

# MINNIE PEARL

## QUEEN OF COUNTRY COMEDY

In a world of singers and musicians, Minnie Pearl found her place in country music through comedy. For more than fifty years, she earned laughter—and won hearts—with corny jokes and humorous stories.

Born Sarah Ophelia Colley on October 25, 1912, in Centerville, Tennessee, she was the youngest daughter of a well-to-do owner of a lumber company. Her family called her “Ophie,” and encouraged her to entertain the family with skits and songs. She grew up dreaming of a serious acting career, and she paid little attention to country music. She studied drama at Nashville’s Ward-Belmont College (now Belmont University), and at age twenty-one, she joined a traveling theater company that staged amateur, or semi-professional, plays around the South. While working in a northern Alabama town in 1936, she stayed with an elderly woman whose folksy manner and entertaining tales inspired Colley to create her own character, which she named Minnie Pearl because, she said, “everyone has a cousin or an aunt named Minnie or Pearl.”

Colley first performed as Minnie Pearl at a women’s club in South Carolina in 1939. A year later, she was invited to audition for the Grand Ole Opry; her jokes and gossipy stories about her fictional hometown, Grinder’s Switch, were an instant hit.

Minnie Pearl always wore a costume consisting of a ruffled dress and a straw hat decorated with artificial flowers and a \$1.98 price tag. (The tag first appeared on stage by accident—Colley forgot to remove it—but it soon became a trademark.) She began every performance with a loud and cheerful “How-DEEEE! I’m just so proud to be here!” Her act sometimes featured comedy



singing and piano playing, but she was most beloved for her spoken humor.

In the 1950s, she began making regular appearances on network television shows; in 1969, she joined the cast of country variety show *Hee Haw*, and spent twenty years on the popular program. She also recorded a half-dozen albums of jokes, stories, and songs.

Sarah Colley became a well-known for her charity work under her married name, Sarah Cannon and after receiving cancer treatment at a facility in Nashville, she offered her name to help promote cancer research. Today, the Sarah Cannon Cancer Institute is known as one of the leading cancer treatment and research facilities in the world. President George H. W. Bush presented Cannon (and Minnie Pearl) with the National Medal of Arts in 1992. She died, at age eighty-three, on March 4, 1996.

Sarah Cannon was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1975, though she chose to enter as Minnie Pearl. Her plaque lists her birth date but no death date because she wanted the character she created to live on forever.

## SOURCES

CNN; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *the Los Angeles Times*; *the New York Times*; *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash