

Hope Emerson from Hawarden to Hollywood

Let me do the math. Were she born a century later, she might have just now concluded a stellar basketball career at USD. Why cut her short?--think of her as a Hawkeye. Wherever she played, she scored because even now, a century later, Hope Emerson would still tower over much of the opposition.

Hope Emerson was born 1897, when the game of basketball was a five-year-old. It would take another decade to put young women in uniform, even here in Iowa, where girls basketball went big-time decades before it did elsewhere.

Hope Emerson stood 6'2" inches tall, and she was no drink of water. It's not nice to talk about weight, but Ms. Emerson was never shy about it herself. That's why it's so amazing to think of her as a movie star. She was. She died in 1960, but any movie buff worth his or her tickets will remember Hope Emerson's face, even if she hasn't appeared on the big screen for fifty years. I'm trying not to be boerish, but it's fair to say Hope Emerson's face was as formidable as her frame.

This Hope Emerson, after all, was no small wonder.

Then again, maybe she was. She was born here--just up the road in Hawarden. And it's a wonder Ms. Emerson had career in motion pictures, pitched her tent among Hollywood's elites, and played unforgettable roles in movies and TV serials. What's more, in the 1930s, Hawarden girls didn't generally take off for Hollywood when they were a hundred pounds heavier than a thousand beauties busting tables and dreaming of a break in California.

Hope Emerson did all of that, and she *was* glamorous in her own way, even if her most memorable character was a sadistic prison matron in *Caged*, a 1950 psycho drama, in a role that earned her an Oscar nomination.

By all reports, Hope Emerson was a kind and gentle giant. In *Cry of the City* (1948), a film noir crime drama, her role as Rose Given, a masseuse, required her to choke Richard Conte. Conte claimed she hated doing the acting, found it sorely difficult.

There were better roles. In *Westward the Woman* (1952), Ms. Emerson played a mail order bride in a wagon train of women bound for the single men of California.

She used her size to great advantage when she literally dead-lifted, Spencer Tracy in a rom-com, *Adam's Rib* (1949). For a long time, she was the voice of Elsie the Cow in radio commercials for Borden Milk, and appeared in dozens of supporting roles on TV.

If you wonder how a Hawarden girl with her astounding wingspan ended up in Hollywood, the answer is easy: her mother, Josie, had three children, two of which--both boys--died very young. Josie's only child, her daughter, was groomed for the stage from age three by a mom who loved it herself. Josie Emerson was her own vaudeville act. She determined early on to bring her daughter into that world. And did. Together, when they weren't performing themselves, they'd drive to Sioux City to watch movies starring men and women Hope would eventually count as friends.

Her father died young, but Hope and Josie never let each other alone. Even though she played a woman to be married on a wagon train full of mail-order brides, throughout a long Hollywood career, Hope Emerson, who never got married or had children, always took care of her mom.

And that's why, should you stop by Hawarden sometime, you should drive up to the cemetery, take the first little road north, cross a gravel lane, keep watching the graves on the edge and you'll find the pink Emerson stone-- father, mother, and daughter.

Pull over. Pay your respects. There they are, together, like always.

They'd enjoy your applause.