

# *CHAPTER x11*

## *Lucky West & Bobby Hoffman*

### **Lucky West**

In a person's life, there are certain people that just seem to stand out in your memory banks. For me, one man stands out as one of my dearest and closest friends was Walter Emerson Westberry, better known in the diving world as Lucky West. In the early years, he became my most unrelenting confidant and a genuine mentor.

One of my greatest regrets in life was that I lost touch with Lucky through the years...about fifteen of them. It wasn't until February of 2009, through the exhausting efforts of Dave Lindsay who tracked him down, that I reunited with Lucky. Aside from a few more gray hairs and a little added weight, he hadn't really changed very much. We seemed to pickup right where we left off. There's nothing

that compares to a homecoming with a dear friend.

Lucky was a unique individual in almost every regard, one of those 'good old boy' kind-of-guys. He didn't care much about anything, particularly money which he merely perceived as an ends to a means. He was on the road for most of his life, but rarely stayed in plush hotels and spent many a night sleeping in the cab of his old pickup truck. If it bothered him at all, and maybe it did, you'd never know it to hear him tell it. As far as I knew, he just didn't give a shit. We're talking about a guy who couldn't read or write. But Lucky could hear a song one time and pick up almost any instrument, usually a guitar or banjo, and play it pretty-much note for note. And, when it came to diving equipment, he was undoubtedly one of the best I ever met. Lucky West rarely ceased to amaze me!

He & Bobby Hoffman were the two most innovative and skilled equipment experts I've ever known. They could build a palace out of scrap metal and wood. Back in 1985, when I first went into the water show business for myself and was in need of some equipment, I called on ole Lucky. He was very casual about it, "Well c'mon down and let's see what we can come up with."

So I show up at his place, , which was nothing more really than

his personal glorified junk yard, a huge lot filled with bits and pieces of just about anything you could imagine. Any normal person would have perceived it as just that, a junk yard. But to Lucky, it was a unique collection of valuable items that he could potentially or conceivably have a use for someday. From this amazing pile of crap, Lucky could create just about anything he envisioned.

"This little thing right here is a one-man helicopter. I built that motherfucker from scratch," he says to me. Hell, I thought he was joking and I chuckled a little. Lucky must have sensed my pessimism. So he climbs in the seat of this tin can contraption, which looked more like a modified car from a carnival ride than a helicopter, and proceeds to fire this fucking thing up. Soon enough, three makeshift rotor blades are spinning, heavy smoke is bellowing out around it and the wind is kicking up dust all around me.

Before I know it, old Lucky was hovering about two hundred feet over my head. I was dumbfounded. He lands the damn thing, climbs out and extends a humble invitation, "Wanna take 'er up for a spin?" In spite of the inspirational demonstration, I was a bit hesitant and reluctantly declined.

I mean; what does that tell you about the guy? I don't know how

a Harvard Grad would label an illiterate guy with that kind of capability, but in my mind, Lucky had to have been some sort of bona fide genius. The guy was a natural-born engineer.

I told him what I had in mind and, needless to say, Lucky managed to sort through and piece together pretty-much everything that I needed to get started. From this elaborate pile of virtual junk, I came away with a portable diving tank that Lucky had designed and built from scratch. The framework for each panel was intricately fabricated and welded to fit together perfectly. Without his assistance, I wouldn't have been able to take my small business to the next level. When he was done, I had a traveling road show.

Lucky had been in the business since 1959 when, at the age of thirteen, he performed high dives for the Shiner's Circus in St. Louis. His personality made him a natural for comedy in the water show business and he was one funny motherfucker too! He was a rather big boy too. It was well known by everyone who worked with him that Lucky didn't take any shit from anybody! And if Lucky didn't like ya...look out. You certainly didn't want to find yourself on the wrong side of Lucky West and a few actually made that mistake through the years.

There were at least two occasions that I know of when Lucky made his point abundantly clear to a teammate right smack dab in the middle of a show. Although he was usually the comedian, he often played the role of "straight man" for the comedy act as well. So he'd be standing over the comedian who had just performed the "hang", i.e. a hilarious stunt - if done properly - where the dive show comedian would hurl his body sideways toward the end the diving board, grab the opposite edge with his hand and end up with his body suspended downwards in a stiff 'hang'.

