

Chapter 1 – 0:57

Introduction

John Erling: When Peggy Josephine Varnadow was signed by Universal Pictures in 1949, the public relations staff whittled down her name to the barest essentials and thus Peggy Dow was born. And many years later her name was changed again to Mrs. Peggy Helmerich. A trip to California developed into a Universal Film seven-year contract where she made such films as *Undertow*, *Woman In Hiding* and co-starred as a lovely nurse in the classic Jimmy Stewart film *Harvey*. After only three years in show business, she retired to marry Walt Helmerich and raise five boys while living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This interview was recorded in a conference room at Helmerich & Payne where Walt Helmerich joined us for the latter part of the interview, as we discussed their courtship, wedding day and honeymoon. You will now hear Peggy Josephine Varnadow Helmerich tell her Hollywood story on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 5:40

From The Beginning

John Erling: Today's date is October 9th, 2009 and I'm John Erling here with-

Peggy Helmerich: Peggy Helmerich, or should I say Peggy Dow Helmerich, just for fun.

JE: What was your legal name at birth?

PH: Peggy Josephine Varnadow.

JE: Somewhere I thought Margaret was in there?

PH: I know because Peggy is a derivative of Margaret, but I was christened Peggy, so I cannot claim that title. So I am really Peggy Josephine because my Father for some unknown reason to all of us-loved the name Josephine. And we never figured it out. It was terrible. I am not too fond of the name. All of you Josephines (out there) forgive me. But in

college when I went off to girls' school, everybody called me Jo, so maybe that worked.

JE: And then again the last name is Varnadow?

PH: Yes, it's a French name, and it means green forest. And it also was spelled -d-e-a-u-x.

But some of our grandparents changed it to (end in) -d-o-w. And then when I went out to California they decided that Dow would be a pretty good name so they renamed me Peggy Dow.

JE: Your birth date?

PH: Oh John! Do I have to tell you? All right. March 18th. You should never know a woman's age. It's on the Internet I know, if everybody wants to really look it up they can. (Laughter) You shouldn't know their age, you shouldn't know the size of their shoe, and you certainly should not know their weight.

JE: So, whomever is listening to this can work on their own to find your birth date, is that what you're saying?

PH: All right. Yes.

JE: All right. And where were you born?

PH: I was born in a tiny, little picturesque town in southern Mississippi, called Columbia, Mississippi. And when I was 4 years old we moved to Louisiana, another little town called Covington, Louisiana. And my sister was born, and subsequently we always say Mother sent us off to girls' school and moved. (Laughter) The family moved, but that really did happen in a way. They moved to Tennessee. They wanted to get a little bit north and out of the heat. So my family moved to Tennessee and my sister went to school there for a couple of years and then on to Colorado University.

JE: Your parents' names?

PH: My Father's name was Leon Varnadow and my Mother's name was Minnie Leigh, and we all called her...grandchildren called her Lee-Lee.

JE: What did your Father do? What was his profession?

PH: First of all he had a little chain of grocery stores in southern Louisiana. But when the war came he began to lose all the managers so he went into the propane and butane gas business. And when he did that, he had to sort of teach farmers to put containers on their tractors and automobiles and in this one area in Tennessee it was wonderful because everybody used propane gas because the filling station sold it. But it was kind of a tough go I would imagine for him to really educate farmers, because their tractors are clean as a pin, they had none of that kind of residue that gasoline gives cars and all that kind of stuff.

JE: And then your Mother was she home to take care of the children?

PH: Oh yes.

JE: Mom at home.

PH: Yes, she was at home and she was a very positive woman and she thought my sister and I should be ladies and she thought we should speak French, play the piano, tailor a suit if need be and cook a four-course meal if we were called upon to do it. (Laughter)

JE: What was your sister's name?

PH: Ann. She is now Mrs. John Otis Winters.

JE: Are you the oldest?

PH: Yes, I am older than she.

JE: You talk about your Mother having that kind of influence. Did she have any influence in terms of acting?

PH: No she didn't, but we loved to sing. My sister really has an excellent voice. And she, later on after she graduated from Colorado she went to Chattanooga Conservatory of Music and Mr. Wolfe was there who was a great friend of Humperdinck who wrote Hansel and Gretel the opera and so she sang the role of Gretel. And she sang a role in Carmen and when stars would come to east Tennessee, she would always get a role in one of the operas so it was really interesting. But I was the talented one John. (Laughter)

JE: This talent for acting and singing, did come from either of your parents do you think?

PH: I don't think so. Except Mother encouraged us always to do everything we thought we could. And I was always one to memorize little poems and recite them all to my relatives and grandparents when we went for weekends to visit them. And this friend of mine said, "You were always like the girl who had to be on the front row at tap-dancing class."

JE: Okay, so this came on early then, so even when you were 5 or 6 years old you were probably doing this?

PH: Probably yeah, probably.

Chapter 3 – 4:31

Education

John Erling: So your elementary schooling was in what town?

Peggy Helmerich: Covington, we started off there, in a parochial school there.

JE: Was that a Catholic School?

PH: Yes, it was.

JE: Your parents were Catholic?

PH: No, nobody was Catholic in our family. My Mother just thought the nuns were exactly what we needed to be disciplined and also learn lots of things. And it was very French-oriented in that southern Louisiana area. As a matter of fact the operator when you called- because you had to say in those days the phone number you wanted. You picked

up the phone and the operator answered and she would say number please in French and you would give the number, you know, so we were in that kind of French area of Louisiana.

JE: Did your parents speak French?

PH: No.

JE: You would go out about the town even as a young person would you run into situations where you would have to speak or understand French?

PH: Well we didn't, but everybody was (called) "Cher" meaning "Dear" and everybody was just very comfortable there with it, because we understood enough that we could sort of squeak by.

JE: So there early years, they were fun times, tough times?

PH: Oh wonderful, wonderful years. They were marvelous. We lived next door to a Mrs. Darkey and across the street were the Dewberries and down the street were the Beauxgeres, so it was really kind of a fun place to live. Oh Mrs. Dacand lived next door and she'd fuss at us all the time. And her daughter was Tu-Tu and she had a parrot and she would yell at the parrot. (Laughter) It was a nutsy place. We loved it. It was crazy.

JE: Were you ever able to stay in touch with those people, as you grew older?

PH: You know, not really, we didn't. I have with some of them but not very often. You know I mean if I went back to Covington I would go to see different friends just to see if they were still there.

JE: Middle school? Where would that have been?

PH: Middle School was in Covington and then we went off to a school for High School called Gulf Park College for Women.

JE: And where was that?

PH: It was in Gulfport, Mississippi, right on the coast.

JE: What are your thoughts and memories of that experience?

PH: Oh that was marvelous. You could major in sailing or swimming. We were all on the swimming team. A couple of girls would bring horses and the arts were wonderful there. It was tough though; I mean it wasn't just a sort of play school. We had Gulf Coast Military Academy down the street and we had the Air Force down another street and the Merchant Marines were there, so we had lots of fun. Lots of boys would flock over there it was fun.

JE: This was a special school and your Father earned enough money to-I mean. It doesn't sound like they came or you came from wealth, as we would know it, is that true?

PH: No, that's true, but-

JE: He was making a living but he had enough to-

PH: Oh yeah he did very well of course for us always. We always went to great schools.

We always had everything we ever needed. We always had everything. I can't think of anything we didn't have.

JE: So when you went to that high school, Ann was there too?

PH: No, she was five years younger than I, so when I left. It was a junior college. Evidently in our day, parents thought their daughters should be educated a bit and then marry. That was the entire life circle. And so this was sort of a finishing school and you got finished and you got married. And of course, she and I were not interested in it and so we didn't think anything about going on to college and other careers and things.

