

The **State of the Arts** **FRUITS** *of Fonda*

Remembered for his role in 'Grapes of Wrath,' Henry Fonda held onto his Nebraska roots

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Editor's note: In this weekly series, we explore the lives and works of notable Nebraska artists of the 20th century.

A man glides across the screen in a shuffle step, throwing one foot in front of the other as his arms lazily dangle at his side.

An audience might think it has caught a glimpse of John Wayne in his Western strut, but after seeing such memorable performances as Tom Joad in "Grapes of Wrath" and Abe Lincoln in "Young Mr. Lincoln," an audience may realize the great actor is none other than Henry Fonda.

Henry Fonda, cinematic legend, father of actors Peter and Jane and grandfather of Bridget, is one of Nebraska's most successful offspring.

After starring in more than 100 films and numerous theatrical productions, Fonda crafted a lifetime career that is one of Hollywood's most memorable.

Best known as "One Take Fonda" and for his interest in characters of integrity, Fonda was born in Grand Island in 1905. His roots and interest in Nebraska stayed with him throughout his life.

"He was a Nebraskan, and he was proud of it," said Ruth McCauly, author of "This Place and All Its Seasons: The Henry Fonda House in Nebraska," a book which comes out this year.

Fonda was born and lived in his family's Grand Island home for about six months, before his parents permanently moved to Omaha.

In Omaha, Fonda graduated from Central High School and began his theatrical career at the Omaha Community Playhouse. At the Playhouse, Fonda was directed by Dorothy Brando, Marlon Brando's mother and another Nebraska native.

"The Omaha Community Playhouse is where Fonda got his start," said Russ Czamlewski, historian of the Stuhr Museum in Grand Island. "(He was) 'discovered,' so to speak."

At the Playhouse, Fonda acted in plays such as "You and I" and "Murton of the Movies."

"Murton" was Fonda's first time in a title role," Czamlewski said.

After a couple of years performing in Omaha, Fonda attended college in Minnesota.

Soon Fonda moved again — but this time to the East Coast to pursue his theatrical career.

He began acting in a performance group called the University Players with other contemporaries such as Jimmy Stewart and Joshua Logan.

During his 20s, Fonda moved to Broadway and starred in plays such as "The Farmer Takes a Wife." After a distinguished theater career and a Tony Award to prove his success, Fonda made the cross-country trek to Hollywood.

On his way out to California, Fonda stopped in Grand Island to discover that his childhood home was to be destroyed.

"The house was going to be torn down in order for another building to be built, and Fonda, of course, didn't want that to happen," McCauly said.

Fonda had the house moved from its original site to the Stuhr Museum grounds, where it would remain preserved.

Fonda then continued on his journey to the West Coast to experience the fame found on the big screen.

In Hollywood, Fonda was most remembered for his collaboration with director John Ford and films such as "Young Mr. Lincoln," "The Grapes of Wrath" and his last film, "On Golden Pond," in which he co-starred with Katherine Hepburn. Fonda was awarded his first Oscar for his performance in "On Golden Pond."

Amid a jam-packed theatrical and cinematic career, Fonda managed to serve as a decorated intelligence officer in World War II and marry five different women. His daughter Jane once revealed that Henry was intensely in love with Lucille Ball.

The two supposedly kept a "very close relationship" but were never married.

Fonda died in 1982, the same year he was awarded his Oscar. His performance career spanned half a century, yet his performances remain timeless.

Fonda's birth home in Grand Island serves as a reminder of his significance in history. Today, a Henry Fonda fan club sponsors events at the historical site of Fonda's early home.

McCauly founded the organization, called Friends of Henry Fonda.

"We like to feel that we are trying to educate people on the life of Henry Fonda," McCauly said.

The Friends began through a Fonda family reunion in Grand Island around 13 years ago to celebrate Henry Fonda's life.

The family, including Jane and Peter, gathered at the Grand Island home. Since the reunion, the Friends of Henry Fonda have been active in promoting awareness of the home.

The fan club decorates the house on holidays such as Christmas, has a celebration on Fonda's birthday (May 16) and tends the home's garden full of Henry Fonda Roses.

The club also contributes to the Grand Island community by awarding scholarships and bonds to theater and art students "in hopes to promote and inspire a career such as Fonda's," McCauly said.

The fan club is open to anyone with an interest in Henry Fonda and has included members such as Jimmy Stewart.

The group currently averages about 20 members who attend meetings and help with events at the Fonda home.

"We are not a big group, but we are a busy group," McCauly said.

The Fonda home is open for public tours. McCauly said, "People come from all over the world" to experience the authenticity and birthplace of a timeless Nebraska talent.



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author of "This Place and All Its Seasons: The Henry Fonda House in Nebraska"