On one occasion the comedian was Marty Strawn and on another it was Pat Sucher, who was 'stuck' in their 'hang' at the end of the diving board during a live performance. I never knew all of the details that led to the dissension, but as the stories go, they had apparently done something to piss Lucky off. So Lucky perpetuated his revenge while they were hanging helplessly and at his mercy.

"I'm gonna kick you right in the face" Lucky announced to the audience, a line that wasn't written into the script. Marty pivoted toward his straight man with a comical look of confusion. And sure enough, Lucky hauled off and kicked him right in the face. I don't think the impact broke Marty's nose, but it was certainly a bloody mess.

Of course, being the true professional that he was, Marty responded to the unexpected and rather harsh treatment with idealistic professionalism. He turned back toward the audience with a face full of blood that the audience assumed was part of the show. "Well I'll be damned," he said with the comical flare of an Abbot and Costello skit, "he did kick me in the face didn't he?" They of course finished out the show with no additional altercations, but Marty learned a valuable lesson that day. Ya just don't fuck with Lucky!

Lucky officially broke into the water show business in the early 1960s with a great partner, a guy by the name of Jimmy Goodhead. Jimmy wasn't a diver by any stretch of the word, but he was obsessed with and desperately wanted to be a part of the up-and-coming water show business. So Lucky taught him enough acrobatic skill, comedy and clown diving to enable him to become a rather talented performer. Jimmy and Lucky worked together as a comedy team for quite a few years before Lucky struck out on his own individual career.

Some guys just weren't cutout to be world champions. Lucky was one of those who were smart enough to recognize that he wasn't

destined to be one of them. But he was also smart enough to focus on all of the other significant aspects of the business like the comedy and the equipment. Lucky taught himself and learned to do it all. His efforts paid off too. In spite of his lack of success and titles in competition, he was one of the most sought-after commodities in the business for many years.

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### **Bobby Hoffman**

Lucky was tough in a rugged sort of way, but Bobby Hoffman was one of the wildest in a group that came to be known as the 'bad boys' of the business. He was one hell of a high diver and very few could match his talents as a water show comic. Bobby had a very unique and rather distinguishable raspy voice. Even when he tried he couldn't disguise it. You always knew it was him.

When it came to innovative tactics and a creative approach to resolving equipment issues, I seriously doubt there was anyone more adept at engineering at the 'jimmy-rigging' level than Bobby. I've seen him design and build shit that often impressed engineering's most elite.

I think it was back in the late 70s that Bob Maxwell signed on with his Mexican cohorts to design and build a water park on a hillside in Acapulco. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Maxwell arranged to build a new water slide, one of the first in the United States, at Wildwood - Amoroso Pier. It's important to note that this was long before water parks were a popular item. There were no plans to build from and the sleek materials of today were nonexistent. So when it came time, Mr. Maxwell called on the talents of Bobby Hoffman.

The actual cost and sale price aren't known, but suffice that to say that if Mr. Maxwell was involved, his objectives were to build it at the lowest possible cost and to make himself the heftiest profit possible in the process.

I can imagine the two of them standing side by side staring at some raw piece land. I'm sure Mr. Maxwell would have had some drawings sketched out on a legal pad. Knowing Bobby, it's just a guess, but I would imagine that the conversation between them probably went something like this;

Mr. Maxwell: So...do you think you can design a water slide?

Bobby: I don't know. Yeah, I guess I could.



Mr. Maxwell: What kind of material would you need?

Bobby: I don't know. Some lumber and some industrial plastic pipe I guess.

Mr. Maxwell: How much do you think the materials would cost?

Bobby: I don't know. Six or seven thousand I guess and a few helpers, maybe a little equipment and some tools.

Mr. Maxwell: How long do you think it would take you?

Bobby: I don't know. Four or five weeks I guess.

Mr. Maxwell: Do you want to do it?

Bobby: I don't know. How much would you pay me?

