

U of I Football Star Palmer Became Hollywood Actor - Sang National Anthem At Every Home Game In 1952; Starred In 'Lil' Abner'

by Tom Emery
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BUZZ MAGAZINE - The 1953 edition of the Illinois football team had plenty to offer. Not only did the Illini win a Big Ten title, but they also had their own anthem singer.

Peter Palmer, a senior tackle, delivered “The Star-Spangled Banner” before every home that season while wearing his football uniform. It was a sign of things to come, as Palmer went on to become a star of the stage and screen.

Palmer was part of the original Broadway cast of *Li'l Abner*, one of the stage hits of the decade, and reprised his role in the Hollywood version. He later was credited with forty television and movie roles.

Born on Sept. 20, 1931, in Milwaukee, Palmer spent most of his youth in St. Louis. He later earned a football scholarship to Illinois and played on Big Ten championship teams in both 1951 and 1953.

However, the gridiron was not Palmer's primary reason for choosing Illinois. Though he was offered scholarships by multiple football programs, he selected Illinois after meeting a professor of voice, Bruce Foote, who had achieved fame as a concert singer and voice instructor.

Palmer, who stood 6'3 and weighed 228, was reportedly the first music major to letter in football at Illinois. He later entered a contest on WGN radio in Chicago and won a trip to Hollywood. But his dreams of fame had to wait, as he was drafted into the U.S. Army.

In a 2005 interview, Palmer said that "being drafted was the best thing that could have happened to me," since he won the All-Army Entertainment Contest while in service. That landed him a spot on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, where he was noticed by the producers of a planned Broadway musical, *Li'l Abner*.

A stage star at Illinois, Palmer was selected after an audition to play the title role in the production, which was based on the longtime Al Capp comic strip.

In addition to Palmer, the cast included veteran performers like Edie Adams and Stubby Kaye. *Li'l Abner*, a slapstick spoof of hillbillies, politics, and American history, opened in November 1956 and ran for 693 performances. Palmer was part of a subsequent national tour.

Three years later, Palmer and most of the original cast reprised their roles in a movie version of *Li'l Abner*, which received mostly positive reviews. The *Washington Post* called the film "broad, colorful fun," while the *Los Angeles Times* lauded its "delightful nonsense." Film critic Leonard Maltin wrote that the characters were "vividly enacted."

In 1963, Palmer was cast in a revival of *Brigadoon*, an acclaimed Lerner-Loewe Broadway hit from 1947, and was part of a special twentieth-anniversary production of *Oklahoma!* He later appeared opposite Carol Channing in the hit Broadway musical production of *Lorelei* in 1974, an adaptation of the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

By then, Palmer was frequently appearing in movies and television. He was cast as a regular in two short-lived series, including *Custer*, a fictionalized western which lasted

for just seventeen episodes on ABC in 1967 despite a string of big-name guest stars. Palmer was also a regular on *The Kallikaks*, an NBC sitcom that ran for just five episodes in August 1977 amid poor reviews.

Guest television roles for Palmer included hits like *Emergency!*, *The Rockford Files*, *M. A.S.H.*, *Quincy M.E.*, *Three's Company*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Fantasy Island*, *Dallas*, and *Simon & Simon*. Palmer also appeared in the 1990 Tim Burton flick *Edward Scissorhands*. His final television appearance was in *Thunder in Paradise* in 1994.

Palmer's first marriage, to Jackalee Ann Gleason, lasted from 1955-66. He subsequently married singer Aniko Farrell, the winner of the 1964 Miss Dominion pageant in Canada.

Throughout his Hollywood career, Palmer continued to actively perform in summer stock, often with Aniko. His stops included the Little Theatre on the Square in Sullivan, where Palmer appeared thirteen times between 1962-78, including six with Aniko. Palmer announced their engagement in Sullivan in 1966.

Aniko Palmer passed away in October 2011. Palmer survived her by nearly a decade until his own death in Tampa on Sept. 21, 2021, one day after his 90th birthday.

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