JE: You knew you'd be doing that?

PH: Absolutely. I wasn't about to start worrying about getting married to some boy, or any boy I knew at that moment. (Laughter)

JE: Were your parents also pushing you that way to not get married but to move on and-

PH: No, I don't know how they put up with us. We were going in all directions and doing all kinds of things.

Chapter 4 – 4:41

Northwestern University

Peggy Helmerich: I had a teacher at Gulf Park who said, "I want you to go to Northwestern. That is the best classical theater training school in the world." She happened to have come from Northwestern University near Chicago, in Evanston, Illinois and so I call my mother and I said, "Mom I want to go to Northwestern" And she said, "Northwestern, I'll have to find out about it and I'll get back to you." And she found out it was an old Methodist school started by the Methodist ministers and professors and she thought that was just perfect that I should want to go to Northwestern. (Laughter) Which of course it has nothing to do with Methodism today unfortunately, but it is wonderful, wonderful school. I couldn't possibly get in it today; I mean it is really tough.

John Erling: Let's go back to your middle school and what you would call junior college. You were performing in plays then I suppose?

PH: Oh yeah.

JE: When do you recall your first play that you were ever in and how old might you have been?

PH: In girls' school, we had to give a recital. The recital consisted of, if you were in the speech department, learning an entire play and doing all the parts of that play. I did Elizabeth the Queen by Maxwell Anderson. And it was about the time in her life where she and Essex were trying to decide whether or not she was going to marry him.

JE: So you performed that?

PH: That entire play in three acts, that's right.

JE: In your junior college or high school?

PH: In junior college, yes.

JE: Let's go back further even. In elementary school, do you remember doing anything on stage then or middle school?

PH: No. Oh I did do one thing I did A Night Before Christmas the poem.

JE: Right.

PH: You know on the stage.

JE: So then it was in high school or junior college that you had your first stage experience, is that true?

PH: I did. Right, right. And then college, when I went to Northwestern I went as a junior so to get a part in a play was tough because they always gave, you know if you the university as a freshman you were given precedent over what parts you might get, so. I did do a leading role in Over 21 and the only thing significant about it was, it was written by Ruth Gordon. My Father (in the play) was Jeff McKinneys, who had done The Life of Christ. It was an old movie that's really wonderful. He was probably the best-looking man I think I ever saw. He was beautiful. He should have been a woman. He just had startling blue eyes a la Paul Newman you know and he just had marvelous facial features. And of course he got into movies the minute he got out to California. Unfortunately, he died about three years later. He wanted to do his own stunts, and he was terribly injured and he died. It was dreadful. We all really mourned him he was such a nice guy.

JE: So your experience then in the high school or junior college actually put you in as a junior at Northwestern.

PH: Right.

JE: That was quite a leap then wasn't it? Was that a big adjustment for you?

PH: Oh yes. I'd only seen snow but about once in my life and that was about four flakes as I recall. And my Mother kept putting long underwear in my suitcase and I kept taking it out. And finally she said, "You are taking this to school." I said, "Mother I am not wearing it, so don't put it in there." Well when I got to school it began to snow. There was my long underwear in the trunk and I never took it off I can tell you. (Laughter) It was really something.

JE: In the Chicago area it's extremely cold and windy.

PH: Yes, and right on Lake Michigan. The school is right on Lake Michigan. Interestingly enough John, they needed more campus and they filled in lake Michigan with dirt and have literally built on Lake Michigan. It's interesting. But you'd never know it. It's grass and green and meadow.

Chapter 5 – 5:16**Names You Know**

John Erling: Some names of people that might have been important in school, particularly as you were in junior high or at Northwestern that nurtured you and mentored you in your acting?

Peggy Helmerich: There were a few famous people there. Oh gosh I wish I could remember names. One, let's see. There was one very famous woman teacher, who mentored and taught Charlton Heston and she was very famous. Patricia Neal was a student of hers and Cloris Leachman just several. Those are the really big names that I can remember though, but-

JE: And they were at Northwestern when you were there?

PH: No, I was just a couple of years after them.

JE: But when you were there, do you recall any people or famous names that were at Northwestern studying like you were, and then went on to become famous?

PH: John Stephenson was a character actor. Paul Lynde was in my class. Charlotte Lubotsky who did several TV sitcoms, a very, very funny, funny girl. And Paul Lynde of course was the star of the campus. He was so funny.

JE: Did you appear in a play with him?

PH: No, I didn't. He was kind of a stand-up comedian type you know. But Northwestern was great. It was the home of the WTCU, there was not a drop of alcohol.

JE: Women's Christian Temperance Union.

PH: Absolutely. My Mother was thrilled about that. So off we all went to Howard Street. Howard Street was the cut-off place between Chicago and Evanston. One side of the street was wall-to-wall bars, and the other side of the street was just filled with little shops. So Dave Garroway was learning to be a disc jockey in one of the bars. And we'd go to listen to him all of the time. My favorite of course was Sarah Vaughan who was next door, and Billy Eckstine who sang with her. And next door to him was Nat King Cole and they announced that he was starting a trio and they had a big opening for him. And then on down the way, well you know it just went on and on. Oh Fats Waller was next door and it was just an absolute retinue of stars and singers-

JE: That were on their way up.

PH: Right, that were on their way up.

JE: And you recall being in those places and hearing those people and-

PH: And all of the boys would take us in and I was so sorry that I didn't like beer. Because you

bought it by the pitcher and then they'd give you pretzels or whatever. And you spent the evening on one pitcher of beer it was sensational. We had to drink Coca-Cola because none of us really liked beer very much, the girls that is.

JE: That must have been something then as Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughan they became popular to-

PH: Can you imagine that then?

JE: To know that you had been there when they were practicing so to speak.

PH: Oh yeah, sure, absolutely, they were learning how.

JE: What a fun great memory you have.

PH: It was really, really wonderful. I couldn't tell you if the, the fight song. If I heard the Northwestern fight song, I wouldn't know it at all, because if you had a date you went in to Chicago. All the dances for the schools and the sororities were all held in the Chicago hotel called The Stevenson and lots of other hotels downtown and of course we'd go downtown. Ray Bolger appeared one time for a school dance and he was so funny. And there was a great tenor, Phil...somebody that I can't remember his name you know. He would sing and then they would do a little comedy act together. It was just, we were sort of snobbish at the time but it was great fun. (Laughter)

JE: So you didn't know your fight song is that because you didn't go to football games at all?

PH: Right. After I married I went to Northwestern as a matter of fact we lost every game for 37 years. But we had a wonderful song: Don't you worry, you're all right, we don't care, you'll win the day and they'll be pumping our gas someday. (Laughter) Or something to that effect, so, we thought we were terribly great you know. But when I married Northwestern played Oklahoma so we all went to the game. It seemed that the boys had been to a hotel to be fed the night before and they all got ptomaine poisoning.

JE: Northwestern?

PH: No, Oklahoma's team and of course Northwestern beat them soundly. Walt said, "Yeah you took us up there and got us all sick, that's the only way you could win." I said, "If you can't come to the big city and tough it out, you know too bad fellas." (Laughter)

JE: So that would have been in the '50s or '60s?

PH: Yeah.

Chapter 6 – 5:281

Marilyn Monroe

John Erling: Eventually you had to move on from Northwestern.

Peggy Helmerich: I did.

JE: Then what?

