

Donna Douglas, best known for her role as the tomboy, critter-loving Elly May Clampett on the 1960s fish-out-of-water CBS sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*, died on New Year's Day, according to WAFB Channel 9 in Louisiana, which cited family members. She was 81.

Douglas also co-starred opposite Elvis Presley in the 1966 film *Frankie and Johnny* (she was Frankie, like Elvis playing a performer on a Mississippi River riverboat) and stood out as the hospitalized woman underneath the bandages in the memorable 1960 *Twilight Zone* episode "The Eye of the Beholder."

The Beverly Hillbillies, created by Paul Henning, centered on Jed Clampett (Buddy Ebsen), a poor Ozarks mountaineer who strikes oil on his property and then moves the family to Beverly Hills. As the story goes in the theme song, "One day he was shooting for some food, and up through the ground come a bubbling crude ... Oil that is, black gold, Texas tea."

The goofy Filmways Television series, which also starred Irene Ryan as Granny, Jed's crusty mother-in-law, and the burly Max Baer Jr. as Elly May's dumb cousin Jethro, was a huge ratings hit on CBS — the No. 1 show in its first two years. It aired from September 1962 until its cancellation in March 1971.

Related: [Remembering Donna Douglas \(Photos\)](#)

The blond, shapely Douglas, a native of Pride, La., who was named Miss New Orleans in a 1957 beauty contest, started out making \$500 a week on the show. That rose to \$3,000 in the ninth and final season of the series.

"I didn't have an agent, but I don't know if that would have made any difference," she told The Hollywood Reporter in early 2013.

The wholesome actress described getting the part of Elly May in an interview with Sam Tweedle on the website Confessions of a Pop Culture Addict.

"By this time they had interviewed over 500 girls but had narrowed it down to six, and gave a screen test to only five," she recalled. "So they had a goat tied up on the set and they asked me, 'Do you reckon you can milk that goat?' Well, I had never milked a goat in my life but I said, 'Sure, I can milk that goat.' That was my first critter. Over the nine years I probably worked with over 900 different animals. Elly didn't kiss a lot of men, but she sure kissed a lot of critters."

Douglas didn't appear much onscreen after the show ended. She reprised her role for the 1981 telefilm *The Return of the Beverly Hillbillies*, appeared in a 1993 TV documentary about the sitcom and made appearances at conventions that celebrated the series.

"The two things I am most asked is if I still love critters and can I still whistle like Elly May. The answer is yes to both," she once said.

Douglas, who was married at age 17, came to New York and worked as a model, attracting attention when she appeared on variety shows hosted by Perry Como, Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan. That led to roles in the 1959 films *Career* (1959), opposite Dean Martin and Shirley MacLaine, and *Li'l Abner*, and she played Tony Randall's secretary in the Rock Hudson-Doris Day romantic comedy *Lover Come Back* (1961).

She also showed up on the TV shows *Tightrope*, *Bachelor Father*, *Dr. Kildare*, *Whirlybirds*, *Route 66*, *Checkmate* and *77 Sunset Strip* before making a splash as Elly May.

Douglas later performed as a gospel singer and wrote the book, *Miss Donna's Mulberry Acres Farm*, which was published in 2011. Also that year, she sued Mattel, claiming that the toy manufacturer used her name and likeness for a Barbie doll without her approval. The suit reportedly was settled.

Earlier, she sued Disney, CAA, Whoopi Goldberg and others, claiming that the idea for the 1992 smash hit *Sister Act* was stolen from the Dorothy Gilman book *A Nun in the Closet* that she said she had optioned. She lost that suit.