



A CENTURY OF ENTERTAINMENT

FROM HIS "NERVOUS MAN" TO BARNEY FIFE TO RALPH FURLEY AND BEYOND, DON KNOTTS WAS
MORGANTOWN'S GIFT TO AMERICAN COMEDY.

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Morgantown
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Picture yourself taking in the Saturday pictures at Morgantown's grand Metropolitan Theatre some summer in the late 1930s. It's hot outside, but it's cool in here, because the Met was one of the very first theaters in the nation to have air conditioning. Your ticket lets you watch movies all day long. While you're waiting for the next one to start, a gangly teenager ambles out, sits down at center stage, and arranges a Charlie McCarthy dummy on his knee. His jokes aren't original, but the delivery is earnest.

"When Don Knotts was in high school, in between movies at the Met, he would go up on stage and do his ventriloquist act for whoever was in the audience," says Metropolitan Theatre enthusiast Rick McEwuen. "He wasn't paid—but nobody objected."

The future comedy legend was well-known locally when he was in high school, for reasons just like this one—he took any opportunity to get in front of an audience. His story is entwined, a little, with that of the Metropolitan Theatre. The two were born just a few days apart, and both became iconic Morgantown symbols of greatness in a golden era of entertainment. Their 100th birthdays are this summer.

THE BEST MEDICINE

Jesse Donald Knotts was just three days old when the Met opened on July 24, 1924. Built by brothers George and John Comuntzis, who ran Comuntzis restaurant across the street, it was billed as "West Virginia's Most Beautiful Playhouse." Opening night was scaled to match. A High Street parade featured live tigers and lions, and the evening's performances, McEwuen says, included acrobats, comedians, a magician, and a vaudeville production of *The Carnival of Venice*. It was a fitting spectacle for the city's new center of entertainment.

Knotts was by far the youngest of four—his brothers were already 14, 16, and 18 when he was born. The family lived in Westover. But his parents soon leased a big house on University Avenue in Sunnyside, and his mother rented rooms to college students for extra income during the Great Depression.

Knotts tells of some rough childhood years in his autobiography, *Barney Fife and Other Characters I Have Known*. His father suffered a mental breakdown before he was born, eventually becoming unable to work and, occasionally, violent. His brother Earl, who went by "Shadow," was Knotts' first comedic inspiration. Shadow kept things light through humor, especially at family meals. "The clowning would begin with Shadow buttering his bread as if it were a violin, tucking it under his chin and using the butter knife for a bow," Knotts wrote. "Sometimes the dinner hour would become complete mayhem, and I would laugh so hard I would have to leave the table, and the tears would run down the cheeks of my dear mother."

Radio was another source of inspiration. The Amos 'n' Andy comedy show aired nightly, and Knotts practiced Jack Benny's famously flawless timing.

Family life eased after Knotts' dad died in 1937. His mother, Elsie Knotts, encouraged his inexpert magic tricks and his pilfered jokes, and community groups would pay him a little to perform. So, full of confidence, he headed to New York after graduating from Morgantown High School in 1942. He returned, discouraged, before the summer was out, and enrolled at WVU—only to be drafted into the Army after his freshman year.

That tour of duty turned out to be the best thing for Knotts' career. He spent the war as the ventriloquist member of a company of entertainers who performed the revue *Stars & Gripes* for troops in the Pacific. Several were seasoned professional comedians, and the aspiring actor learned everything he could from them. By the time he returned to WVU in 1945, he had his confidence back. He married fellow WVU student Kathryn "Kay" Metz in 1947 and, not long after graduating in 1948, headed with his wife to New York to make it for real this time.

THE VIEW FROM MORGANTOWN

The new mass media of radio and television meant family and friends in Morgantown could follow Knotts' successes from their very own living rooms.

Starting in 1949, kids might have heard him on WAJR voicing old-timer Windy Wales on the popular radio program *Bobby Benson and the Bar-B-Bar Riders*. More and more homes had televisions and, from 1953 to 1955, housewives who made time to watch *Search for Tomorrow* weekdays at 12:30 could have seen him occasionally as janitor Wilbur Peterson.

