

Santa Cruz's Hollywood Legend - ZaSu Pitts

Comic actress appeared in 500 films



ZaSu Pitts and Thelma Todd hear the landlady approaching in "Asleep in the Feet"

Bio-P
by Rick Hildreth

ZASU PITTS, legendary comedian of television, stage and screen, spent her childhood in Santa Cruz.

One of the most prolific actresses ever to crash the Hollywood gates, the comedian with sad eyes and fluttering hands made more than 500 features, shorts and television films in a career spanning four decades.

Born sometime between 1895 and 1900 in Parsons, Kansas, ZaSu was one of three children living near poverty on a small pension left by their father, a soldier who died in the Spanish-American War. The Pitts family came west searching for an environment more hospitable to a woman and three children with few resources than the snow-covered cornfields could provide.

ZaSu Pitts was her real name, derived from the names of two of her aunts, Susan and Eliza.

She made her stage debut in the early 1900s at the old Santa Cruz Opera House, where she read "The Midnight Ride of Paul Reveré." She later appeared in thespian delights such as "Dress Rehearsal" and "Triumph of Honor."

Her mother encouraged ZaSu to pursue a career in the nascent business of film making. In 1917 she fulfilled her mother's hopes by appearing with silent screen legend Mary Pickford in "The Little Princess."

She was quickly recognized as a tireless worker with tremendous motivation to transcend her impoverished youth in Santa Cruz. Dozens of silent films featured ZaSu Pitts, and her name quickly became box office gold.

Although many early films were made in the greater Monterey Bay-San Francisco area, ZaSu Pitts made only one film near her childhood home: "Thunder Mountain" in 1925.

She was one of the few actresses to

survive the transition from silent films to the talkies.

ZaSu Pitts wanted to be considered a serious actress, and appeared in Eric von Stroheim's "Greed" and "The Wedding March." She was also featured the European version of Louis Milestone's "All Quiet on the Western Front" in 1930. Stroheim described her as "the greatest tragedian of them all."

In 1944, ZaSu Pitts made her Broadway debut in "Ramshackle Inn." She did three more plays on Broadway before returning to Hollywood.

Her greatest success was as a film comedian. ZaSu Pitts appeared opposite W.C. Fields in "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch" in 1934. She was the Army colonel in the 1954 classic "Francis Joins the WACS," featuring Francis the talking mule. Both the 1930 and 1940 versions of "No No Nanette" starred ZaSu. A series of comedy shorts in the 1930s featured the team of ZaSu Pitts and Thelma Todd.

She appeared as "Miss Nugent" on the 1950s television series "Oh Susanna" with Gale Storm.

Her last film was Stanley Kramer's 1963 slapstick farce, "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World."

ZaSu Pitts was married twice, had a daughter in the 1940s and adopted the son of actress Barbara LaMarr. She kept her personal life out of the screen magazines.

In the 1940s, ZaSu, who fancied herself a culinary expert, tried unsuccessfully to purchase the recipe for the "Victoria Bar" produced by Santa Cruz confectioner Frazier Lewis. ZaSu Pitts' candy recipes survive in a book called *Candy Hits*.

ZaSu Pitts contracted cancer in 1961 and died in Hollywood in 1963.

Her childhood home at 208 Lincoln St. in Santa Cruz is now a historic landmark, a reminder of the humble beginnings of one of America's premier comic actresses. •