PH: My roommate at Northwestern's father had died just as she was a senior, just a few months before we graduated. She said, "Please come out and visit me and we'll pep Mother up she's just really having a tough time. So I finally convinced Mama and Papa to let me go out, and that was fine. Dad also had friend who was a writer and I was going to go see him, and to see what happened you know how he got along in his career in movies. He didn't mind us going out to Hollywood. But he didn't want us to go to New York, because New York is Sin City as far as he was concerned. But he'd been to (Hollywood) California and he thought it was sort of a provincial town and that was because all of the buildings were short. Because in those days you couldn't have more than a three-story building, and it looked like a small town to him and that was fine. Little did they know... (Laughter) Anyway I went out to visit Carmen and I called this writer. He said, "What you have to do is find an agent, as a matter of fact I know a really good guy. His name is Ed Goldberg, go and see him." So I did. And he said, "Well, I think we might be able to do something for you. We'll just send you over to the studio if you'd like to go." By that time I'd been with Carmen about 10 days and I called my Father and I said, "Dad, I've got to do something on my own." They (Carmen and her Mother) were very kind and said, "Oh please don't go." You know. I said, "No-no-no. I really should get an apartment." So I found an apartment not too far from them, from Carmen. So he said, "I'll give you two weeks." (Laughter)

JE: He meaning?

PH: My father. He said, "I'll give you two weeks and then you come home young lady, enough of that." Anyway during that time I went out to Universal. They were starting a sort of in-studio class of young players. Tony Curtis, a young actress by the name of Piper Laurie, Annie Pierce who is married to the Director of *On the Beach*, do you remember Gregory Peck was in that? He was a submarine captain and then all of a sudden the atomic bomb went off and when he came up everything was gone sort of thing. Rock Hudson was in it a fellow by the name of John Hudson, who did character roles forever. I was in the class. It was really an interesting group. We all kind of hung out together. It was fun. And so the Director that saw all of the young actors and actresses said, "If you want to read for me, come on out and read for me." And so he said, "Yeah, you have an agent now." So he said, "We'll put you in the class and see how it goes."

JE: And?

PH: And he did. And there I was. So I called my Dad and I said, "This looks like it might work. There's a place I can go and live for two years called the Hollywood Studio Club, which was a women's hotel that was sort of sponsored by Mrs. Cecil B. DeMille. She wanted to make sure that young ladies that came from small towns that wanted to be actors were

kept safe until they decided what they wanted to do. You could live there for two years, so I enrolled in the Hollywood Studio Club. But, oh it was tough. They had hours you know you had to be in at a certain time. Your parents were written notes at the end of every month. Sort of a department classified report and it was really tough, I mean you had to sort of mind your manners and all the rest. Marilyn Monroe lived there when we did for a while.

JE: What was Marilyn Monroe like then?

PH: Marilyn Monroe was very much of a loner. And we'd all ask her to come and sit with us at a table in the dining room and she would say, "Oh no, I have to go soon." And so she would sit by herself usually. And she had a convertible out front and none of us had a convertible. We all had little Chevrolets that somehow our fathers would let us buy. You know that was about it.

JE: Did she come from a family that gave her a convertible or was it an agent or somebody?

PH: I have no idea. (Laughter) None of us went into that. But we all had sort of an idea. But no, she was very nice. I shouldn't say that.

JE: But she was shy apparently?

PH: Very shy, very shy, and you know she evidently wanted to have a career and she certainly had it you know, she was really very successful. She was beautiful.

JE: Did you and the others in the class look upon her as having acting ability and talent?

PH: Actually she was not at our studio. We were at Universal. I don't know where she was, you know, there were other studios. And so you didn't have much to do with other studios.

JE: But that fact that you lived together in the same-

PH: And she just lived there for a short while, and then moved on. And I lived there about two years, and then I moved on.

Chapter 7 – 5:00

Universal Films

John Erling: Was this the point then that you were given the new name Peggy Dow?

Peggy Helmerich: Yes.

JE: Was that okay with you it didn't bother you at all?

PH: No it didn't really, no.

JE: Was it true that you were cast in a TV show about 1949?

PH: I was. The Mummy's Foot. (Laughter)

JE: The Mummy's Foot.

JE: And what was that about and what did you play?

PH: It was about a girl who had a dream. She dreamed that she was back in the time of Egyptians and the Queen's foot was missing from her sarcophagus and everybody wanted to know what had happened to it. And she was accused of it and she would always wake up. And she was dating a boy who ended up playing Dagwood in the Dagwood and Blondie sitcoms years after that. And I guess I did one or two of those shows and that was sort of it, just an appearance.

JE: That was in 1949 I believe.

PH: Probably, right.

JE: I guess it was a TV show that was just shown maybe on the coast it wasn't nationally then at that time it was just-

PH: No, it was so new. TV was so new that nobody wanted to be in TV, because it was just very experimental.

JE: Is it true that Universal Films came to you?

PH: No they didn't come to me, I was working for them.

JE: Okay, that's where you were.

PH: Yes.

JE: And did they offer you a seven-year contract Universal Films?

PH: That was all you could get. You were under contract to the studio; they could fire you at any time. You couldn't leave. You had to finish the contract and they absolutely had you chained. You couldn't budge you had to just leave and not work. You'd just have to say, all right, you have the contract. You will not release me, so I'll leave. Period. Goodbye. And of course, even after Walt and I married I was still under contract for about three years. And they would send me notices saying: You had better not appear in anything or we'll sue you and this and that. So, I never did anyway.

JE: So you were paid a flat fee?

PH: Right.

JE: And then you had to appear in as many films-?

PH: Any and everything, right.

JE: As many as they wanted you to appear in?

PH: That's right.

JE: Do you remember what kind of money you might have been paid back then?

PH: I think I started off at \$150 a week, which was big-time money.

JE: Yeah.

PH: I remember after about a year and a half I was increased to \$200 a week. Wow, that was really something, but of course it was expensive to live out there too, you know so you didn't save very much.

JE: You weren't able to save very much?

PH: I would call Daddy quite often. (Laughter)

JE: Even though you were making that kind of money?

PH: Yeah. I was. That's right.

JE: Did you buy a car?

PH: I did.

JE: What kind of car?

PH: A Chevrolet, it was a hatch-back. It was very chic I thought. (Laughter)

JE: What color was it?

PH: Green, a beautiful shade of green. It went with the environment.

JE: 1950 or 1951 or somewhere in there?

PH: Oh, it was about 1950. It was fun.

JE: Were there many of your cohorts there who were women who bought cars?

PH: Oh yeah, we all bought a car. That was the big thing, as soon as we could. And then of course you never saved any money you just paid on a car forever, you know, for years.

JE: Guys in the community must have been chasing after you starlettes. Here you are beautiful and you had your own car on top of that.

PH: Oh yes, it was wonderful fun. (Laughter)

JE: Driving with the sunglasses on and the whole bit.

PH: Of course! We all peroxided (bleached) our hair and went flying for Sunset Strip.

JE: That's got to be a wonderful memory for you.

PH: It was really was. It was great fun. Yes.

JE: I don't want to give your age away but you are about 21 or 22 years old during that period.

PH: I was. That's right. As a matter of fact I was 20. Because I graduated from school when I was 20, from Northwestern. And I had to go before a judge, because I don't know if you remember but Mickey Rooney when he was little and all of the younger stars. Their parents would confiscate all of their great money you know that they made when they were stars. Jackie Coogan was a great example because his parents when he was old enough to ask them where is the money, it was gone. And so you had to have a court order that your money, all that you were paid had to be put in escrow until you were old enough to decide what to do with it.

JE: So for you then 21 was the age that-

PH: Yes I only had a year, that's right.