Morgantown didn't get to see Knotts in the 1955-'57 Broadway production *No Time for Sergeants*, where he and fellow cast member Andy Griffith found instant camaraderie on-stage and off. But lucky residents who switched on NBC's *Tonight Show* on November 8, 1956, would have seen him debut his "nervous

man"—the first character that he felt was entirely his own invention. It earned him a spot as a regular on *The Steve Allen Show*. It's easy to imagine Elsie Knotts settling in front of the TV after dinner Sunday evenings with her eldest son, Ralph, and his family to watch her youngest son cutting up in the show's Man on the Street sketches.

In early 1960, Knotts happened to catch the pilot episode of a show his old friend Andy Griffith from *No Time for Sergeants* was working on. He called Griffith the next day and suggested, "Don't you think Sheriff Andy Taylor ought to have a deputy?" Griffith loved the idea, and the executive producer was soon persuaded, too. On October 3, 1960, CBS aired the first episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, with Knotts as the bumbling, lovable Deputy Barney Fife: pure TV magic.

**I
USED
TO BE INDECISIVE.
NOW
I'M NOT
SO SURE.
— DON KNOTTS**



Don Knotts
with cast
members
of The Andy
Griffith Show
(from left):
Andy Griffith,
Ron Howard,
and Jim
Nabors.

MORGANTOWN

WEST VIRGINIA

WESTOVER

A

C

B

D

E

M

J

F

G

I

H

K

L

NOTE The privately owned properties on this map appear here through the gracious consent of the property owners. Please respect their privacy.

BEECHURST AVENUE

UNIVERSITY AVENUE

WILLEY STREET

SPRUCE STREET

WALNUT STREET

COBURN AVENUE

HOLLAND AVENUE

DON KNOTTS BOULEVARD

HIGH STREET

DON KNOTTS

WALKING AND DRIVING TOUR

MORGANTOWN

Don Knotts lived in Morgantown from the time he was born in 1924 until he moved to New York City in 1948, with the exception of his World War II service in the Army, 1943–1945. He visited many times later in life to see family and friends and to be celebrated by his proud hometown.

A good place to start for the complete driving tour is the home in Westover where Knotts' family lived when he was born, site A. A walking tour of only the downtown sites could start at Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity, site E—the pay parking lot in the block of North High Street above Willey Street is convenient—or, for less challenging terrain, park anywhere downtown to visit sites F through J.

A. HOME AT BIRTH: 82 *Jefferson Street* in Westover. The family gave up the Knotts family farm outside Morgantown before he was born and moved here.

B. CHILDHOOD FAMILY HOME: 2147 *University Avenue* (no longer standing—it would have been on the lot occupied by Seneca Hall). When Knotts was about 5, the family leased a large house here and rented rooms to boarders. He grew up here with his parents and the older and younger of his three brothers, Ralph and Earl.

C. The former **SENECA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**, 313 *McLane Avenue*. Knotts attended elementary school here, a few blocks from the family home.

D. WEST VIRGINIA AND REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER at West Virginia University's Wise Library, 1549 *University Avenue*, 6th floor. The library's holdings, including Don Knotts' manuscripts and scripts with hand-written notes as well as showbills, honorary plaques, photographs, and audio recordings, are available to researchers by appointment. wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu

E. PHI SIGMA KAPPA FRATERNITY, 672 *North High Street*. Knotts was a member. The character Barney Fife took his name in part from nearby Fife Avenue, which intersects North High just uphill from here.

F. METROPOLITAN THEATRE, 371 *High Street*. This grand theater opened just days after Knotts was born in 1924, and he performed on its stage. A bronze sculpture, plaque, and star in front of the theater now celebrate his career in comedy and acting.

G. MONONGALIA COUNTY COURTHOUSE SQUARE, corner of High Street and Chancery Row. Don Knotts was presented with keys to the city here during Don Knotts Day festivities, June 1, 1963.

