A COAL MINER'S DEPUTY

Every working actor credits someone or something for his first break, and for Don Knotts it was a lingering country accent. The year was 1955, and the rail-thin actor was loafing at a New York City drugstore when a friend told him about a new Broadway production looking for "Southern types. 'It ought to be right down your alley,'" his friend told him.

For the audition, Knotts consciously worked his drawl and got the call back. His role was small, but "No Time for Sergeants" was huge, especially for another young Southern actor named Andy Griffith. He and Knotts only had a short scene together, but the two hit it off immediately. "We had common threads in our background," as Knotts recalls in his 1999 autobiography, "and we understood each other's humor."

A few years later, when Knotts saw Griffith's pilot for a weekly TV show about a small town sheriff, "the wheels in my brain began to whirl." Knotts immediately called his old pal, who agreed it would be "a hell of an idea" to add a deputy to the cast. Thus was born Barney Fife, Sheriff Taylor's jittery, bundle-of-nerves sidekick in the "Andy Griffith Show," a black-and-white classic that remains one of the most popular syndicated shows in Hollywood history.

It was Knotts' parents — and their parents — who probably deserve credit for the accent that led to his immortal role as TV Land's most inimitable lawman and Second Banana. His mother's family was thick with farmers and Bible Belt evangelicals. His father's side boasted real-life Floyd the Barbers. (Two uncles ran cut shops within a few blocks of each other. One was the funny man; the other was a Christian fundamentalist who gave grace at family suppers and was known to speak in tongues.)

So it goes in Appalachia, where snake-handling and Hee Haw knee-slappping exist side by side. In fact, none of Knotts' story is surprising — until you consider that it all gurgled up within 75 miles of downtown Pittsburgh.

In truth, Knotts' hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia, where he was born Jesse Donald Knotts in 1924, was as much Animal House as Mayberry. His father owned a farm and mined coal, but by the time Don came along, youngest of four sons, Dad had suffered a nervous breakdown and had given up the plow. Mother Elsie moved the family to town and leased a house on University Avenue in the Sunnyside section, which she ran as a student boarding house. (The Knotts clan lived in two rooms — Don got the cot in the kitchen.)

University campus, not a country hollow, was his real backyard. He passed the time sneaking into WVU football games and bantering with the college kids living upstairs.

But for all its credentials as a college town, Morgantown was and still is sausage-and-biscuits country. It could be argued that Morgantown and Monongalia County mark the northern terminus of Appalachia — were it not for Greene County, Pennsylvania. Only a state border separates the two rural, formerly coal mining-dependent counties, and Greene is Pennsylvania's poorest and most isolated. When Knotts was young, Sundays were reserved for visiting country kin there, a dozen miles from Morgantown. "I hated those visits," Knotts writes. "For one thing, it meant attending a holy roller church service, which scared me half to death when I was little...." (Picture a pre-adolescent Barney Fife, eyes-a-bugging, as the minister conjures up visions of eternal damnation.)

"The farmers were nice people," Knotts continues, "but they didn't exactly set the world on fire with conversation. After church and a big Sunday dinner, the men would sit around with several minutes elapsing between sentences."

This is not the conventional stuff from which an actor draws inspiration, unless you're destined to play a deputy sheriff in a make-believe small town. Between takes, Knotts and Griffith got into the habit of working their own stories into the script. In one scene, inspired by a languid Sunday afternoon in Greene County, Barney interrupts the action to say: "I think I'll go down to the gas station and get a bottle of pop, visit Thelma Lou, then home to watch a little TV." (Long pause, repeat.)
The dead-on send-up, delivered with Barney's quaking self-consciousness, was enough to put Griffith in stitches. "We both loved the idea," Knotts writes, "of shooting a scene every now and then in which Andy and Barney would just sit and shoot the breeze about something that had nothing whatsoever to do with the story we were doing."

Knotts' old Morgantown buddies, Jarvey Eldred and Richie Ferrara, weren't surprised to see Don blend so smoothly into Mayberry's pace. "Some of those skits we actually lived through," Ferrara said. (Watch the "Griffith Show" closely and you may catch a reference to "Richie Ferrara's Hardware Store.") Morgantown had its share of small town characters, and Don was a quick study. "We'd sit on High Street and make fun of the various characters walking on by," Eldred added. "Don always found a lot of humor in the people he associated with."

In high school, the three friends formed an act, the Radio Three, with Eldred on the musical saw, Ferrara on the mandolin, and Knotts as comedian. "We'd play Baptist churches for entertainment on Sunday—do a 60-40 split," Ferrara remembered. "The audiences were a little stiff at first, but Don would get them laughing."

