

## This Day in History... January 3, 1894

### Birth of ZaSu Pitts

Actress ZaSu Pitts was born Eliza Susan Pitts on January 3, 1894, in Parsons, Kansas. Though known as “the screen’s greatest tragedienne” for her dramatic silent film roles, she went on to star in several comedies after the advent of sound films.

The daughter of a Civil War veteran, Pitts was nicknamed “ZaSu” (shortening and combining her first and middle names) when she was a child and adopted it as her legal name when she got into acting. Her family moved to Santa Cruz, California in 1903, where she performed in plays at Santa Cruz High School.

Unbeknownst to her, Pitts was discovered one rainy day in 1915 on a crowded Hollywood trolley. Pitts had moved to Hollywood that year in search of a career as an actress. Her big break didn’t come, however, until two years later when she co-starred in *A Little Princess*, the first of several movies with America’s sweetheart – Mary Pickford. By 1919 she had made 28 movies.

The following year, Pitts was hired by director King Vidor. Exclaiming “I discovered you,” he went on to explain how he had seen her on the trolley on that rainy day in 1915. “Had I not been just a struggling screenwriter at the time,” he told her, “I would have hired you on the spot!” Pitts went on to make four movies with Vidor.

In 1924 she starred in her most important role – the leading lady of Erich von Stroheim’s psychodrama *Greed*. He also cast her in his 1928 film *The Wedding March*. During the first half of her career, Pitts became known as “the screen’s greatest tragedienne.” When sound was introduced to film, she successfully transitioned to playing comedy roles. She often portrayed flustered spinsters and was frequently paired with Thelma Todd. In fact, Pitts became so well-known for her comedic roles, people didn’t take her seriously as a dramatic actor. She was initially cast in the war drama *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but when preview audiences laughed at her performance, she was re-cast.

In addition to film, Pitts branched out to radio, vaudeville, Broadway, and television. She appeared on several *Fibber McGee and Molly* shows and acted performed alongside Bing Crosby, Al Jolson, W.C. Fields, and more on variety shows. Pitts also appeared in the soap opera *Big Sister*. In 1944, she made her Broadway debut in *Ramshackle Inn*, which was written for her. The play was a success, and she later took it on the road. In the 1950s and 60s, Pitts appeared in a number of TV shows including *The Gale Storm Show*, *Guestward, Ho!*, *Perry Mason*, and *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

Pitts was diagnosed with cancer in the 1950s and died on June 7, 1963. Pitts received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960 and her book of candy recipes was published posthumously. Pitts’s acting style also reportedly inspired voice actress Mae Questel’s performance of Olive Oyl in the Popeye cartoons.



ZaSu Pitts stamp from the 1994 Silent Screen Stars issue



In 1963, she wrote the cook book *Candy Hits* by ZaSu Pitts. She was famous for her chocolate fudge and candy-making talents.

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