H. WARNER THEATRE, 147 *High Street*. Knotts worked as an usher at the Warner Theatre when he was in high school, and his Warner Bros. film *The Incredible Mr. Limpet* had its regional opening here in 1964.

I. MORGANTOWN HISTORY MUSEUM, 175 *Kirk Street*. The museum has a permanent exhibit of local and career Don Knotts memorabilia and holds an archive of Knotts artifacts, available to researchers by appointment. @morgantownhistory on FB

J. DON KNOTTS BOULEVARD, *South University Avenue* was renamed to honor the comedian in 1998.

K. MORGANTOWN HIGH SCHOOL, 109 *Wilson Avenue*. Knotts attended MHS 1938–1942. He formed a vaudeville group called The Radio Three with his friends Richie Ferrara and Jarvie Eldred.

L. Former site of **RAESE'S GROCERY**, 260 *Green Street*. After Knotts graduated from high school, after his first brief attempt to make it in New York and before he started at West Virginia University in the fall of 1942, he plucked chickens in the stockroom here.

M. ELSIE KNOTTS' HOME later in life, 732 *Louise Avenue*. Knotts bought this home for his mother in the mid-1960s, when his film career took off. She lived here until she died in 1969.

POINTS OF INTEREST OUTSIDE THE TOUR MAP

BEVERLY HILLS MEMORIAL GARDENS, 1290 *Fairmont Road*, 3.3 miles from downtown Morgantown. Knotts' father, William Jesse Knotts; mother, Elsie Luzetta Moore Knotts; and eldest and third brothers, Ralph Louis and William Earl Knotts, are buried here, as well as other relatives.

KNOTTSVILLE, WEST VIRGINIA, 30 miles from Morgantown. This is no longer an incorporated town, but there's a Knottsville Methodist Church, a Knottsville Road, and a Knottsville Cemetery. Don Knotts' great-great-great-great-grandfather James Absalom Knotts II, 1746–1835, a Revolutionary War soldier, is buried there.

Former **FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH** at 1206 *Byron Street* in Wheeling, West Virginia, 80 miles from Morgantown. Don Knotts and his first wife, Kathryn "Kay" Metz, were married here in 1947. Ms. Metz's father served as pastor at the church.



Don Knotts reads to children in the 1970s during one of his many visits to his hometown.

OUR HOMETOWN FUNNYMAN

The quirky mix of vulnerability and bravado that became Knotts' trademark was fully formed by this time, and it propelled Knotts to quick fame. In May 1961, the end of the *Griffith Show's* first season, he won its first Emmy Award, for outstanding supporting performance in a series.

Morgantown burst with pride. In the summer of 1961, the WVU alumni magazine featured its celebrated alum. And Monongalia County Sheriff Clarence Johnson hatched a plan, all in good fun. He had a history with Knotts: A one-time amateur magician himself, he'd performed with Knotts in front of school and community groups a couple decades earlier. So Johnson had a plaque made out of West Virginia walnut with a six-pointed star. In May 1962, when the second *Griffith Show* season finished taping, Johnson flew to New York "to get his man," according to a tongue-in-cheek story in *The Dominion-News*. He recruited Knotts as one of the nation's highest-paid sheriff's deputies in the country, the paper joked—at a cost to the county payroll of just \$1 a year.

Later that month, Knotts appeared on the cover of *TV Guide*. And then he won his second Emmy.

The following year, downtown Morgantown undertook a months-long spiffing up called Project 63 to look its best for West Virginia's centennial on June 20, 1963. At the same time, the mayor proclaimed June 1, 1963, Don Knotts Day. Fresh off of the third *Griffith* season—and his third Emmy—Knotts was treated to an all-out small-town jamboree, including receptions planned "so that everyone will have the opportunity to see him, hear him, or shake hands with him"—a tall order in a town of more than 20,000 people. It was also Memorial Day weekend in the state's centennial year, so the festivities were extra spectacular.

