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# When Peggy Helmerich was Peggy Dow, rising Hollywood star of the 1950s

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Peggy Helmerich sits next to posters from some of her movies, including "Harvey" and "Bright Victory," that are on display at Circle Cinema. Helmerich will be doing a Q-and-A after a screening of her movie "Bright Victory" at the

By MICHAEL SMITH ♦ World Scene Writer | 2 comments

Listen to a Voices of Oklahoma interview featuring Peggy Helmerich

If you live in Tulsa, you may know the name Peggy Helmerich.

Perhaps you've made a visit to the Peggy V. Helmerich Women's Health Center at one of Hillcrest's hospitals.

Maybe you've read about the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author's Award through the Tulsa Library Trust. Or visited

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### Screening

Peggy Helmerich film event

**WHAT:** "Bright Victory," a 1951 film starring Tulsa's Peggy Helmerich, will be screened, with Helmerich speaking and answering audience questions following the pair of showings.

**WHEN:** Tuesday, 2 and 7 p.m.; ticket-holders for 7 p.m. showing may attend a 6 p.m. reception at the theater.

**WHERE:** Circle Cinema, 10 S. Lewis Ave.

**TICKETS:** These Circle Cinema benefit screenings will be held as a 2 p.m. matinee, with tickets \$25 (\$15 for Circle Cinema members) and free for veterans; and at 7 p.m., with these tickets \$35 (\$25 for theater members).

**TO BUY:** Tickets are available for both shows online at [circlecinema.com](http://circlecinema.com) and at the theater's box-office. More information is available by calling 918-585-3456.

**NOTE:** Helmerich will also be in attendance at Tuesday's 6 p.m. reception, which will be hosted by Polo Grill and chef Robert Merrifield and include hors d'oeuvres and beverages.

the Peggy V. Helmerich Library on 91st Street.

She has become that much a part of the fabric of Tulsa, which has benefited greatly from her philanthropy of more than 60 years.

She and her late husband, Walter Helmerich III, the longtime chairman of Helmerich & Payne who died in 2012, made a point of donating money to Tulsa institutions — and she's raised much more through her work with many nonprofits in the city.

But did you know that Peggy Helmerich was a Hollywood movie star before she became one of Tulsa's brightest stars?

Do you know the name Peggy Dow?

Those who do can probably tell you that Peggy Dow played the pretty nurse in the Hollywood comedy classic "Harvey," starring opposite Jimmy Stewart.

But even they might not be able to name her other films, despite her appearing in eight films released in 1950-51, three of which were nominated for Academy Awards and in which she was billed among the top four cast members each time.

Peggy Dow was being groomed for big things in Hollywood. A Southern belle and a classic beauty, she was signed to a seven-year contract with Universal Pictures.

Peggy Dow was on the cover of Life Magazine. She presented legendary costume designer Edith Head with her first of eight Oscars at the 1950 Academy Awards ceremony.

She was, at age 23, the very definition of a rising star.

And then she fell in love with and married Walter Helmerich III and moved to Tulsa, stunning most everyone in Hollywood, including columnists like her friend Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons, who wrote of Peggy Dow returning to the film set soon



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after the wedding.

But Peggy Dow was now Peggy Helmerich.

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"I was very happy with my career. I was having a great time, and he was messing me up," Helmerich said with a chuckle thinking back to that time.

"But I loved him," she said about her marriage of more than 60 years to the Tulsa oilman and father of their five sons.

Helmerich has rarely spoken extensively about her Hollywood career, but she did so recently over lunch at a restaurant at Utica Square, the shopping center that Helmerich & Payne purchased in 1964.

She will do so again on Tuesday at Circle Cinema — her 1951 film "Bright Victory" is screening twice that day as a benefit for the theater. She will speak about making movies during the "golden age" of Hollywood and will answer audience questions.

"I love what they do at Circle Cinema, and Clark (Wiens, co-founder of the theater's foundation) has asked me to help with a few things," Helmerich said.

"They even put my name on their 'Walk of Fame' sidewalk, and that was the sweetest thing."

### 'That was my war'

The screenings come a few days before the Tulsa Library Trust's presentation of the annual Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award on Saturday, Dec. 5.

This year's recipient is Rick Atkinson, a three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and military historian who has written extensively about World War II.

"Bright Victory" is a WWII drama in which Helmerich starred opposite Oscar-nominee Arthur Kennedy, who played a soldier blinded by sniper fire in North Africa and who returns home and struggles to adjust to losing his sight.