To Pittsburghers accustomed to thinking of Perry Como and Shirley Jones as the region's contributions to the Golden Age of Television, the thought of giving birth to the likes of Barney Fife seems a bit implausible. After all, this is the land of smokestacks and onion domes, not smoke-houses and tent revivals.

The truth is, Appalachia is the one region to which Pittsburgh officially belongs, at least since 1965. That's when the Johnson administration mapped Appalachia and included a large chunk of southwestern Pennsylvania. If you think that's just Great Society fiction, mosey on down to Greene or Fayette counties: country music drones from loudspeakers at filling stations. "Yinz" fades to a discernable "ya'll." Somewhere down here, Deer Hunter country gives way to Coal Miner's Daughter.

When Knotts was growing up, the road to Pittsburgh was rough and winding—"a four-hour drive each way if you're in a truck," Ferrera recalls today from his winter home in Florida—but everyone knew Morgantown depended on the Smoky City. "We shipped most of our coal north on the Monongahela," Ferrara remembers, "and my father was there twice a week, picking up groceries for his store." And clear-channel KDKA, of course, was a main supplier of entertainment; Knotts and his family were
devotees of "Amos and Andy," which KDKA broadcast throughout the 1930s.

For Knotts, and probably countless other country kids in the great rural swath to the south, the Smokey City was Bright Lights, Big City. Although he'd gotten his first sustained taste of show business in the Army, where he performed with a traveling show called "Stars and Gripes," Knotts turned to Pittsburgh to hone his act after the war. Though enrolled at WVU, he hit town during his first summer break in 1946 hoping to crack the nightclub scene. "Don didn't have a car back then," remembers Eldred, "so he hitchhiked back and forth between Morgantown and Pittsburgh."

Ferrara, in fact, came along when Knotts hitched in the first time looking for an agent. Stymied all day, the two West Virginia kids managed to talk their way into a downtown booking agent’s office just before closing time. Ferrara, then pre-med, warmed her up by offering her some medical advice, but she "just howled" when Don performed his stumbling football routine and dummy act. She immediately placed a call to Bill Green, who booked him for a 20-minute routine, twice a week, at his hopping nightclub in Pleasant Hills. (See article on pg. 70 in this issue.)

Although Knotts got good reviews, the performance venues could be a bit unpredictable. One evening, Knotts found himself unwittingly emceeing what turned out to be a stag show in a town about 50 miles from Pittsburgh. (Johnstown? New Castle?) His duties included holding the strippers' discards. "I stood there dumbfounded, with my hands full of dainties. Well, I thought to myself, now I've done everything."

Well, not quite. "Three's Company" was still decades away.

After college, Knotts did what every aspiring actor does: he went bi-coastal, first to the Big Apple and eventually to California, where his "Andy Griffith" tour lasted from 1960 to 1965. Knotts earned an impressive stash of Emmys for his work on "Andy Griffith," but he left craving other challenges. An impressive quantity of movies followed — "The Incredible Mr. Limpet," "The Ghost and Mr. Chicken," and an odd romp called "The Love God"— but Knotts, for all his talent, could never really break out of the family movie genre, which continued into the '70s with "The Apple Dumpling Gang." Like a lot of actors who grow famous on long-running and then syndicated shows, Knotts found himself trapped, in the public's mind, in the role of Mayberry's frail and improbable deputy. During its original run in prime time, "Andy Griffith" was part of a crowded field of rural comedies that included "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," and "Petticoat Junction." Audiences probably watched the shows because they were just plain funny. (How could you not laugh at Jethro?) But they also seemed to strike at something deeper in the American psyche — a hunger for the certainties of small town life amidst the empty calories of suburbs, highways, and chain stores. And interestingly, their ascent did coincide roughly with a mass migration of rural Appalachians to several prominent cities.

This hunger for simpler times could also be what keeps "Andy Griffith" in syndication today. Its fans are among the most devoted in all TV Land; "rural Trekkies" can recite entire episodes from memory, and will drive hours for the chance to meet a former cast member at a Mayberry reunion show. Knotts turns down most invitations to such get-togethers, but these days he is good-humored, publicly anyway, about being recognized as Barney Fife (and not, say, Mr. Furley from "Three's Company."). Earlier this year, he joined his friend Andy Griffith to receive his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. And he seemed just as flattered a few years back when his hometown renamed University Avenue in his honor.

Maybe the Don Knotts story doesn't lend itself to neat generalizations. The Pittsburgh region never became a destination for displaced Appalachians the way, say, Columbus or Cincinnati or Detroit did to our west. But that doesn't mean Pittsburgh has not been shaped by the green hills of Appalachia. Just think of all the hunters and tobacco chewers in our midst, and you realize that our Urban Experience is filtered through a different screen than, say, Philadelphia or Baltimore. We're not Mayberry, but maybe we're the big town you head for when you want a big city that's never too far from home.
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