Don Knotts Day got an early start, with Sheriff Johnson hosting a coffee hour for Knotts and law enforcement officers from counties all around. The University High School marching band kicked off a parade down High Street, followed by a float, a couple of tanks, and the mayors of all four Morgantown-area towns as well as cars for Knotts and his family, all accompanied by a marching unit of deputy

that year I got a temporary
 job working in the toy department
 of a department store. One day
 I got talking with the old
 gentleman who was playing
 Santa Claus. (pause) I didn't sit
 on his lap or anything.
 But anyway, he encouraged me to
 to try and try it. So when it
 gets right down to it I made
 it because he told me I could.
 Don't tell me there's no Santa Claus.
 So after some nightclub work
 and a small part in a
 Broadway play I wound up
 on the Steve Allen Television
 Show where we developed the little
 I woke up one morning and realized I
 had the flu. So I called in sick. I
 told the stage manager I had aches and fever.

Hand-written notes for
 Don Knotts' 1999 autobiography,
Barney Fife and Other Characters I Have Known.

sheriffs. U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph and West Virginia Governor William Barron spoke at Courthouse Square, where Knotts was presented with keys to the city. It was a good thing Morgantown had spruced itself up: TV cameras from news markets as far away as New York took it all in. Knotts later toured the WVU medical center, met business professionals at Lakeview Country Club, and addressed the Alumni Centennial Banquet at the Hotel Morgan.

Quite a reception for a boy who grew up in a boarding house.

GOING BIGGER

The TV screen wasn't big enough for Knotts' talent. He'd already had several roles in movies—It's a *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, among others—and he liked it better than TV. As a perfectionist who rehearsed his lines every which way until he got the delivery just right—Griffith compared him to a concert pianist—the longer timeline of film work suited him. Griffith had only set out to do *The Andy Griffith Show* for five years anyway so, as that time played out, Knotts shifted his career.

He started appearing on the big screen regularly. On March 20, 1964, the Warner Theatre made a “whoop-de-doo” of the regional premiere of Warner Bros.' *The Incredible Mr. Limpet*, according to a front-page story in *The Dominion-News*. Elsie Knotts was the guest of honor.

Knotts then signed a five-film contract with Universal Pictures—it was around that time that he bought a house for his mom on Louise Avenue. When *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* opened at the Met in January 1966, Gus Comuntzis—son of George Comuntzis and now owner of the restaurant and theater—took Mrs. Knotts to dinner and the film's first showing. That would become one of Knotts' best-loved films, and the hapless hero Luther Hegg one of his best-loved characters. It was followed by *The Reluctant Astronaut* in 1967, *The Shakiest Gun in the West* in 1968, *The Love God?* in 1969, and *How to Frame a Figg* in 1971.

Great-nephew Bill Knotts lived with Don Knotts for two years while he went to acting school in the 1970s. He remembers his famous family member as down to earth, unlike many actors. “He never tried to cut in line at restaurants,” Bill Knotts says. “He always waited his turn and nodded when people smiled at him. When they were out for dinner and he was asked for autographs, it was his family who would say, ‘You know, we’re having dinner right now, if you could wait until we’re done.’ Because he would never say no. It was cool to see a guy that recognizable who was humble.”

Knotts worked all the time, and all across the entertainment spectrum. In 1972, for example, he appeared in the film *The Man Who Came to Dinner* with Orson Welles and did his first voice-overs in two episodes of the animated *New Scooby Doo Movies*. In 1974, he did touring regional theater, as he often did in summer, in the play *The Mind with the Dirty Man*, then started filming *The Apple Dumpling Gang* with Tim Conway in California, one of a long series of films for Disney Studios. He also appeared regularly on variety shows and had guest appearances on TV series.

