

Dale's most famous daughter

by Kathy Tretter

From birth, Florence Agnes Henderson (February 14, 1934–November 24, 2016) was someone special.

Born in Dale on Valentine's Day, the beloved actress and singer took her final breath on Thanksgiving Day at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, California, surrounded by family and friends. She is buried at Forest Lawn-Hollywood Hills Cemetery in LA.

By all accounts she was indeed a lovely lady, a kind and generous woman who found fame like no other Dale native ever did.

The youngest of 10 children born to Joseph and Elizabeth (Elder) Henderson, her father was a tobacco sharecropper and the family was quite poor. Her mother liked to sing and recognized Florence's talent when she was just two years old. By the time she was 12, Florence Henderson was singing in local grocery stores.

She was deeply influenced and encouraged by members of the Ferdinand Sisters of St. Benedict during her grade school years at St. Bernard's in Rockport, especially by Sr. Gemma

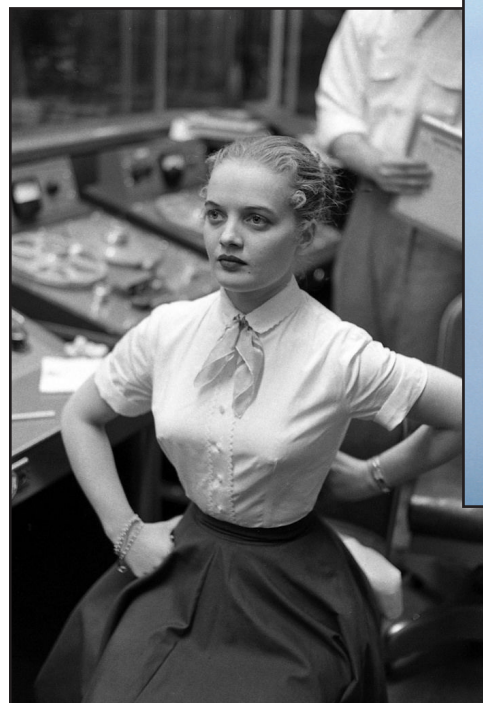
Gettelfinger (her teacher in grades one through five), who, Florence recalled during a 2002 visit to the monastery, always warmed her hands and feet after a long walk to school and brushed her hair before class began.

Other sisters who influenced the future star included Sr. Mary William Moore, Sr. Jeannette Tenbarger, Sr. Scholastica Harpenau and Sr. Mary Delores Gaesser (all deceased). Henderson later claimed the sisters taught her to sight read Gregorian chants, thus expanding her musicality.

Thanks to the generosity of the sisters, Henderson attended and then graduated from St. Frances Academy in Owensboro, KY in 1951 before setting her sights on the Big Apple where she studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Her rags to riches story reads something like a script straight out of Hollywood. In 1952 she made her Broadway debut in the musical *Wish You Were Here*, and later starring on Broadway in the long-running 1954 musical, *Fanny* (888 performances) in which she originated the title role.

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Left: Florence Henderson started her career on Broadway starring in the musical *Wish You Were Here* in 1952.

Above: Florence with her iconic hair cut.

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