins on a yacht. What other markers of class and financial circumstances do you see in the film, and what effect do they have on the story? Why is the class difference between the two protagonists a central concern?

2. One motif in the film related to the Depression setting is hunger. How is it used? (Who is hungry, and when, and for what?)

3. What do you think of the relationship between Ellen and her father? Where is her mother?

4. Peter is a newspaper reporter, and his motive for helping Ellen, at least at first, is to get the scoop he needs to save his job. Newspapers also appear throughout the film, often in stylized scenes of headlines coming off the presses, and there are several scenes of newsroom drama. Radio broadcasts are also mentioned, and at the end of the movie Ellie and King’s wedding is being photographed and filmed by reporters. How do you understand this interest in the media?

5. Peter tells Oscar Shapeley that Ellen is his wife in order to get him to leave her alone; he tells the motel owners the same thing for financial reasons; and he and Ellen pretend to be married when they are hitchhiking, presumably to avoid scandal. What do you think of all this playacting, and especially the most elaborate case of it, when Ellen and Peter put on a show for her father’s detectives? (Peter suggests that this is actually a play that could be produced for the stage; he says its title would be “The Great Deception”). Why does Peter cast Ellen as a plumber’s daughter in this play?

6. The scene in which Clark Gable removes his shirt is infamous (men’s undershirt sales dropped precipitously when film came out). This is the first of several scenes of undressing in the movie. Why do you think Capra has included these scenes?

7. Peter often treats Ellen as though she is a child: his favorite nickname for her is “brat;” he says she doesn’t know how to take care of herself and tells her what to eat and how to spend her allowance; he even spanks her at one point. Is this misogynist paternalism or parental care (or some sort of combination)? Is he ever maternal with her?

8. Ellen says she has spent her whole life being told what to do, which she hates (the premise of the movie is her dramatic “escape” from her father). How do you understand her falling in love with someone who tells her what to do so insistently and in such detail (not only how to stretch a dollar, but how to dunk, how to hitchhike, how to ride piggyback)?
9. Peter talks a lot about being made a sucker or taken for a ride, and also about socking people. He even pretends to be a gangster at one point. Why do you think he tends to represent himself as a defensive and violent person? How is this related to his dream of life on a Pacific island?

10. What is the Biblical story of the walls of Jericho and how does it inform your understanding of the blanket Peter uses as room divider?

11. When Ellie confesses her love, Peter seems at first unable to believe or respond to her. Then he leaves her alone at the motel, which results in their literally missing each other on the road, and nearly losing each other forever. Just after Peter has confessed to Ellen’s father that he loves her, she tells her father she is “not interested” in anything he has to say about Peter. Is all this just to create suspense, or does it contribute to our understanding of what’s at stake for these characters?

12. Ellen and Peter spend three nights together on the road. Why do you think the title refers to something that happened one night? Is that night one of the three? What exactly happened?