Dow plays a woman who befriends and falls in love with Kennedy's character in the town where the U.S. Army General Hospital is located.

"That was my war," she said, clasping her hands and remembering the events of the 1940s in her hometown.

She's proud of "Bright Victory" — Helmerich beams as she recalls traveling to receive an award for the film from President Harry S. Truman, on behalf of the film's story about the rehabilitation of veterans, including the ones depicted in the film who had been blinded in a variety of wartime injuries.

"We filmed so much at the (Army) hospital, with (blinded veterans) working with us, and it was just amazing what these men were able to do," Helmerich said. "Just amazing."

The film showing will be a digital screening, as Universal Pictures agreed to make one from a 35mm print of "Bright Victory," which is not available on DVD.

### Hollywood's Golden Age

After the war, Helmerich and her sister began attending Gulf Park College for Women in Gulfport, Mississippi, before she would head off to Northwestern to study classical theater acting (comedic actor Paul Lynde was in her class there) and her family moved to Athens, Tennessee.



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During her senior year, she went to visit a friend in California and at the same time met with a writer friend of her family there, who suggested she try to get an agent.

Her looks, talent and work ethic convinced an agent to sign her, and she further convinced Universal-International, as Universal Pictures was then known: She became a contract player for the studio's films on a seven-year deal.

While enrolled in an "in-studio" class (with Tony Curtis and Rock Hudson as classmates), she was living at the Hollywood Studio Club (Marilyn Monroe was also a resident), a chaperoned dormitory for young women involved in the movie business, where they could live for up to two years.

"It was so much fun," Helmerich said of her Hollywood experience attending events and movie premieres and making films, "and it was a contract that paid me \$200 a week. That doesn't seem like much, but it was good money for just starting out."

She was born Peggy Josephine Varnadow, but that name would never appear on a movie screen.

"The studio said, 'We've got to do something about that last name, Varnadow,' and I ultimately suggested that they just use the last syllable of my name," and Peggy Dow was born, Helmerich said.

"I'm just glad they went with that," she said, rolling her eyes. "I was very nearly Vera Varnay, or something like that. Thank goodness that didn't happen."

## 'Harvey' and Helmerich

After starting out in multiple film-noir crime films, Dow found herself cast in one of Hollywood's best-known comedies: 1950's "Harvey," in which Jimmy Stewart played Elwood P. Dowd, a fellow who believes his best friend is a 6-foot white rabbit named Harvey.

Helmerich played Miss Kelly, a nurse at a sanitarium where Dowd's family tries to admit him, and she had several scenes with Stewart, who was nominated for a best-actor Oscar for the role.

"He was just such a help to the young actors, and he was such a sweet guy, and he was one of the most modest guys," she said of Stewart. "There are actors who you wonder, 'Are

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they real?' Well, he was real. He was wonderful."

The movie was a hit and remains a classic 65 years later. But the role for which she will always be best-known was one she almost turned down.

The role in "Harvey" was a co-starring part, and she had the opportunity to be the female lead in a film with actor Van Heflin, she said. She would play an Indian princess, despite not being Indian — a common practice in Hollywood at the time.

But fate, and Walter Helmerich III, stepped in.

"Here I am trying to tell Walt, 'You just don't understand this business. Van Heflin is a marvelous actor, and I'm going to play an Indian princess, and that 'Harvey' role isn't that much," Helmerich remembers telling him.

"But Walt kept telling me that people will be watching that Jimmy Stewart movie for the next 50 years, and my agent was pushing for 'Harvey,' too."

She recalls going for a drive with her agent, who was still trying to sway her decision.

"He's driving and he says to me, 'Let me tell you about Jimmy Stewart,' and he's telling me all of these wonderful things, and who does it turn out is hiding under a blanket in the back seat of the car? Walt Helmerich!" she said, shaking her head.

"My agent and Walt became very good friends, and they were always plotting," she said with a smile, "but with 'Harvey,' they knew what I should do."

## Meeting her match

Helmerich attended a Broadway opening of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," starring Carol Channing, to which her friend Nina Foch promised: If you come, I'll have a date for you.

But it was a man who asked Helmerich to dance while her date was distracted that stole her heart.

The other man was Walter Helmerich III, who was then attending Harvard Business School. While she was at the school in Gulfport a couple of years earlier, he had been stationed at Keesler Air Force Base at nearby Biloxi, and they knew some of the same people.

