



'I KNOW HILLBILLY' - INSIDE SOURCES

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Sixty years ago, Americans were doubled over laughing at a 70-something spitfire's antics.

When "The Beverly Hillbillies" debuted on CBS in 1962, critics were aghast. But viewers fell in love with the fish-out-of-water story of overnight rich mountain types transplanted into America's glitziest ZIP Code.

It was a guilty pleasure for many. "The intelligentsia tell their friends they hate it," one observer wrote at the time. "Then they go home, draw the curtains so no one can see, turn on the Hillbillies, and laugh till their sides hurt."

Much of the sitcom's success was thanks to a 5-foot-2-inch actress who weighed less than 100 pounds. And who, incidentally, was years younger than her character.

Irene Ryan (who was 59 when the series debuted on Sept. 26, 1962) stole the show as Daisy Moses, better known as Granny. Viewers couldn't get enough of the spunky septuagenarian who toted a shotgun, sipped white lightning, and always spoke her mind.

But she almost didn't get the part. Here's how it happened.

Paul Henning grew up in Independence, Mo., and clerked in a drugstore as a boy (where local politician Harry Truman advised him to go to law school).

Showbiz called instead, and by the 1940s, he was writing for the biggest comedy shows on radio. When television came along, he worked on hits like "The Real McCoys" and "The Andy Griffith Show."

For years, Henning had nurtured the idea of a sitcom featuring characters from the Missouri Ozarks. He had vacationed there in his youth and knew a series about down-to-earth hill folk would succeed.

He eventually got the green light and set about bringing his dream to life. There was Jed Clampett, the widower mountaineer (whose log cabin sat atop a sea of oil) struggling to raise his beautiful tomboy daughter, Elly May.

To help, his late wife's mother, Granny, resided with the Clampetts. (How any man could live happily with his mother-in-law is what the theater calls "voluntary suspension of disbelief.")

It came time to select the cast, and Henning had the perfect Granny picked out. Bea Benaderet was a star of radio and TV with such hits as "I Love Lucy," "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show" on her resume. (Baby Boomers will also remember her as the voice of Betty Rubble in "The Flintstones" cartoons.)

Though his decision was already made, Henning went through with auditions for the role. Then Irene Ryan came in, and everything changed.

The soft-spoken, diminutive actress was nothing like the character she hoped to play. She had risen through the entertainment ranks the hard way, paying her dues over many long, unglamorous years.

She and her first husband had played the vaudeville circuit as “Tim and Irene,” with Ryan playing a ditzzy wife in a comedy act. There were many hard times, especially during the lean years of the Depression, when the couple took any job they could, anywhere they could find it, including remote villages in the Deep South and the country’s midsection.

There were bit parts in B Movies, a divorce, a second marriage, more minor roles, a second divorce. With 60 looming, she had never landed a big gig. And she really needed the work just then, too. So, Ryan went after the role with all the gusto of the character herself.

She showed up for her audition looking like Granny: no makeup, hair pulled tightly back in a bun, old-fashioned wire-rim glasses, and—in the words of those who watched her read the part—“feisty as all get out.”

Impressed with her performance, Henning asked just one question: “Can you play a hillbilly, Irene?”

Her answer settled things.

“Are you kidding? I was in a stock company when we played a theater in Arkansas. We kept waiting backstage for the curtain to go up. There was nobody in the theater. So, we talked to the manager and asked why he didn’t let the people in. He said if he’d let them in before the curtain rose, they would whittle away the seats. So, believe me, I know hillbilly!”

That, as they say, sealed the deal.

Benaderet was a good sport about losing the role. Henning created the part of Cousin Pearl as a consolation prize and promised her the starring role in the upcoming “Petticoat Junction.”

“The Beverly Hillbillies” was the top-rated show in its first two seasons. It was among the top 20 most-watched programs for eight of its nine seasons and remains a rerun favorite today.

And it was partly thanks to the years Irene Ryan toiled in obscurity among real-life “hillbillies.”