So in 1979, when Knotts was invited to play the awkward swinger landlord Ralph Furley on the ABC sitcom *Three's Company*, he was an actor who required no audition. Co-stars John Ritter and Joyce DeWitt couldn't believe their luck—when he showed up at the studio to read lines, DeWitt told one Knotts biographer, she and Ritter kept pinching each other. The first time he walked onto the soundstage, the live studio audience applauded for “what seemed to be about 10 minutes,” a producer told the biographer.

A LEGEND IN HIS OWN TIME

At an age when many would retire, Knotts continued to work. In the 1980s and '90s, he appeared in a TV episode here and there, including as the regular character Les Calhoun on lifelong friend Andy Griffith's crime series *Matlock* and in an increasing number of voice-overs in animated films. Fans of the 1998 film *Pleasantville* will remember him as the TV repairman.

Knotts didn't return to Morgantown as often after his mom died in 1969, but he did visit in 1998 for the renaming of South University Avenue as Don Knotts Boulevard.

He was in his mid-70s when he met the comedian Jim Carrey, a huge Don Knotts fan who does a great impression of him. There's a story Ron Howard likes to tell—he's the actor who played young Opie on the *Griffith Show* and later became an Oscar-winning filmmaker.



CALM? DO "MURDER" AND "CALM" GO TOGETHER? CALM AND MURDER? MURDER?

— DON KNOTTS AS LUTHER HEGGS IN
THE GHOST AND MR. CHICKEN

When he was directing the 2000 film *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Carrey, in the lead role, was increasingly burned out by the big fur costume and the yellow contact lenses and the oppressive green makeup. One day, to cheer him up, Howard arranged for Knotts to visit the set. Carrey was high up at the mouth of Grinch's cave when he spotted Knotts below, and he launched directly into his Don Knotts impersonation. "I only wish the cameras were rolling," Howard told CNN's Larry King in 2006, "because here he was in the Grinch costume doing Barney Fife, you know, and it was—it was hilarious." The two comedians spent the afternoon together, and Carrey later told *The Los Angeles Times* that he felt giddy. He thanked Knotts for making him smile, and especially for *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*.


TOGETHER AGAIN

Don Knotts died in Los Angeles on February 24, 2006, at the age of 81. He worked right up until the end, appearing in an episode of *That '70s Show* in 2005 and doing voice-overs for numerous films in 2005 and 2006, including the kid-favorite Mayor Turkey Lurkey in *Chicken Little*.

Andy Griffith delivered the eulogies at private and public services. Newspapers across the nation ran retrospectives on Knotts' career. "Mr. Knotts, over and over, was willing to play the desperate, pathetic low-man-on-every-pole," read a *New York Times* appreciation on his death. "His talent for abasement became a source, paradoxically, of great authority."

Knotts and the Metropolitan Theatre came together again in meaningful and indelible ways twice in the early 2000s. In 2005, a bronze star was set in the sidewalk in front of the theater in his honor. And in 2016, a bronze sculpture of Knotts created by Morgantown sculptor Jamie Lester was placed near the star. The statue depicts Knotts holding a deputy sheriff's hat and a script for *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*, an open-hearted grin on his face. "It's long overdue," project organizer John Pyles, who remembered Knotts visiting his school with his ventriloquist dummy, said at the unveiling. "It's just a happy occasion to have this great statue of Don, remembering him."

There may be no parallel, in our age of individualistic streaming services, to a star who is as universally recognized as Don Knotts was in 20th century entertainment. Knotts' five prime-time Emmys make him one of the top 20 awardees of all time. His 87 credits on IMDB span half a century. And his wholesome demeanor made him appealing for family-friendly movies, which put him in front of young people generation after generation. "He probably had one of the most iconic characters in the history of television," great-nephew Bill Knotts says of Barney Fife, who can still pretty much always be seen in re-runs. "That's a good legacy to have."

Knotts' brand of funny can seem quaint, today. But when you watch him, pay attention to how he makes you feel. Unlike a lot of humor, the chuckles he'll inspire in you feel wholesome. The plaque on his grave says it best: "He saw the poignancy in people's pride and pain and turned it into something hilarious and endearing." 

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