Mr. Maxwell: How about \$200 per day with a \$1000 bonus if you get it done quicker?

Bobby: I don't know. How about \$250 a day with a \$3000 bonus? And I get to keep the tools.

Mr. Maxwell: You've got a deal. When can you start?

Bobby: I don't know. Tomorrow I guess.

As I recall, Bobby did almost all of the work himself. He designed and fabricated all of the components for the entire water slide structure out of wood from a local lumberyard. He completed the entire project in something like two or three weeks.

It's just an educated guess, but I'd venture to estimate that

Bobby probably earned less than \$10,000. The total cost, including materials, was probably less than \$20,000. It's also my guess that Mr. Maxwell probably sold the water slide project for more than \$100,000. My guess is that Bobby didn't really care. If he made an agreement, he stuck to it. That's just the kind of guy he was.

As long as he got paid what he agreed to do the work for, he wouldn't have complained. What amazed me is that Bobby, a high school dropout - a man with no formal training, was able to do all that to begin with. You just can't help but admire a guy like that and I truly did!

I once did a show with Bobby Hoffman, Reggie Ruffin and Frank Bedier at **Bablo** Island in Canada. The four of us ended up renting a two-bedroom apartment and Bobby says to me, "Give me the day off and when you get back, this will be a four-bedroom place."

That thought scared me a little. Bobby is like twenty years older than me, but I'm running the show. So I told him, "You can't go pounding any nails into the walls or anything like that or we'll lose our deposit." Sure enough, he'd gone out and rounded up some scrap wood and a bunch of empty ice cream buckets or something like that. He had managed to construct some self-supporting divider walls

(no nails in the existing structure) and actually built furniture and had turned buckets into lampshades and things like that.

He does all of this on his one day off. We leave in the morning to go do our shows and come back six hours later. Sure enough, our apartment is now a nifty little four bedroom unit. The guy was amazing. He could build anything.

Another thing that I remember about Bobby was the way he judged distances. I would ask him, "How far is it Bobby?" His answer would be in the form beer quantities like; 'about a 6-pack past the bridge.' Well...or me a 6-pack could be anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half. So now I'm watching him to see how fast he drinks a beer so I can gauge how far a 6-pack is in terms of time or distance by his standards. If he was thirsty at the time, a 6-pack could be about 2 miles.

Once I was riding with Bobby from Great Adventure in New Jersey to Cape Cod, I think it was. Along the way, we/he decides we're going to stop and have a beer. Hell, I wasn't even old enough to drink. So we stop at this little bar. When we walk in, the lady who owned the place was having an argument with her bartender.

The bartender says, "Fuck you! I quit!" and walks out the door.

The owner finalized their conversation with, "Fine, get out then."

Bobby, being the cool customer that he is, says to her, "Well, can we get a beer or not?" It was still early and there were a few other people in there, but this lady starts venting her concerns.

She begins to unload with, "I'm stuck guys. I don't know what to do. It's Friday night and I don't have a bartender. I need a bartender like right now. I don't know what I'm going to do."

So Bobby says, "well, I know how to bartend."

The lady said, "Fine...you're hired." The next thing I know Bobby's behind the bar and we're drinkin'. He's taking care of everybody in the place. Half way through the night, we're crocked and he quits taking money from the customers altogether. But everyone stayed and had a good time. So, at the end of the night, the owner was okay with it and didn't get pissed off or anything. It was a fun and rather funny night for me...an entirely new experience.

We had to get back on the road anyway, so Bobby didn't care what anybody thought. What was she going to do, fire him? She paid him and we were on our very merry way.

Bobby had this old brown van that he affectionately referred to as 'Charlie Brown'. On a non-stop trip from Miami to Great Adventure and just fifteen miles from his destination, he fell asleep at the wheel. The van flipped into the air and almost killed him, but his body miraculously flew out through the windshield and landed on the pavement. The van landed on the highway about seven in front of him. Charlie Brown somehow managed to completely miss landing on him, but it was compressed like a pancake on impact into a condensed pile of twisted rubble. He was extremely lucky to be alive.

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