JE: You only had a year in escrow, so you built up a little savings I bet.

PH: Not much, but some.

Chapter 8 – 7:08**Woman in Hiding**

John Erling: Was that a huge transition for you to go, I mean basically you were from Mississippi and then you jump in to Hollywood, how was that?

Peggy Helmerich: It was a very, very big transition, and you know I knew Tony Curtis quite well. All of us knew each other. You know we hung out all of the time. If you went anyplace you'd call and say, "Are you going? Let's go!" And we'd all get in (the car) and go. And his parents were waiting for him to really make it big so they could move to California to be with him so he could support them. My family would say, "Come home. Isn't that long enough? You've been out there two weeks, isn't that enough?" I said, "Dad I've got a contract." He'd say, "I know whatever you have but that's ridiculous, you come home." You know. (Laughter) I would say, "Please, please come out and let me explain it all to you." So they did. They came out and they met my agent, and they gave him instructions. It was hysterical.

JE: And they approved of where you lived?

PH: Well yes absolutely, because there were no boys ever. You had to be in at a certain time and that was it. So that was great for them, and terrible for me.

JE: So they then approved and saw what you were doing and-

PH: And they came out pretty regularly to see us, you know, and I went home a lot.

JE: They would probably come to a class of your maybe and watch?

PH: Yeah, they were really good. The class lasted, you know there was one at Paramount and there was one at Universal. I don't know if RKR 20th had one or not but anyway Colleen Evans was at Paramount she was a friend of mine. At least I knew her. And she married a very famous minister in the Hollywood area, a Presbyterian Minister. And they were sent to Washington, D.C. And when our son worked in Washington, we went to see him at one period of time.

JE: Which son?

PH: Matthew, who worked for Senator Boren as a matter of fact. And we went to church. And Matt said, "Mom, I've been going to this church and Ms. Evans was about your era of Hollywood." And of course I realized it was Colleen Townsend Evans you know so. There she was and there I was.

JE: Colleen Townsend Evans.

PH: Evans. Yes, she married a Minister by that name.

JE: I think she starred in a Billy Graham film.

PH: I wouldn't be surprised, I'm certain she would have, yeah.

JE: One of the first films that he produced.

PH: Right. I'll bet she did.

JE: It seems that you were able to walk in to a film set where you didn't have to take some of these starlette bit parts. Where you walked in and were able to get a really solid part from the beginning. Is that true?

PH: That's about right. It was actually. Oh, it was a sensational role. I played the other woman in a movie called *Woman in Hiding*. And Ida Lupino was in it and Stephen McNally who was going to be the really great villain and he was being primed for all that. Howard Duff, who had been on radio as a matter of fact for years and years and became a movie actor. It started out there was a factory and Mr. McNally was the director of the factory and owner of the factory and had a beautiful daughter named Ida Lupino. And Ida Lupino was there and the director Mr. McNally decided that's the catch of all time and I'm going to see how I can work things out with Ida and so he began to court her and she fell madly in love with him. And he was sent to another factory that her father owned. And when he came back, he thought, this is what I've got to start up again. And she said, "Oh you've left me." And he said, "Oh no, I had to go off and do all of this stuff but now I am back and let's get back where we started." So they marry and decide to honeymoon in this beautiful log cabin up in the forest and it is marvelous. So they drive up in a lovely convertible setting and park in front of the cabin and about that time, the door of the cabin opens, and there I am. I have a drink in one hand and I'm leaning against the door with the other hand. And I say, "Stephen darling, I didn't expect you this soon." And all of this nonsense and he pushes me away and I said, "All right, all right. I'll leave you alone." And I threw the keys to the cabin. I said, "But you might like to have the keys to the cabin darling." And I left. (Laughter) That was the- oh! I was so excited about that part. I called my Mother and I said, "Mom, you won't believe this part I have! It's wonderful!" I got the part from making a short film of it. And the head of the studio said, "Peggy, I'm going to let you make this little piece of film." The most important thing in Hollywood was to have a piece of film you could take to another studio and all around so you could get parts you know if they saw you and they wanted you or something they could do it. But you had to get on film. So, they said, "If you do this, you can't take it around, because it will leak to the other studios the plot we're going to do in this picture. And we want that to be one of the most important scenes in the thing." So I said, "That's all right, I'll do it." I just wanted to try it and see it-to see what I looked like on film, you know. So I did this part and they put it away. And when they decided to do the film, which was about two or three months later, I got the part. That was really fun. They had me under contract you know they might as well push me a little in it, and it's not too big a part, so. But it was a nifty first scene, you know in any movie. It was really-Oh my Mother! I called her and I said, "Mom, guess what? I'm playing the other woman!" And there was this long silence on the phone and

she said, "What?!?" I said, "I'm playing the other woman, you know it's fine. That's the way Bette Davis got started." She said, "You get the good girl part." And I said, Mom, Ida Lupino has that part (Laughter) I can't get it. Sorry about that, I wanted it but can't do it." Ohhhh.

JE: So that, *Woman In Hiding* was your first film?

PH: Yes, it was.

Chapter 9 – 4:53

Peggy's Films

John Erling: I believe your next film was *Undertow*?

Peggy Helmerich: *Undertow*, yes.

JE: You played the part of a vacationing schoolteacher?

PH: Yes, I did. And I smoked in that film. And years later the boys saw it and they all gasped, "Mom! You're smoking!" You know they all had a fit. They said, "Dad did you see that? She's smoking!" You know. And I gambled. I was shooting craps at the table you know and oh it was terrible. It was terrible.

JE: What about your parents, did they know you were smoking in that movie?

PH: (Laughing) Eventually they knew. Poor things.

JE: Do you remember whom you may have starred with in that or some names?

PH: Scott Brady and his brother and Richard Cotty were in that film. He was a gangster type, very swarthy, dark, good-looking Italian. And he was marvelous. And his brother John was even more handsome than he, such a good-looking guy.

JE: I can throw out some other names of movies and you can comment on them?

PH: Oh sure. I was just there, almost three years, not quite. And movies take a long time to make.

JE: So you did 9 or 10 movies?

PH: Yeah, about 9 or 10.

JE: *You Never Can Tell*?

PH: Starring Dick Powell, yeah.

JE: What kind of a person was Dick Powell?

PH: Oh he was a dream. He was absolutely darling. He was married to June Allyson at the time and we had great fun going up and having dinner with them. They had a hilltop house. You could just see eternity from that house. It was beautiful. The ocean and all the rest, you know it was lovely.

JE: Are you dating anybody here during this time period?

PH: You know, I really wasn't dating anybody. I did date some boys "off campus" as we said, who were not in the movie business. I dated a boy from Chicago who had also gone to Northwestern but I didn't know him there. Yes I had several friends.

JE: But they were outside of your business?

PH: Oh yes. They were.

JE: Another movie you were in is I Want You with Dana Andrews?

PH: Right, Dorothy McGuire, Mildred Dunnock I think was in that. And she was the Mother you know in the original cast of Death of a Salesman on the stage in New York. Bob Keith I think was her husband. It was a series of families. Bob Keith and Millie Dunnock were the Father and Mother, and then Dana Andrews and Dorothy McGuire were the next couple from the World War II era. And then Farley Granger and I were in the Korean War. We represented the Korean War, so it was all about three different wars.

JE: The movie I Want You was about three different wars?

PH: Yes.

JE: Reunion in Reno?

PH: That was with an actor by the name of Mark Stephens. And Gigi Perreau was a little girl who wanted to divorce her parents. She was furious with them and so she somehow got to Reno and Mark Stephens was the lawyer and I was someone who was-I don't know what. I had a job and was his friend.

JE: Francis Dee is that-

PH: Oh yes, she was in it. She was married to an actor by the name of Joel McCrea, an old actor who was marvelous, a darling guy.

JE: Your parts, your lines and so forth. Was that easy for you to memorize?

PH: No it-was well, you just worked at it terribly hard. And you were given a script and expected to memorize the entire script because movies are never made in sequence. You might do the end of the movie first, then the middle, and then maybe the beginning months later. And then the second phase of it you know another time. So whenever and whatever set up they made, you know an outdoor set up or an indoor whatever. Why you had to be ready for that particular part of the script and it was tough. You had to really spend a lot of study time by yourself to grind it through.

JE: Here we are into about two or three films of yours, it's about 1951, did your parents go to a theater to see the films with their daughter?

PH: Oh of course!

JE: What were their feelings and reactions to it?

PH: They were so funny. My Mom would say, "Well, I didn't like the dress you wore." And so on. (Laughing) My gosh, here were these designers Edith Head and Orry Kelly trying all of these clothes and I would say, "Well Mom, I didn't decide on that material." (Laughing)

JE: But they were proud of their daughter.

PH: Oh yeah, they were really cute about it. I'd have to come home every three or four weeks, so no matter what. Unless I was working and I couldn't because I was right in the middle of something.

Chapter 1 – 4:47

Bright Victory & Harvey

John Erling: Bright Victory was another film. You were really busy in 1951.

Peggy Helmerich: I was.

JE: As I count here, this is the fifth film of 1951.

PH: Yes.

JE: It's almost hard to believe that you could pull that many off in one year.

PH: I can't imagine. I had no idea they were all dated like that. But that was a busy time.

JE: Arthur Kennedy, Julie Adams, John Hudson, James Edwards.

PH: Right. That was a very interesting movie. We were sent up to Philadelphia to the hospital that took wounded soldiers who had become blind or lost part of their sight. And they would train them to go back out into the world. And this was done not with dogs interestingly enough, but on their own. And this whole town was mapped out and each person who had lost their eyes had to memorize how the town worked, and what you listened for to be able to cross the street or go anywhere. They could do almost anything. It was absolutely miraculous. A blind person can absolutely run up and stop maybe a foot before a solid brick wall. Their senses are such that just because of heat and different sensory things and their skin even. They are just so alert to all of that it's just fascinating. We would go out and play golf with some of them. You could ring a little bell over the golf hole or whatever and make a little noise and they all bowled as well. You couldn't believe the things they were able to do.

JE: You began to experience because this is about this blinded war veteran who had to adjust to civilian life—

PH: Right. And it was a true story. And he became a lawyer and won several cases just because he could sense from the people if they were fibbing or lying to them, or not. And it was really fascinating.

JE: And he had to learn to tone down his racial prejudices I think, is that true?

PH: Yes he did. That's exactly right.

JE: And then you played the woman that loved him, Arthur Kennedy?

PH: Right. And he was going to go home and marry another girl, his childhood sweetheart.

And her father was very much against it, and so she turned him down, and so I got him.
(Laughing)

JE: Jumping back now to 1950 because then there was a film that really became famous and that was Harvey.

PH: Right.

JE: And of course it starred James Stewart, talk to us about that experience.

PH: It was really an interesting experience because I was not going to do it. I had a role of an Indian Princess that was in a movie that was starring Van Heflin. He was a very famous actor at the time. And oh, I could not wait for it. I wanted it, and as they do things, here I am a Nordic-Caucasian type, I was going to get (outfitted with) a black wig and brown contact lenses and I was to be the Indian Princess. Well, I just thought that was wonderful. I was learning to ride a horse and do all kinds of wonderful things you know and I was thrilled. Walt came out to visit me that weekend and he had met my agent and they had become fast friends and I wasn't too pleased about that. But anyway, they corresponded and talked on the phone evidently and he kind of kept up with me, and I didn't like it one bit. But evidently it worked out all right for him anyway. So there I was sort of talking over this part with the makeup man and in walks Walt and my agent and the agent comes over and he says, "Peggy you won't believe it. It's wonderful. You have a role in the movie Harvey and it's the nurse Ellen Kelly." And I said, "That's no part! What do you mean? I am going to be an Indian Princess!" And he said, "You've got to be nuts. Don't you realize that people will be watching Harvey with Jimmy Stewart 50 years from today?" And so, they talked me into it. (Laughter) And I never wanted to do it.

JE: So Jimmy Stewart had already established himself as a major star.

PH: Oh yes, and he had already promised to be in the movie. And they had signed him up. He had signed up to be in it so it was a done deal for him.

Chapter 11 – 5:11

Jimmy Stewart & Rock Hudson

John Erling: What is your remembrance of him working on the set?

Peggy Helmerich: Oh, he was absolutely the cutest guy. You can't believe how much fun he was. And he would tell such cute stories on himself. And there's so much downtime on a movie. You wait for a set to be finished, and you wait for them to light it and you wait for your stand in to go through all of the rigamarole that you'll have to go through. And all the walking and sitting and everything and how that lights, and how this lights, and on and on. And then finally they call you in and you do the part in 15 to 20 minutes depending on

the retakes you have to make. And then you just sort of sit around and chit chat and talk with each other. James Cagney used to tap dance. I mean people did different things. So Jim and I were sitting up at the top of the stairs waiting to come down in Chumley's Rest Psychiatric Clinic. And he said to me, "Do you know how to touch your nose with your tongue?" And I said, "Well of course not, nobody can do that." And he said, "Can you kiss your elbow?" (Laughing) I said, "No, nobody can kiss their elbow." And he said, "Watch this!" And he stuck his tongue out and touched his nose. I almost fainted. The director said, "What's going on up there? Quiet! Quiet!" You know. We were hysterical. He was a nut. He would just do anything to sort of take up time and keep you upbeat. He was so good to young people. Charlie Drake and I were having a great time with him. He was the young psychiatrist and my love interest in it.

JE: In Harvey?

PH: Yes. He had no narcissism. He had no glitzy, Hollywood attitude. You know he was a true World War II Hero. He flew I guess 30 missions or so. He was so loved by everyone. He adored his wife. He tells the story of when they had twin girls at the hospital. Gloria had said, "I've got to go down in a wheelchair, it's hospital regulations. I'll meet you at the front door now Jimmy. And I'll take the girls and you drive the car around and meet us." You know, so she went down in the wheelchair and there's no Jimmy. And she waited and waited and she had a baby in each arm. She said, "Here, take the babies and lend me a quarter." In those days you had pay phones in the hospital. She took the quarter and went over and called Jimmy at home. He answered the phone. He said, "Gloria, where are you?" She said, "Where am I? You idiot, I'm at the hospital." He said, "Oh! Oh! Oh! I'll be right there. I'll be right there." So he forgot his own twin babies. (Laughter) He was such a forgetful guy.

JE: Was he a forgetful kind of person when he was on the set, or was he?

PH: Not that I remember and he never forgot a line. I mean he was professional. Oh! And if you forgot a line, he would remind you right there on the spot and say, "We have to get this done. This is absolutely the most important thing you can do." So we all made sure we had it down cold. But that was great training. I mean that's the way you should be if you're going to do anything, is to be a professional.

JE: The Sleeping City, I don't know if that holds any memories for you or not?

PH: Actually, that was my first movie John. I was in it about 30 seconds. I went to New York for a month and a half. I met my husband there as a matter of fact. And I came home and ended up on the cutting room floor. So, I always say Woman In Hiding was my first role, and in truth, it really was, so that was my first movie. But it was fun.

