

The Remarkable Success of “Lucky Lem,” aka David Fee

(Ask published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 22, 2023)

Gordon Fee is my friend and retired President of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, as well as former manager of the Oak Ridge Y-12 Plant. Y-12 is known as the Y-12 National Security Complex now and is the nation's nuclear weapons secondaries manufacturer and where all the nation's highly enriched uranium is stored that is not in a nuclear weapon, a research reactor, or the Navy's nuclear submarines and ships.

I worked for Gordon at Y-12 and like to tell the story that he would not let me go back to my management position in maintenance until I fully implemented Targeted Selection...a structured interviewing process. Last I checked, it was still in use at Y-12!

After retirement, Gordon has been busy with state level volunteer initiatives mainly pertaining to education. He has served on numerous boards and has been honored as a Distinguished Alumni of Penn State University, recognized by the Tennessee state legislature for his contribution to education across the state, and received the Muddy Boot Award from the East Tennessee Economic Council, among several other awards and honors over his career.

I enjoy a good friendship with him and Miriam and often join him for breakfast where I listen to stories from his career...some of which I can use. I asked him to help tell the story of his son, David Fee, who I had known when he was a teenager as “Lucky Lem,” the magician. I used him as entertainment at Cub Scout Pack 220 annual meetings. He agreed to ask his daughter, Debbie, to do that for me.

Please enjoy Debbie Fee Newsom's story about her brother, David Fee.

David Fee, a 1979 graduate of Oak Ridge High School, has had a remarkable career in the entertainment world. It all started with a dream born while participating in shows at the Oak Ridge Junior Playhouse where his mother, Miriam Fee, served as president of the board. His dream was to own a theater one day and produce his own shows. Over a 25-year period, David Fee and his business partner, Jim Hedrick, accomplished this dream and built a \$40 million dollar business, the Fee/Hedrick Family Entertainment Group.

Born in 1961 in Oak Ridge, Tenn., to Gordon and Miriam Fee, David Fee lived in Oak Ridge for a year with his family here. Then they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and then later to Somers, N. Y. They ultimately returned in 1972 to Oak Ridge. Fee also has a sister, Debbie, who is three years older and is a 1976 graduate of Oak Ridge High School.

It was in Oak Ridge that Fee began his performing career in the Oak Ridge Junior Playhouse, where he played many roles under the tutorage of Marguerite Ebert. When Fee learned a few magic tricks from a friend, the wheels were in motion for his direction in life. He was hooked on magic and performing for an audience.

“David loved fooling and entertaining people at the same time,” says sister, Debbie. “A friend of his, Mark Young, another Oak Ridge High School 1976 graduate, could always trick David, and he was determined to fool him back,” she recalls. Young, who now lives in Beaufort, S.C., served as an early catalyst for his development as a magician.

Fee began performing magic tricks at events, such as children's birthday parties and company picnics, when he was only 12 years old. His Dad, Gordon Fee, (the retired president of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems) recalls that, “One day an Oak Ridge magician, Larry Austin, whose stage

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name was “Austinini,” asked David to cover a company picnic for him because he had booked two gigs for the same day. David agreed, without any idea what his act would be to entertain attendees at Union Carbide's Engineering Division picnic at Carbide Park. He went to the Oak Ridge Playhouse, got a pair of overalls and a hillbilly hat, and in four days his act of comedy, corny jokes and magic as ‘Lucky Lem the Hillbilly Magician’ was born.”

Over the following years, Fee performed as “Lucky Lem the Hillbilly Magician” at many birthday parties, company picnics, amusement parks, Tennessee campgrounds, the Elks Club, Boeing Engineering Company, the Boys' Club Board of Directors, the Knights of Columbus, St. Mary's Chinese New Year Celebration, the Boys' Club Halloween party, the Morristown Jaycees, the Mountain Communities for Children, Artfest's Saturday Night on the Town and many, many others.

In 1975, Fee joined the International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM), Ring 58 and the Smoky Mountain Mystics in Knoxville, Tenn. He is a lifetime member of both organizations and an Order of Merlin Shield Magician. Fee entered his first IBM contest in the youth category in 1975. He won that contest and was honored to be named “Teen Magician of the Year for the United States,” three years in a row — at Little Rock, Ark., in 1975; at Evansville, Ind., in 1976 and at Washington D.C., in 1977. He baffled and amused the judges with his stage presence, originality, humor, strength-of-effects, and technical skill.

Based on this acclaim, the Southeastern Association of Magicians in Greenville, S. C., invited him to perform at their convention. His success also garnered him an invitation to a “dream trip” to Hollywood, where he performed magic at the Academy of Magical Arts Awards Show at the Beverly-Wilshire Hotel on Saturday, March 13, 1976, held in Los Angeles, Calif.

Over 600 stars of the entertainment world, such as Siegfried and Roy, Bob Barker, Edie Gorme, Steve Lawrence, Mel Blanc and Cary Grant, applauded Fee. Diana Zimmerman, a famous, female magician, and founder of the youth program at the Magic Castle, hosted Fee and his parents at the Magic Castle on that trip. In honor of Fee's accomplishments, the mayor of Oak Ridge proclaimed March 13, 1976, as “David Fee Day,” in recognition of his outstanding magic awards.

Still in high school, Fee obtained a job with Magic World in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. The next year he got a job with Silver Dollar City in Pigeon Forge (which later became the Dollywood Amusement Park). He later returned to Magic World in 1979. Here he met a juggler and comedian named Jim Hedrick, who became his business partner in his future endeavors.

After performing at Magic World, Fee headed straight for the streets of New York with Hedrick. They called themselves, “The Fly-By-Night Street Performers” and performed in the middle of Times Square. Fee also performed in an off-Broadway children's show called, “Through the Eye of the Giant.” Once the show ended at Christmas and it became too cold to perform in Times Square, they moved to Las Vegas. There, Fee performed an act with his ventriloquist dummy, Oscar, at The Sahara Hotel and became a blackjack expert in the casinos.

Fee returned to Knoxville, Tenn., at the age of 21 to be one of five official magicians at the 1982 World's Fair, with sponsorship by Little Debbie Snack Cakes. He did a mixture of stage shows and close-up work entertaining the lines where attendees waited for admission, served as emcee and one of the featured entertainers at the Elm Tree Theater. During the World's Fair, he executed nine straitjacket escapes while suspended upside down from a crane in a regulation straitjacket.

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“David was an integral part of the performing arts program at the fair, where he amused, amazed and entertained audiences from every corner of the world,” said S. H. Roberts, Jr., president of the 1982 World’s Fair. “He was superb!”

One memorable event, sponsored by the Bank of Oak Ridge, was an underwater escape that was conducted at the Oak Ridge Marina on June 10, 1983. He made an airborne arrival to the Marina, endured a “nude search” by local authorities and gave some last words. Assistants then leg-ironed and handcuffed him and placed him in a three-foot-square wooden box before securing it shut with over 40 bolts, 100 screws and 150 nails.

To assure the validity of the escape, the local news media nailed and chained the lid of the box. The box contained a scuba tank with only three minutes of oxygen, and was dropped 20 feet into the Clinch River, laden with 200-pounds of weights lashed to the outside. Fee quickly escaped from the tightly secured and heavily packed crate. Failure to successfully escape would have meant a drowning death. Fee repeated this stunt in September 1985 at Chilhowee Lake for the Tennessee Valley Fair.

On June 24, 1983, Fee performed a “Tribute to Houdini” by escaping from a straitjacket while hanging upside down from a helicopter 75 feet above the ground at the Oak Ridge Downtown Shopping Center.

In April 1984, to raise money for St. Jude’s Hospital, Fee performed a stunt that involved being buried alive in a coffin with a specially built air supply for two days in the Downtown West Shopping Center in Knoxville. The stunt raised \$2,000 from a bottle passed around to onlookers and a total of \$186,000 from radio listeners, and it earned Fee a lot of recognition.

In 1984, Fee went on to become the only magician at the World’s Fair in New Orleans, La., and the featured magician for the Tennessee Valley Fair in Knoxville.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Tennessee in 1985, Fee joined Carnival Cruise Lines as a magician and soon became a cruise director. He worked for Carnival for ten years cruising the Caribbean to St. Thomas, St. Martin, Barbados, Cancun, Jamaica, and many other islands. A definite highlight of his cruising years was being on the initial voyage Carnival took through the Panama Canal.

Fee was just 33 when he left Carnival as their senior cruise director, bought a theater in Pigeon Forge, and opened “The Comedy Barn®” show. This clean comedy, family-friendly show, that Fee originated and produced, is still running today having entertained millions of visitors through its 29-year run.

Based on the success of the Comedy Barn®, the Fee/Hedrick partners from 1994 to 2019 built and operated a number of theaters and restaurants in Pigeon Forge including: “The Smoky Mountain Opry™”; “The Smith Morning Variety Show”; “The Hatfield and McCoy Dinner Feud™”; “Magic Beyond Belief,™” starring Darren Romeo; “Amazing Animals;” Frizzle Chicken Farmhouse Café; Tony Roma’s Steak House; Chef’s Catering; Noah’s Ark Animal Park and several real estate properties.

From the modest beginning of one small theater, Fee and Hedrick withstood many challenges to become a highly successful corporation, with a devotion to providing enjoyable family-oriented entertainment for audiences from 2 to 92. The Fee/Hedrick Family Entertainment Group has

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always been recognized for their innovative, clean, family-fun shows with a corporate theme of “We Sell Fun.”

After 25 years in business, with the help of over 500 employees, (including his sister, Debbie Fee Newsom, who served as their director of public relations), Fee/Hedrick Family Entertainment Group became one of the largest and most successful live entertainment companies in the United States, entertaining almost one million customers annually. In January of 2019, World Choice Investments, LLC., the operating partner of Dolly Parton's dinner theaters, purchased all the Fee Hedrick Family Entertainment Group, and Fee and Hedrick semi-retired.

Fee and his two children, Megan Fee (age 21) and Joshua Fee (age 16), have always made their home in Pigeon Forge. In May, Megan will graduate from the University of Tennessee with a degree in hospitality and theater management and is ready to partner with her dad in the entertainment industry.

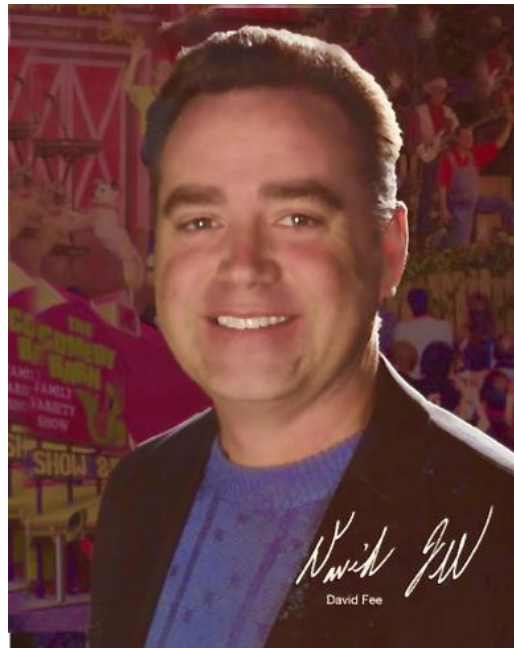
After four years in semi-retirement, in March of this year, Fee purchased the Palace Theater in the Village of Lake Delton in the Wisconsin Dells and later this spring will open a new show, “Bello's Circus Extreme Variety Show.” This is a remarkable journey for “Lucky Lem the Hillbilly Magician.”

And the story is not over yet! Thank you, Debbie, for documenting the marvelous career of “Lucky Lem” or better known now as David Fee, a most successful producer of exceptional family entertainment. I must admit enjoying being reminded of the many things David has done, but the one where he was buried in a coffin for two days brought me up short! I would NEVER be able to stand that. Even thinking about him doing it makes me very uncomfortable.

I know you readers, who knew David when he was in Oak Ridge, appreciated being reminded of the many entertaining things he did for us here and being made aware of the details of his most successful career...which is not yet over, for sure. What he was able to do with Fee/Hedrick Family Entertainment Group in Pigeon Forge, TN, will likely be replicated in the Village of Lake Delton in the Wisconsin Dells.

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David Fee



David Fee dangling from a helicopter over Oak Ridge's Downtown Shopping Center parking lot while escaping from a straitjacket

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David Fee as Lucky Lem, the Hillbilly Magician