They began talking. They danced some more. Eventually, he would begin flying from Boston to Los Angeles on weekends, by propeller plane, to see her.

"I really don't know how he got through Harvard Business School," Helmerich said, recalling their long-distance relationship that had many ups — and an occasional down.

"There was this one argument — I remember telling him, 'Don't come see me, don't call me...' — and that led Walt to send off a gardenia to me, every day, for the next two months," she said.

"Everyone I knew had a gardenia, I kept giving them away."

Each one had a personalized note attached. It was an early beginning to a practice he would continue for the next 60 years.

"He would leave me these notes, little sticky notes, with everything from 'I waited for you for two hours ... Where were you!' to some very personal ones and some that were a little

embarrassing," she said with a little blush.

"I counted, and I have 16 of those notes still today. I wish I had more. He must have written a thousand."

## 'If you'll marry me'

Their long-distance courtship eventually came to a head when she was invited to Washington, D.C., to accept President Truman's award for "Bright Victory."

She needed an escort in Washington.

"Walt was perfect for this," Helmerich said. "He was always up on current events. He was such a bright guy. He was also so good-looking, and I liked him so much.

"Well, I decide to call him, and we hadn't talked in a couple of months, and, of course, it turns out he's been in North Dakota for more than a month working on an oil well. I reach him, and I thought he was going to jump through the phone the way that he told me he'd been so sad not hearing from me."

But when she asked if he would be her escort, he gave an ultimatum: I'll come if you'll agree to marry me.

"I finally gave in, and I said, 'Oh, OK. OK, darn it, I will,'" she said, chuckling.

They were married Nov. 23, 1951, in Athens, Tennessee, in a church "lighted entirely by hundreds of white tapers and decorated with gardenias in garlands, baskets and vases," according to a Tulsa World report.

## Hollywood called again

Helmerich's last film as Peggy Dow was "I Want You," a wartime drama in which she acted opposite Dana Andrews, Dorothy McGuire and Farley Granger in a film for studio executive Samuel Goldwyn, who had asked Universal to loan Dow out for the film.

It was her second film for director Mark Robson ("Peyton Place"), whom Helmerich refers to as "one of my mentors" and who would direct films for another three decades.

Would Helmerich have continued to work with the two-time Oscar-nominated director and other esteemed filmmakers? We'll never know.

If you were to look at her listing on the Internet Movie Database, her bio reads: "This promising 1950s Universal-International contract player had so much going for her — beauty, brains and talent — to go the distance, but she came up far short after deciding to retire for domestic life."

"I wish I knew someone who could change it, it's so wrong," Helmerich said of the listing, adding that she has little interest in online activities.

"My children put me on Facebook a couple of years ago," she said, "and I had them take me off the next day."

Helmerich was married and already the mother of her first son when Hollywood came calling one last time.

One of the biggest movie stars in the world, William Holden, wanted her in his next film to play his romantic interest. It would mean several weeks of filming in the desert of Nevada.

“William Holden was to play a test pilot (the film, “Toward the Unknown,” was released in 1956), and they told me, ‘We’ll help you, you can have a nanny on the set,’” Helmerich recalled.

“Walt wanted me to come out and meet with them, to never (have any regrets), and I just said I’m sorry, but no thank you.”

She remembers her decision to leave Hollywood this way:

“I had worked on a movie with Dick Powell (“You Never Can Tell,” 1951), and he said ‘Why would you want to stay in this business?’ I thought he was crazy, and I told him, the same reason as you: I’m an actor. But it turned out that he was fascinated with Walt because Dick was fascinated with business. He told me: You get married to Walt, and you come back to Hollywood, and this is what’s going to happen: It won’t work out. He asked me to come up with five happy married couples in Hollywood that we knew, and we had a hard time doing it.”

So she agreed to marry Walt (“I loved him, and I was not going to let him go back to working on an oil well without me telling him that”), and as she says, “I started to see things differently.”

She came to Tulsa, and she started a family. She saw a city in which she could make a different kind of mark through philanthropy and through working with many of the city’s nonprofits for decades.

“You put your creativity into other things, and when I say other things, I mean important things,” Helmerich said. “What I’ve been able to do is a blessed gift.”

She says this with the conviction of a woman who knows she has accomplished more in the last 65 years in Tulsa than making a few extra movies could have ever done.

World news researcher Hilary Pittman contributed to this story.

Michael Smith 918-581-8479



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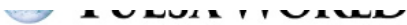
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