JE: So other people you worked with, did you work with Rock Hudson?

PH: I did. He was in Bright Victory. When Arthur Kennedy was shot and lost his sight (in the

movie) Rock Hudson was driving the Jeep. That was one of his first parts. So he was just a kind of stand-in type, what we call a soldier, he had a tiny part in that.

JE: What are your memories of him? He was obviously a very good- looking young man.

PH: Oh! He was darling and we used to make appearances together and the girls would go absolutely bananas. He was just such a good-looking guy. He was such a sweetheart. He was shy. He fell in love with Vera Ellen. She was a dancer and he was just absolutely thrilled with her. And then all of a sudden she broke his heart and married someone else. And I got married myself and never saw him much again.

JE: So you never saw him again?

PH: No, no so he developed into whatever he developed into.

Chapter 12 – 4:05

Sam Goldwin & Jane Russell

John Erling: So these films done in the '49, '50, '51 era...did they have royalties then? Were they paid out to you?

Peggy Helmerich: Not to me, not to those of us under contract. Right, and I did make a movie with Sam Goldwyn. The movie was I Want You as a matter of fact. That was his movie and it was made at Goldwyn Studios.

JE: Did you feel his presence around?

PH: Oh yes. I had dinner with him the first night of the film. I had to go to his house and have dinner. And it was beautiful and so much fun. And he was married to a woman by the name of Francis Farmer and old movie actress. And she determined what our wardrobe would be like. She was with us every day. The only thing was we had to bring most of our own clothes except dresses that were important in the scene, and wear our own shoes and all of that, which I didn't like. I mean at Universal, they supplied everything, everything you ever put on. And if you had an appearance for example you had to go to Zaerow's for an evening or some big happening. Tony Curtis was assigned to take you and he was all in a tux and dressed and we would go down and get an old dress that Olivia Hatlen had worn and you know just some wonderful actress's gown that they had in the stock room. And you had a wonderful time. They'd give you beautiful jewelry to wear and you know you looked like a million dollars and you had to give it all back the next morning. Bummer. (Laughter) But you'd make an appearance. It was fun.

JE: There were magazines dealing with Hollywood in stores then weren't there?

PH: Oh, right. Right.

JE: And so I recall you made it on the cover of LIFE magazine?

PH: I did. But the funniest one, I was given an assignment to go out to a person's home and by her swimming pool wear a bathing suit and have a bathing suit shot there. What I mean is a photograph. So, I went out it was freezing cold. I was in a two-piece bathing suit. And I was stretched out by the pool and all that. And finally this woman said, "Why don't you guys come in, I'll fix you a cup of hot tea." So we ran up to the house, and guess who it was? Jane Russell! (Laughter) I said, "If you use that bathing suit shot of me I'll kill you." I thought, she (Jane) should be down there in a bathing suit.

JE: So you were at her home by her swimming pool?

PH: It was her home, right.

JE: And by that time she had become?

PH: Oh Wow. She had become the curvaceous wonder of the world. Howard Hughes had her in all kinds of things you know and she had done the Outlaw and that was her big movie and-

JE: Was she older than you?

PH: Oh yeah, she was. She was married to a football player or somebody at the time. I think she divorced him several years later, but she was very sweet. And became a great Christian.

JE: Oh really?

PH: Oh yeah. She knew I guess Dr. James Kennedy down in Coral Springs in Florida. Yes, she really did. She was an interesting woman.

JE: So then you used her pool and had tea with Jane Russell?

PH: (Laughing) Right.

JE: They had a Jane Russell line of swimming pools didn't they?

PH: I think probably they did as I recall. That's true. That was a long time ago but she was really cute to us. I thought. Why am I? What am I? You know, flat chest here, and Jane's so- (Laughter)

JE: Yeah, but you were Peggy Dow and you were a star. So you did that shoot for magazines and were people trying to get your autograph I suppose back in those days?

PH: Oh yeah, that was so fun. Oh yeah. And you would decide how you were going to sign things you know, whether you were going to scribble it across or really write it out or whatever. It was so fun.

Chapter 13 – 4:57

Peggy Meets Walt

John Erling: Did you go to the premiere of the movies?

Peggy Helmerich: Oh yes. We would go to all kinds of things and the Academy Awards you know, we always showed up with somebody. It was fun.

JE: You would go to the Academy Awards?

PH: Oh yeah. I was in an Academy Award one time. I gave out an award.

JE: Oh!

PH: Yes. I gave Edith Head an Oscar for dress designing. She was very famous at Paramount.

JE: So that had to be in 1951 or 1950 as well?

PH: Oh yes. It was really fun. I met Johnny Green, he was the orchestra guy you know and he was directing everything. He was a great piano player and wonderful fellow.

JE: Somewhere along in all of this fun, you meet a guy by the name of Walt Helmerich. (Laughter) can you tell us, before he shows up how did you meet?

PH: I was asked by Nina Foch, a character actor; a darling girl who was engaged to John Canty to go to the opening of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. I said, "Oh Nina, I just cannot..." She said, "I have a date for you. He's a wonderful guy, you're going to love him." I said, "I don't do blind dates, first and I'm going home tomorrow." I was in New York, this was all happening in New York. And I said, "I just don't have time. I have to pack and this and that and—" And she said, "Oh, you've got to go to an opening." She said, "We all go to the St. Regis Hotel roof and we wait for the newspaper reports (to see) whether the critics liked it or not and this is so important. So you've got to come and read and see how the reviews were."

JE: In *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* do you remember who the stars were?

PH: It was a stage play. Carol Channing, that was her first Broadway appearance. And a lot of kids that we knew from California were dancers were in it. So I thought gosh, I really should go. I had never been to an opening and it's a big hoopla and all kinds of stuff, so I got my fanciest dress and I said, "Oh Nina, I'm going to go, just because I'm curious. But I've got to come home early." So off we went and it was a wonderful play and a great success. And Carol Channing was marvelous and I saw Hedy Lamarr for the first time and all kinds of wonderful people. They were all there at this St. Regis roof party waiting for the reviews. So we were sitting and having a marvelous time, and all of sudden out of the corner of my eye. There was a great staircase coming down to the dance floor. Everybody that came in had sort of a little entrance to make. And here was this gorgeous blond girl sort of Lana Turner-esque in this big blason dress I thought was cut too low and rather inexpensive looking and that sort of thing. She was flanked by two young men. And she makes a beeline for our table, and I couldn't believe it. She says to my date, "Tony darling how are you?" I was with a man by the name of Anthony Farrell who had sponsored musicals on Broadway. And she was a singer. Her name was Monica Lewis, and she was a knockout in some people's minds. So, (Laughing) she looked at me and said,

“Oh, excuse me darling,” as she moved in to chat with Tony. One of the young men with her said, “Would you like to dance?” And I thought, no I wouldn’t like to dance. I wouldn’t like to do anything but get this babe out of the way. And Nina said to me, “Peggy, that’s Walt Helmerich, watch your step!” And so I said, “How are you? Oh sure, let’s dance.” So we got up and we sort of danced around and he said, “I’m with a young man by the name of Ralph Fields who’s Father wrote the stage play for Gentlemen Prefer Blonds, so he was going to introduce me to some ladies in the show but I’m so glad I saw you.” Or some nonsensical chit chat like that. And we danced and came back and she was still busy and poor Tony Farrell was looking around her waving at me. And we danced again.

