



Kulp, Nancy (1921-1991)

by Linda Rapp

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Accomplished character actress Nancy Kulp specialized in playing prim, straight-laced spinsters, most notably bank secretary Jane Hathaway on the long-running situation comedy *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Closeted throughout her career, she publicly acknowledged her lesbianism only towards the end of her life.

The daughter of a lawyer and a schoolteacher, Nancy Kulp was born on August 28, 1921 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and grew up in nearby Mifflintown.

With aspirations of becoming a journalist, Kulp studied at Florida State University, earning her bachelor's degree in 1943. During her college years she worked as a feature writer for the *Miami Beach Tropics*, profiling celebrities including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Clark Gable, and Errol Flynn.

Upon graduation, Kulp enlisted in the WAVEs and rose to the rank of lieutenant. She stated that patriotism motivated her to join up, and added that "the all-female atmosphere" also appealed to her. In the long run, however, she could not envision a career for herself in the military, and so she left the service in 1945.

Returning to civilian life, she took a job as publicity director at a Miami radio station in 1946. A few years later she moved to a television station, where she directed and acted.

On April 1--April Fools' Day--1951, Kulp married Charles Dacus, a rather mysterious figure. In a 1989 interview Kulp refused to address speculation that Dacus was gay--or, indeed, even to say whether or not he was alive or what his profession was or had been.

It was apparently Dacus who encouraged Kulp to pursue her ambitions as an actress, and she was quickly off to Hollywood.

She soon won a supporting role in George Cukor's *The Model and the Marriage Broker* (1951), in which she played the sort of character that would become her stock-in-trade, a spinster.

More movie roles--some uncredited--followed. Among Kulp's more memorable films were Nunnally Johnson's *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), Nancy Myers's *The Parent Trap* (1961), and Melvin Frank's *Strange Bedfellows* (1965).

Most of Kulp's screen work came on television. Over the course of her career she made dozens of guest appearances on various shows, the vast majority of them in comedic parts. Her first recurring role was as bird-watcher Pamela Livingstone on *The Bob Cummings Show* (1955-1959). Paul Henning, the writer for the program, created a role for Kulp in a subsequent project, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971).

Kulp played Miss Jane Hathaway, a smart, competent, and confident bank secretary--and, of course, a spinster. Most improbably, the intellectual Miss Hathaway was infatuated with the young and handsome but extremely dim Jethro (played by Max Baer, Jr.). Kulp called the mismatch "the impossible dream, played

strictly for laughs," adding, "I doubt anyone could picture Jane and Jethro walking down the aisle together, or would want to."

Kulp received an Emmy Award nomination in 1967 for her performance on the show.

After the run of *The Beverly Hillbillies* ended, Kulp was a regular on the short-lived *Brian Keith Show* (1973-1974) and continued to appear as a guest artist on other programs and to play minor roles in films. She also worked steadily in summer stock and dinner theater, and had a turn on Broadway in 1982 in Paul Osborn's *Mornings at Seven*.

In 1984 Kulp, who had long been interested in politics and campaigned in support of other candidates, made her own bid for public office. Having settled on a farm in Port Royal, Pennsylvania, near her hometown, she ran as a Democrat for the United States House of Representatives in the state's Ninth District against a Republican who had already held the seat for twelve years.

During the campaign Kulp's former *Beverly Hillbillies* co-star Buddy Ebsen made a radio commercial calling her "too liberal for Pennsylvania" and endorsing her opponent. Kulp was incensed, complaining that the Californian Ebsen knew nothing about Pennsylvania politics, and stating that she "was speechless at such a betrayal, and something so needless and cruel."

After her defeat in the election, Kulp spent a year at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, teaching film and drama. As artist-in-residence, she also directed and acted in the school's production of William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*.

In a departure from her usual comedic roles, Kulp played the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* at the 1987 Georgia Shakespeare Festival in Atlanta.

Kulp returned to California, where she served on the board of the Screen Actors Guild and was active in various organizations, including the Humane Society of the Desert, United Cerebral Palsy, and the Desert Theatre League. Gary Walker, the president of the theater group, praised Kulp, calling her "a sweet and caring lady" who "was there for us when we needed her."

Kulp died of cancer at her home in Palm Desert, California on February 3, 1991.

Lesbian News hailed Kulp for creating a role model for young lesbians in the 1960s with the Jane Hathaway character, who was intelligent, decisive, respected, self-sufficient--and a member of a women-only bird-watching club.

While Kulp may have projected a lesbian image in her work, she did not proclaim her own lesbian identity publicly. Like many other actors of her era, including Rock Hudson, with whom she worked in *Strange Bedfellows*, she undoubtedly realized that revealing her sexual orientation could seriously jeopardize--indeed, possibly end--a career.

In a 1989 interview with Boze Hadleigh, Kulp was painfully circumspect in speaking of her sexual identity.

"As long as you reproduce my reply word for word, and the question, you may use it," she told him. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me phrase the question. There is more than one way. Here's how I would ask it: 'Do you think that opposites attract?' My own reply would be that I'm the other sort--I find that birds of a feather flock together. *That* answers your question." Never in the course of the interview did she refer to herself as a lesbian.

When not focusing on what Hadleigh called "the Big Question," which Kulp corrected to "the Fatal Question" in terms of show business, she spoke more freely, decrying the fact that when the media present human

interest stories "they mean heterosexual human interest, exclusively"; responding to a question about "a significant other" in her life with a coy "Into each life a little romance must fall"; and expressing admiration for gay Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank, who, she noted, had been outed.

Asked if she would have come out as a member of Congress, Kulp replied, "Not voluntarily. If I were outed, then I would not deny it." After further discussion she added, "If one is past fifty or sixty, it's almost like saying that most of your life you've been too embarrassed to admit it or to speak up."

Unfortunately for Kulp, she lived in a time and a culture in which an acknowledgment of one's homosexuality was defined as an admission, and she worked in an industry in which speaking up about it constituted answering a "fatal question" professionally.

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