Chapter 14 – 4:50

Coke Break in Tulsa

Peggy Helmerich: So at the end of the evening, he of course left and we left and that night I got a four-page telegram from him telling me how I could fly from Athens Tennessee because he knew I was going home for Christmas to Hollywood and stop in Tulsa. So I said, “Mom what do you think?” And she said, “I don’t know dear. If you want to stop a half-hour with him and have a Coca-Cola with him that might be alright if you like him that well. And then get on the plane and go on to work.” So I said, “Okay, I will. I’ll stop for a half-hour and have a Coke.” So I wrote him back and told him I would be happy to stop for a half hour. He said that was fine. The plane stopped, I got off and there was Walt and we were sitting in the little dining room of the airport having a Coca-Cola when this announcement came over the loud speaker saying there was mechanical trouble on the plane to Los Angeles and we will be here 4-5 hours fixing it. So, I saw Tulsa. That was the day I saw Tulsa. I thought Oklahoma was sand and tumbleweed. And of course I had a friend at home who had married a boy from Denver and her father thought he’s never see her again, ever. (Laughing) So her had her portrait painted. But it was sort of the end of the world for all of us, you know.

JE: I’m curious about the plane landing, it almost sounds like you had a private plane?

PH: Oh, it sounds like it was fixed! No, I was on Delta or American or whatever. Oh no, it really happened.

JE: It was a natural stop?

PH: Oh absolutely yes.

JE: And you would have had a natural half-hour?

PH: Probably to refuel, and then go on to California. Oh yes, we would have had a half-hour.

JE: So then when Walt first saw you at that dance and you danced with him, did it spark

anything inside you?

PH: Well it was interesting because at Gulf Park there had been three girls from Oklahoma City. And we had seen Walt, most of the time when we weren't studying we'd be in a lounge on the second floor called The Smoker and we'd watch all the boys. It was in a U-shaped building and all the boys had to go down a middle walkway to the Headmaster's Office to call the girls for dates. This is at Gulf Park College before I went to Northwestern.

JE: Oh, okay.

PH: And everybody said, "Walt Helmerich is dating Suzie Callaway." And we said, "Who's Walt Helmerich?" And Walt gets out of his little convertible with his raincoat on and his collar up and his Lieutenant's hat on and he is stationed with the Air Force down the road in Biloxi that is the city next to Gulfport, Mississippi. And so he was dating these young women and so he would strut down the walkway (Laughter) and we'd hoot and holler and say, "Oh, you're a cutie, who are you dating today?" You know and carry on. We were terrible. And there he was.

JE: And here he shows up?

PH: And here he is (Laughter) and of course the minute he had said that he had been in Oklahoma City I knew exactly who he was. I said, "I can't believe this." I said, "Did you know these girls from Gulf Park?" And then we'd name everybody and we began to talk it over.

JE: As I recall, he says that when he met you, I think he was attending Harvard Business School?

PH: Yes, he was. He was at Harvard Business School and he had come down to New York for the opening.

JE: And did he say that he had your picture on his dresser?

PH: Oh isn't that a story. I guess he did, I don't know. (Laughter)

JE: Because he had seen it-

PH: In the Boston paper.

JE: He'd seen this picture of Peggy Dow and he was so taken with your looks.

PH: (Laughing) Oh I'm sure. But he did tell me that. He said he saw my picture in that paper. So I guess the story is true. (AUDIO GETS CUT OFF BEFORE SHE FINISHES THE SENTENCE.)

Chapter 15 – 7:05

Peggy finally says, "Yes!"

John Erling: So did he chase you then to pursue marriage?

Peggy Helmerich: Yes. He asked me to marry him on the first, while we were dancing as a matter of fact. You know on the first-

JE: On the first date on the first dance?

PH: Oh yeah, absolutely. I said, "Are you nuts? Of course I wouldn't marry you. I don't even know you. What do you mean?" And then finally he kept saying, "We've got to get married." And I said, "Walt, you don't have a job. I'm not about to marry you. You don't know me. I don't know you. And you don't have a job!" And so we sort of fought it out for two and a half years and then we gave up.

JE: But then you were on a trip to Washington, D.C.

PH: Right.

JE: Did Harry Truman is there a connection there with you and Harry Truman?

PH: That's right.

JE: What is the connection?

PH: He gave the picture I was in, Bright Victory, an award. And I was assigned by the studio to go to Washington and make two or three appearances with the Press and one thing and another and receive the award from President Truman. We all went over to the Hall of Labor and it was on the stage and there was a big audience. And I was called out and he read this little thing about the movie and how it had helped veterans and how that was so important that they would know, and could know, that they were taken care of and all of this business and here's the award. And take it back to your studio with our thanks. And so he was darling to me and then we went to two or three luncheons, not with the President but with different magazines and paper people, media people. And I stayed in Washington three or four days and then I flew home.

JE: As I recall, you let Walt know that you were in Washington?

PH: Right, I had to have an escort for two or three of the important appointments with the media so I called him and said, "Would you come to Washington and be my escort? Well meet the person that does LOOK magazine and this and that." And he said, "No." And I said, "Oh, I'm sorry." He said, "But if you marry me I'll come." And I said, "What?" And he said, "If you'll marry me, I'll come." And I said, "Ohhhh, okay. Come on." (Laughter.)

JE: So that was your answer to marriage? Oh Okay?

PH: That was it. "Oh, Okay." If that's what it takes, come on. (Laughing) So that's exactly what happened.

JE: Well, we should say he (Walt) has just walked in the room. And we're going to have him join us here. She has just told us Walt how you came to the performance of Gentlemen Prefer Blonds and that you asked her for a dance and that you actually asked her to

marry you on that first dance?

Walt Helmerich: No, I didn't. I didn't ask her to marry me until our first date in California, two weeks later.

PH: Oh, okay.

WH: I went back to my table and I said, "I'm going to marry that girl."

PH: Oh that's right. That's what it was.

WH: But you didn't know that.

PH: Oops, no I didn't.

WH: Okay.

PH: Except for you telling me about 14 times, that's all.

JE: So then she's told us about how she stopped at the airport and had a 30-minute Coke date and how the plane stayed for five hours.

WH: I think she just changed planes so she could stay.

PH: I did not change planes. You know very well it was a mechanical problem and they fixed--

WH: The Lord's Will.

PH: Don't start. Don't bring him into this. (Laughter) It's not His fault.

JE: So, she was just also saying that she went to Washington, D.C. and accepted that award for the film--

WH: Yes.

JE: And then she asked if you would come out there to Washington, D.C.

WH: Yes. That's right.

PH: And he did.

WH: After I said, "Look I'll come if you'll want to get married."

JE: And did you have to argue with her to talk her into it?

WH: No, I just said, "Yes or No, let me know."

JE: You were tired of chasing her?

WH: Absolutely.

PH: And that's when I said, "Oh, okay." (Laughing) Don't refute that.

JE: So then you went out and started dating her in California?

WH: I'd fly back and forth from business school.

PH: And this is before jets, and I'd go out and meet him and go to sleep in my car waiting for him. And he'd come in sometimes at 11 at night or 12 and I'd wake up and realize he's sitting in the airport waiting for me. And I'd run in and get him and take him to his hotel.

JE: And you'd only stay a day or two?

PH: Oh just overnight, right.

WH: I'd have to go back Sunday. I'd get in late Friday night and have to go back Sunday.

PH: I wish I had a nickel for every phone call we made. It was terrible.

JE: This is what love is all about isn't it?

PH: (Laughter)

JE: So you knew that she would marry you because that's what she said when she was in Washington, D.C., so then how long did it take after that before you-

WH: We met on December 8th, 1949 and were married in 1950 in November.

PH: 1951.

WH: In 1951? Rick came in 1951, I guess that's right.

PH: Oops. Oh no. (Laughing) Then it was 1950.

JE: And where were you married?

PH: Athens, Tennessee, my hometown.

JE: Who was in your wedding?

PH: My roommate and cousins and little nieces and-

WH: My sister.

PH: And your sister, yes. Cadijah. And-

WH: Your sister.

PH: My sister, that's right. You had Ted Reeds and Charlie Chestnut.

WH: Dick King. And then my Dad was my Best Man. Reeds, Charlie, Dick King and Gaylord Gray.

PH: Gaylord Gray, that's right.

WH: And they're all dead now.

PH: They're all gone.

JE: It was a pretty big wedding wasn't it?

PH: It really was for our town anyway. It was pretty big.

JE: And then where did you honeymoon?

PH: In Hawaii. It was fun. We went back a couple of years ago.

WH: The Suite we'd had for 2 weeks (for our honeymoon) was \$4,000/night now.

PH: A night. I couldn't believe it. Oh it was awful.

WH: Pete Hamblin who was then Chairman of then National Bank of Tulsa summered there for a month every year for years. He was a bachelor, never married. So he asked if we would like to go there and he would arrange it. So he gave before he left (Hawaii) every year a golf tournament, and he gave fancy prizes to everybody in the tournament. So they adored him. So when we were there as his guests, that just meant everything out there. So we were treated very royally.

PH: Just like royalty it was so fun. It was wonderful.

JE: You were a beautiful Hollywood star. Walt was a handsome gentleman wasn't he? Or how would you describe him? You had to be taken with his looks and his handsomeness?

WH: Yes, that's right.

PH: And his persistence. (Laughter)

JE: Sweet persistence.

Chapter 16 – 4:10

Life in Tulsa

John Erling: So then you were married and you started a family?

Peggy Helmerich: We did.

JE: Five young boys, their names are for the record

PH: Rik, Zak, Mat, Hans and Jon.

JE: Did you wonder if any of them would inherit your acting ability?

PH: No I never really did.

Walt Helmerich: I thought Mat might have, but he didn't.

PH: Yeah he wrote a play and they did it out at Holland Hall

WH: Yes.

PH: It was fun. He was a writer. He really has done some interesting things.

JE: Peggy, your faith means a lot to you. Did that come from your home life, or in Hollywood or is there something that brought that home to you strong?

PH: It started at home. I have very Christian parents and my father taught Sunday school. And we, when we were very young in Covington, we lived right across the street from church. And we were there every time the doors were open. We went to all of the services. I just grew up in a very Christian home. My Dad taught Sunday school and when he died I had to fight my sister for his Bible. But at any rate, Mother gave it to me and he made little notes you know in the margins. It's just like having a visit with him almost. It's just so fun to read it and read the things that were important to him. It's just such an enlightening experience, always.

JE: Was there a big adjustment coming to Tulsa to live here, you were this Hollywood star, was it tough in social scenes and so forth? Were people maybe a little put off by that?

PH: No, I think probably there was (some of that) but I have to say that everyone was so sweet to me, so good and generous and I have several really good close friends here that I still have, that are just so important to me. That was so undergirding it was just wonderful because I'm sure a lot of people thought I was going to dance on the tables and all the rest but it never mercifully turned out anything like that. It was just a lovely experience always.

JE: And you never looked back at Hollywood?

PH: Never. Well now I can't say that I didn't look back but I never would have traded one

minute that I gave up for anything I could have had back there I wouldn't-, it was-

Walt Helmerich: Tell him about the experience the time you went back and Bill Holden.

PH: Oh, actually it was the director. A very important director called and said, "You've got to come back and do a picture about a test pilot, and you'll be the love interest and it's starring Bill Holden." Well everybody had a feigning fit to go back and because Bill Holden was such an important actor at that time and just so cute and good-looking and all the rest. So, I had met his Mother at a coffee gathering one time. Her name was Mrs. Beetle, his real name was Billy Beetle. (Laughter) And they changed it thank goodness to Bill Holden. But anyway we went back and Walt and I sat with Bill and the Director and I said, "Walt, I just can't do it. I just cannot do it." And I came home, and I've never really, ever-And he was really I guess, so smart. Walt said, "I want you to go out there and meet them. Because I never want you to say, 'Oh gosh, if it hadn't been for you I could have made a movie with Bill Holden.'" Or whomever else, you know.

JE: Was there a method to your madness in that?

WH: Sure, I mean it was such an important thing. Holden was the top actor in Hollywood then, and it was a great compliment to her for him to want her back. And if she had wanted to do it, I would have encouraged her to do it. I thought it was important for her to go back and see. He was kind of a smart Alec-

PH: Now, now, now.

WH: When she kept saying No, no, no to all the things they offered. He finally said, "You have a chance to do a picture with me and all this and that's when she said, "No, I don't want to do it."

Chapter 17 – 2:54

Advice to Students

John Erling: But then you came to Tulsa and you took on causes, you helped establish the Tulsa Library Trust. A Library is named in your honor. You've contributed to the libraries. You have the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award where you've honored many famous authors. Do any of these jump out at you as-

Walt Helmerich: She's got a hospital.

JE: The Peggy V. Helmerich Women's Health Center, at Hillcrest Hospital.

PH: Yes.

JE: Certainly the two of you with your interest and Walt's interest as well- made a major interest in our community do any of these jump out as a particular passion? Education? Health Education? Or all of them?

PH: Well of course I love the library and I have done a lot of stuff for the libraries around Tulsa but I just think you have to read. Even if you never read and you're just on the Internet all the time, you've got to be able to read. You've got to be able to communicate and I think that's what libraries are all about and all for, you know you've got to learn that.

JE: Did you have a passion for reading?

PH: I didn't, we lived about a block from the library in Covington and the only thing I can remember doing down there was wrapping bandages. And kids used to go down there to knit socks for soldiers during my teenage years, you know because everybody was in the war. But there was not a real passion. I had to read because of course I had to learn scripts and read every script and a lot of Shakespeare and lots of wonderful theater writers and that was always fascinating to me. Authors are just such a special breed. I've been trying to get him (Walt) to write a book for a long time.

JE: Oh I know, so have I.

PH: He should do it.

JE: Well, the two of you are very fortunate living long lives and being able to contribute. I thank you very much Peggy for doing this.

PH: You're so welcome.

JE: Any final words? There are students who will listen to this, they may want to be an actor or actress, or they may want to be a Peggy Dow, what would you say to them?

PH: I would say don't try to be someone else, just be yourself. And go to the library. Read a lot. It's a treasure house. And that's what you should be into. There are just so many wonderful opportunities to see other kinds of things there, lots of things. Take advantage of it. That's what we want you to do.

JE: Good. And I know you still like movies, isn't that true? (Laughter) Walt?

PH: Not like we used to.

WH: Yes, I love movies. I still watch her movies. (Laughter)

JE: And so you have all of her movies?

WH: Sure, yes.

JE: And they're all black and white?

PH: Yes.

JE: Did you turn them on and Walt do you still enjoy watching them?

WH: Sure. She looks just the same to me.

PH: Oh, no. (Laughter)

Chapter 17 – 0:29

Conclusion

John Erling: Beyond Peggy's family she took on several causes that would have a major

impact on the Tulsa community such as healthcare education as developed in the Peggy V. Helmerich Women's Health Center at Hillcrest Academy. She helped establish The Tulsa Library Trust with a library named in her honor. And numerous authors have been honored through the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. This conversation with Peggy Dow Helmerich was made possible through the generous contributions of the underwriters of VoicesofOklahoma.com.

