

The History of JB Corn in the haunt business

As a child I made the candy rounds like everyone else. We would attend the Halloween Carnival at school; take a trip through the haunted house and bob for apples. 1961 was a fun year for me. I was twelve, almost thirteen, we had moved into a new house, far away from our old digs, and Halloween was fast approaching. I was into many different things and Halloween was about to become one of them. Out of the clear blue I decided to entertain the local Trick-or-Treaters. Our front porch was enclosed with ironwork. The only way in was up a slight step and onto the porch. I placed an 8' plywood ramp, decorated it with ropes to look like a drawbridge and created my first horror scene in my living room. I would play music and, using a PA system, talk to my victims. Distracted as they were, they did not notice, at first, the drawbridge being raised, and when they did, it was too late. The porch light went out as the front door opened and I greeted them. I was very busy that night. Word went far and wide and for the next couple of years I created more fun for my neighbors. It was not 'cool' to continue this in High School and the urge to scare died away.

How Not To Build Your First Haunt, 1979

1979 found me newly married. I operated my own acting schools in ***** and *****. The month is October, one of my favorites, and something new was happening in the area, Haunted Houses. We had several, some good some bad but all in fun. My wife suggested that we build one in the school, something for the students to do and a fundraiser for the school. She created a monster.

***** (the school) was located near downtown *****, right on the freeway at a major intersection; a perfect location. We decided to open for the last week plus, Thursday the 22nd through Saturday the 31st. Please remember the title to this article as I describe my first haunt.

I wanted my customers to experience something different. So I went all out not to look like any other haunt. Customers had to remove their shoes and socks and stow all their belongings in a numbered box we provided. Their first adventure was to cross worm swamp. A 2x6 framed pool created with black plastic, filled with water and plastic worms with a black light. Fishing line was hanging in the path and a fan blew air into their faces. For added terror we would pull a garden hose through the water. It worked to well. Imagine your bare feet with worms squishing beneath and then suddenly something slides along your leg, in the dark...

Customers traveled a brief path through hanging carpet tubes. The space was big enough to get turned around in, the forerunner of my tube room turn around. A puppet monster would come down from above in the tubes at random places to nibble on any available heads, yes, we touched the customers.

The school stage became the cemetery, covered with leaves, nearly eighteen inches deep, tree limbs, tombstones, flying bats and a singing corpse rising out of the grave. This was the distraction, the real scare came from the corpse rising behind them, and he would grab an ankle. Many customers fell, some off the stage but mostly into the leaves. By Halloween night our eighteen-inch high pile of leaves was about two inches

and we brought in twenty more bags to fill the cemetery again.

They would exit and crawl into a 2'x2' tunnel. We preferred couples and with word of mouth we had many couples. We would get on top of the tunnel, bang on the wood and squirt them with water guns. As they crawled they moved up. They would crawl over an actor padded with a quilt; he would wiggle as they crawled over him. This made for some unusual reactions. Because they were forced to crawl one behind the other, it was easy to separate them. A wall would suddenly appear in the space between them. They were told to continue to crawl. They each made a right hand turn and were told to lie face down. The bottom would drop out and they would land face up together on a large mattress 24" below.

Lady Luck was kind to me. Not one injury, no fire, no emergency of any kind. The haunt had one entrance and exit and was on a second floor. Flame Proofing? Not a clue, What Me Worry? My only fire extinguisher was of the kitchen type. A variety of lighting fixtures powered by an array of extension cords in various conditions were tacked and hanging everywhere, even around the swamp. Cassette players with tapes that had to be turned over or rewound were placed in several locations.

We charged \$2 per person and made a little over \$600. The haunt was small, but because of the individual attention each group received and the fact that running was not an option, customers felt they got their moneys worth.

The students enjoyed the work and this event became the annual fundraiser of first **** through 1996. I would continue producing the event and would eventually make a few mistakes. I had much to learn, but we were off to a good start.

Working In Tight Places, 1980

The building my school was in was sold. The new owners had other plans, so off I was to an office warehouse space. The 1980 haunt was about 1,500 sq. ft. I had to come up with ways to deliver a longer haunt. Our location faced a major roadway. We had the opportunity to make good money, if we could deliver a good show.

The building had a front entrance and a back rolling door. The concept of emergency exits was not to present itself to me till 1986. Passageways in the haunt were two feet wide. And then there was the crawling maze. On your hands and knees, down two foot square tunnels, with us on top banging, yelling and squirting you with water. The tunnel path was 64 feet long. Built of sheet rock, 2x2s and nails (I had yet to discover the wonders of screws) it almost lasted the season. It did require major repairs before the last weekend. Carpet tubes returned, puppets popping out of all sorts of places, a witch's cauldron and witches, too. The grand finale was a large box. Customers walked up a ramp, ducked down and entered a four-foot square box, eight feet long. It had 100-watt sound system and two woofers. The sound track was the classic "buried alive", being sold everywhere back then. We closed the door behind them, turned out the lights, turned on the music, then released the lock and the entire box pivoted back and forth like a see saw. We would bang them around several times (more if the line was short) then let them out the backside. As they exited the box, they could see the exit to outside. As they stepped forward (thinking they were through) a very large

spider dropped on top of them at the doorway of the exit. Very effective.

Well, actually this was another good year, almost. We covered the expense of building the haunt, purchasing some new props, had a cast party and still had a pocket full of money to play with. However, I learned the first of many lessons this year.

We masked everything with black plastic (yes, the kind we have all learned not to use). Stapled it in place, OOPS, staples? Yes staples. Customers would bump into, fall all over and pull down the plastic. When it would come down, it brought with it staples. Some staples remained partially in the wood, leaving a sharp pointy thing armed to attack an unsuspecting customer. As fate would have it the injury was to a little girl being carried by her dad. The staple cut across her right hand and confused us. We were not ready for customer injuries. They could not receive any help till they made it all the way to the box. At this time we realized the reason for their shouts of 'help'.

It was clearly our fault and I agreed to pay the emergency room fee. He took her down the road and was back in less than an hour with a receipt for \$98. Ouch. After the accident I closed the haunt down for about ten minutes and found several more staples poised for attack. I removed them. This was the last time I would ever use staples exposed in any of my haunts. That is not to say that I do not use staples, I do. After creating a curtain with taffeta, I cover the stapled side with another board using screws. This was the first of three customer injuries 1980, 1982 and 1988.

This event brought to my attention emergency situations. I had never prepared for them. It also focused attention on access to haunt areas. We had no access except through the customer path. It would be several years before I could remedy this problem. But we did prepare emergency response plans. The adults and students that worked the haunt were advised to listen to the customers as they made it down the customer path. Any unusual shouting was to be investigated immediately. This action paid off several days later when a family got stuck in the tube room. It seems that one of the tubes had come untied and the dangling cord was caught up in a unique hair do. They were caught for only a brief time and they themselves were not in a panic, yet. I was notified and was able to untangle her hair from the cord. It was nothing that they could not have done themselves, except that each was carrying a child that was not willing to be put down. We were able to help them before the problem became serious and they continued through the haunt laughing and screaming.

The staple lesson was clear. Second year of operation and it suddenly dawned on me that I was responsible for the safety of my customers. It was my job to create a safe haunt. Somewhere during this revelation the word fire 'snuck' up on me. I noticed the pathetic kitchen fire extinguisher and almost died laughing. Before we opened the next evening I bought two giant chemical extinguishers and more flashlights. We had talks about evacuation and selected a location outside of the building where everyone was to meet in the event of an emergency. People were assigned emergency duties. One to walk through the haunt and make sure that all customers were out, two to standby the fire extinguishers and one to count heads at the meeting place.

There was no regulations, guidelines, inspections or anyone to talk to. I learned by visiting other haunts, watching my customers and making mistakes. These lessons I pass on to you.

Stay Focused, 1981

During the day I was a TV Producer. We had three half hour television shows to produce each week. 1980 had but one show and we were able to pre shoot studio segments and avoid using the studio where the haunt was. This year the studio had to be used during the day and converted back to a haunt at night. This was a drag.

The haunt was almost the same as the year before. No exposed staples. The customer path was rearranged and sets from the TV programs were used. Most of the haunt was hinged and my portable designs were being born. 4x8' and 8x8' panels were all around. I was still using mostly ninety-degree walls in the design, but the mazes used a variety of angles. Oh, and I stopped using sheet rock. I had not discovered wafer board, so I used plywood. I did not use the sixty-degree system till 1989.

A variety of problems were created. The first was the night we opened and no customers were coming out of the haunt, they were going in, but nobody was exiting. At first we joked about this, told customers waiting in line that no one ever escaped our haunt alive. After about thirty customers had entered it was obvious that something was wrong. As it turned out a wall was in the wrong place, it was hinged and got closed off the wrong way creating a loop effect. The customers were going in circles. The reason we heard no complaints was that they loved it. This error was incorporated into other designs.

Then there was the night I became brain dead. I had no idea where anything went. Nothing seemed to fit and we were twenty minutes late in opening. Add to this the Saturday we ran over in shooting. Normally we would open at 6pm for lights on tours then 7pm for real haunting. We had a crowd at 6pm, unusual, for the lights on, but we were still shooting in the studio. In between takes we were setting up the haunt, but we still did not open till 7pm for lights on and 7:30pm for lights off. We stumbled through the month exhausted and in a semi coma. Bottom line was that the haunt did not really suffer and our TV shows seemed better. I work well under pressure, but this was absurd. The final straw came when I actually loaded into the VCR and cued that days show seconds before airtime. We were all basket cases and losing focus, then the month was over, could not have lasted another day.

The plus to this madness was that I was learning short cuts. Quicker ways to put up/take down, run wire, set lights and general preparation for opening. This experience became valuable beginning in 1989 and 1990 with the advent of more than one haunt and setting up in a parking lot. We were really on our own with no municipal guidance. No one was injured, no customer emergencies went unhandled (like we are really scared, please let us out) and nothing broke. We did have fewer parents helping out, but we had more than enough students and some of them were already planning for 1982.

So, so what? You say. Well, I am into year three, still using the haunt as a fundraiser for the acting school and I love it. OK, so I enjoy self-abuse. I have learned a great deal, and I start keeping notes. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending upon your point of view) I have lost my early floor plans. They were little more than a joke, anyway. Basically I would walk into the room, pick a spot and begin to build. When it failed to fit, I modified whatever I was working on to fit, or changed to something else

entirely. I did not make a real floor plan till 1986. And it was 1987 before anybody in city government noticed us or anyone else I believe.

The reality was/is that I did not even begin to work on the haunt till October. My life was so busy that I could not focus on the haunt till it was up and in my face. We usually opened for the last two or three weeks and that gave me the first week of October to prepare. This too would change in time. My haunts were becoming more complex and requiring more time to build. I had not yet developed the technique for modular construction. We re-used everything from the haunts in our TV productions. The inventory of show sets was increasing and it began to make sense to me that I might begin an inventory of haunt related sets, but that is another story. And if there is any message here (focus) it is that time must be dedicated and a true focus achieved. Unless you wish to become a candidate for the funny farm and a pretty padded cell with a limited view.

Splinter, 1982

Summer of 1982 I stumbled across a deal. An old mall was being renovated into a high-class flea market. They were spending big bucks to reopen Lochwood Mall and to make it look modern. I knew one of the organizers and talked him into letting me place a puppet theater in the basement. It was a huge success. Not that we made big bucks, but along with the puppets we used our students as actors on stage for some great entertainment. And my students enjoyed live audiences. The admission was free and the mall promoted our weekend and holiday shows. I made out by attracting more students. Our TV show **** was in Town East Mall and we filmed some sequences at Lochwood.

Halloween became a thought and I asked the mall for use of additional basement space for a haunt. They said yes. We provided four free passes per vendor in the market and opened Thursday the 14th through Sunday the 31st. We had special shows during the day Saturday and Sunday. As before I wandered into the space and started building in one corner and worked my way around till I ran out of space. Most of the haunt was of plywood, but we had more space than we had money, so sheet rock made a return. Lumber was cheap, but there was an even cheaper grade of 2x4 available and I bought it.

The haunt was not remarkable. It contained several of my standbys, the carpet tubes, crawling maze and several rooms. It would take an average of 15 minutes to get through and we now had as a permanent feature the ability to swing a wall and send you around through most of the haunt as many times as we wanted or as time would allow.

We operated the puppet theater, the haunt and performed additional skits in the open area on a stage between the two. \$3 per person and you got your moneys worth. It was easy to spend an hour in the basement, and little of that time standing in line.

The haunt was a technical nightmare. Wires, extension cords and pull cords running everywhere. No one came to inspect and no permits were required. This was the first year where the exit and entrance were one in the same. Not because I wanted it that way, the space had only one-way in and out. The new customer base was rough on the haunt. I had been building one style of haunt, but this year it became obvious that not all customers are alike. It would take an hour or so before opening to repair damage. And during operation I had to shut down once or twice per night to fix something. The worst

was the pulling down of extension cords and clamp lights. It seemed that some of the customers only came to destroy.

The stage was set. Halloween night 8pm another little girl being carried by another dad got a big splinter in her hand. And another emergency room bill this one \$129. It was one of those bargain 2x4s. I figured out latter that had I bought the better grade of lumber I would have had money left over from the \$129 I spent. Hindsight is always 20/20. At the end, I also discovered that I could have almost paid for plywood instead of sheet rock, I was replacing it on a regular basis. Well, not actually replacing, more like nailing another sheet of ½ inch over a damaged one. It took hours to clean up the sheet rock mess and haul it off. And I trashed the crummy 2x4s as well; they were doing a wiggle and enough nails in them for a nice sized anchor. The sheet rock maze had many lessons.

But on the brighter side the event was a tremendous success. The students and their parents had a blast. Our audience was entertained and we had money to play with. Our costumed characters roamed the mall during market hours. The merchants were pleased and so was the mall management. After all, the entertainment was free and effective. Merchants recalled this season as being the best yet for a new flea market.

We continued right through the holidays, converting the haunt into Santa's Workshop and presenting holiday shows. We made a killing selling photos with Santa.

I was learning the value of entertainment. We entertained and the crowd loved it. Next year I would learn another lesson, crowd mentality. But for now it was clear that superior building materials had to be used and that all raw lumber should be painted. This would add considerable cost to the final event, but then it would be worth it. We now had a nice collection of props, set pieces and building materials.

The Line, 1983

Year two at Lochwood Flea Market was upon us. I saw no reason to change my ways too much, so I began in a corner and started building the haunt. The Mall had given us more space. We had over 4,000 sq. ft. I was nearly lost in a space so large. Then I was hit with a surprise. We were scheduled to open Thursday the 13th. Because our location was in the basement and the closest entrance was in the back I seldom visited the front main entrance of the mall. I was coming back from the lumber yard (before Home Depot) and noticed a large sign for a haunted house over the main entrance. I was surprised that the mall would do such a thing for us (serious ego problem here), but I surmised that they were very happy with the show we put on. HA!

I drove around back and delivered the lumber. Worked into the night till about 8pm. Staggered up stairs and drove around to the mall front to see the sign again. OOPS. It was the Friday before we were to open and there was a line out the front doors. I parked and entered the mall to see what was going on. In a space of over 10,000 sq. ft., a prime entry location, another Haunted House was open. I was in shock. The management explained it to me this way, 'If one Haunted House is good, then two must be twice as good.'

This haunt was a completely different style. Inside they built elaborate sets,

placed distance between them and presented a theatrical production. They would take groups of about twenty at a time and the cast produced a vampire wedding. I never saw it all, but it took us some time to recover from the surprise. You see, the production was about twenty minutes, only one group at a time was allowed inside and a very very long line formed. They could have held the line inside the mall. Instead they forced it out the doors onto the front sidewalk. At the time I thought this was stupid.

The crowd mentality was; see a line get in it. We did our best to have no more than a fifteen-minute wait. On Friday & Saturday nights you could stand in line for two hours upstairs. Their success was great enough to add a second cast so that they could do two groups at a time. I am no mathematician but they could only handle 120 people per hour. But, they were charging \$8 per person (this is 1983, we were charging a whopping \$3 per person). The down side was that our initial attendance was down. Our only advantage was that they allowed no children at all.

We did more for the mall. We provided daytime entertainment (costumed characters), opened our haunt during weekend business hours and provided discounts to vendors. Our competition did none of this. Later I found out that they did pay rent, which we did not. Out of desperation we finally began to work their line, this paid off and our second season at Lochwood was better than our first.

Our style changed this year. We had larger scenes and the crawling maze was gone, it was now a walking maze. This would be our first year for a fog machine and strobe lights. We also added some black light puppets. Our stereo sound system was supplemented with portable cassette players and loop cassettes playing random sounds along the customer path.

And, sorry to say, we created a line out the front and up the stairs. We never got it outside the mall entry door, but not for lack of trying. When people from the other haunt came to check us out they would get into a long line, but would leave if we had no line. That mentality exists till this day. They enjoyed our show as much as the one upstairs and would not have gone through had we not had a line.

I find this curious. A long line indicates a superior show, one worth waiting for. No line indicates a lousy show and that one should leave. Its part of the haunted thing for Halloween, I guess. But I have seen this for other amusements as well; Six Flags and Disney Land come to mind. There is a science to crowd mentality, I do not understand it; I accept it.

The bottom line is (if there is one) charge what the public is willing to pay. I know of no magic formula for this. I am sure that the upstairs haunt had a higher overhead than us and equally certain that they made money. Our goals were not the same. They operated strictly for the money; fun for us, student training and some change left over. Till this day I note that a line out the front door of my haunt is the best sales tool for those driving by, because if I do not have a line, they do just that... drive by.

All Good Things..., 1984

Our last year at Lochwood was to be strange, not that the haunt business was in and of itself normal. It seems that the mall was not doing well. Money seemed to be disappearing, not going to advertising as it was supposed to. Many vendors had left, but the upstairs haunt returned and so did we. We cut back on entertainment during the day and opened the haunt for lights on tours, no actors till 7pm. The folks upstairs were using the stuff from the year before and apparently producing the same show for the first two weeks. I know, because the word got out and our business was booming and they never fully recovered. They blamed us. We added our sign to the front of the mall and placed direction banners across the mall hall leading to our haunt.

We tied our two shows together. First the customers were seated in the puppet theater for a ten-minute show. They were then escorted to the exit, which was the haunt entrance. We kept them entertained for an average of thirty minutes and could move 120 people per show or 240 per hour. Our price went up to \$4 and we had a good-sized stack of dollar bills to play with when it was all said and done.

The haunt changed into more of a path connecting scenes. It was not all 90 degree, but we were still using two-foot wide passages. This year we had two swinging walls and tried something new (and I promise never to do it again). We actually could turn the customers around and back onto themselves. This was fun for a while, but it proved to be dangerous, as customers began to confuse themselves with actors and some customers became actors. This was done as part of the maze and the scenes before and after the maze. The maze is where one of the problems developed.

This was the first time I had seen people pay to get in and set up shop as an actor in the haunt, usually in the maze. It didn't seem bad at first, but then it became apparent that these people could/would and did get carried away and created problems. The situation could have been worse had we not nipped it in the bud. It is one thing for a member of a group to move quickly ahead of the group in order to scare one of his friends, it is quit another for an individual to join the cast. Cast implies that you know who they are, have information on how to get in touch with them and require them to be accountable for their actions. 1992 would present a similar but different problem.

October would be it for the mall. None of us knew that, but the management was not paying the rent. When the hammer fell our stuff was caught in the web. It took us nearly a month to get most of our stuff out. It was not a pretty sight. We had no true lease; a verbal agreement was it. But the mess extended to flea market vendors as well. Tuesday November 1st was a deadline. When vendors returned for the next weekend they discovered that they were locked out. An interim solution was found and the mall owners accepted weekend rent from vendors for what would turn out to be the last weekend.

This was only one of many times that my lack of management skill would become obvious. Our attraction was outgrowing my ability to manage it. Not the creative/show side, but the detail side. Advertising, marketing, contracts and other types of agreements were foreign to me. I mention this because a haunt is a blend of creative talents and business skills. Although my haunt continues to survive, it should be doing better.

We were growing and changing as well. I was the creative part of a group trying to establish one of the early satellite networks. We built some nice studios, sets and shot a stack of videotape. The haunt would relocate to our film/video production studios, which contained classrooms for the acting school.

Plastic Miracle, 1985

Halloween almost slipped by us this year. Everything we had and were doing was tied up in the attempt to launch a satellite network. My students would not let it pass. Space, we had plenty of space. Money, well, that was in short supply. We had props and sets, lights and effects, but no way to build the connecting walls. The building materials from years past had been used in other ways. Then it hit me, walls of black plastic (hey, get over it, this was '85 and I knew no better). The sets were placed and ropes formed the tops of the walls, black plastic was draped over the ropes and walls were formed.

This year marked the first time we were inspected. The Farmers Branch Fire Department came out the week before Halloween. Made sure we had at least two 10-pound fire extinguishers and flashlights. That was it. We were opened the 17th through the 31st and charged \$3.

This haunt was remarkable in that I used more blood and gore than ever before. The teens loved it. One scene was an actual telephone booth with a teen girl being hacked to death from the shadows. The customer path covered three sides of the booth. It was remarkable because the amount of blood that was squirting and splashing everywhere. She would wipe the glass with her bloody face as customers hurried by. This was before plastic knives and things, so we used a real machete. Her back was protected by plywood covered with a pillowcase filled with cotton and straw. The hacking sound added to the illusion and as customers came close the machete would slip and hack a piece of wood near her face. Not to worry, her mom wielded the weapon. Friday and Saturday nights we would destroy several pillow cases.

This was the year to learn the value of scene placement. The telephone booth was placed in the middle of the haunt; it should have been at the end. Customers commented about it as they exited and the remainder of the haunt was as in passing. In the business of theatrical revues an actor knows his performance was miserable when he reads his name and the word adequate. It indicates that the reviewer did not remember his performance, but noted his name in the credits. The last half of our haunt was like that, it was there, but nothing came close to the intensity of the telephone booth. There was a natural fear of whatever was hacking at the girl would come after them, but they did not notice our closing scenes. This is not to say that we did not scare them, we did. But there was a difference.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. I should have known better, but who would have thought that a simple scene could have such impact. At once I realized I should have moved it. But my designs were not that flexible and I had other duties. The haunt did OK, nothing fantastic, but we had the same amount of money left over as the year before, only because we spent nearly nothing building the haunt. This was also the year for developing pace as a haunt concept.

A simple effect occurred by accident. As the customers moved along the curtained path, the curtains (black plastic) moved with them. The flow scared a majority, who thought they were being followed. Their imagination filled in the blanks and after

the telephone booth some wanted to exit. Another problem was no internal exits. The haunt had an entrance and an exit, nothing more. We began to add more illusion to the flowing curtain. At selected locations an actor would rush the curtain, pushing it in towards the customers. The reactions were extreme and we had to be careful as to not scare the customers into anything that would hurt them.

This wanting to get out of the haunt because they were scared and being able to move scenes was having a cumulative effect on me. The satellite network thing folded up around my ears and my concentration returned to the acting school.

900 Sq. Ft. & Pickets, 1986

Halloween suddenly appeared. The kids were ready. I was not. Again funds were scarce but student anticipation was high. A haunt for Halloween had taken a life of its own. The students expected it. Our acting school was in a new smaller space. We would add more next year, but this year our haunt was cramped. This would be the first time that we built an entry area. It was a giant cave facade.

Also unique to this design was a central corridor. It provided actor access to all scenes and customer exit from any scene. The entrance and exit to the haunt were one in the same. There was no real haunt design. The space was divided into square rooms/scenes. The customer path followed the wall of the space with switchbacks dividing the rooms. Black plastic was used for the walls of the central corridor and wafer board was used to build the switchbacks. This was my first year to use wafer board.

The haunt was packed with actors. The space may have been small but we had eight scenes, four to a side, three to four actors per scene and several scare points in the switch backs between scenes. The down side is that it took about eight or nine minutes to make it through, but we only charged \$3, so our customers were pleased. The fog machine and strobe lighting everywhere added to the show. The students were intense. Farmer's Branch Fire Department paid a visit-opening day, looked for fire extinguishers and flashlights. They announced that next year we would have to notify them in advance and request an inspection before we opened.

However, a season cannot go by without some lesson. October 31st was on Friday night. We had a line before opening. We also had something else. At our front door was a TV news reporter, and at the entrance to the haunt (back in the alley) was a religious cult, wearing robes, carrying large wooden crosses, singing and chanting. It seems that we were all going to 'Hell.' Halloween night is also the night for the students Halloween Party. The lobby was full of parents and kids ranging in age from 6 to 17. Refreshments were being served and games were being played.

The camera crew was in back and the reporter entered the lobby asking questions. We opened on time, our customers thought it was part of the show and I let the students answer the reporters' questions. Our cult left right after the camera entered the lobby and our kids looked great on TV for the Ten PM. News. I missed the story. The tape machine failed to record a useable picture and the phone rang off the wall... asking how to get to our haunt. We were opened till 2am, which is not normal for us.

I never knew who the cult was, some people accused us of orchestrating the event and the cult left a mess in the alley, their signs, crosses and other trash. Bottom line is

that the event did not hurt us, as was intended, but we made more money that night than all other nights combined. We lucked out. The cult picked on a kid acting school and it backfired. The greatest stroke of luck was that none of the staff appeared on camera. A seven-year-old girl explaining Halloween and how fun it was to scare big people was very diffusing.

It could have easily gone against us. Had the cult been more organized and had a game plan besides marching around chanting, we could have been toasted. The reporter decided to play the cute side of the event instead of going along with the cult. She interviewed several students and parents, but only the seven year old made it on camera and the whole story ran at the end of the newscast as a ninety second filler. Our student had more time on camera than the cult and they showed our best scene of the haunt.

The cult was so serious that they became comical. Customers in line decided that they were our actors and joined in the fun. This intensified the cults chant, which in turn intensified the customers' reactions. The cult was so humiliated that they could not wait to get out of Dodge (so to speak). I have no idea what it is that I am saying or what the point is (if any), except to say that the haunt business is a lightning rod. I did not realize that this was a prelude of stranger things to come.

Great Discovery, *SCREWS*, 1987

Back in the 50s I built my first tree house. I built a clubhouse, train layouts, Christmas tree forts and sets for school productions. My friend was the hammer and his close associate the nail. I loved nails. I could build almost anything with them and various sizes and shapes of lumber. Summer of '87 I began to build yet another set. It was our sitcom stage. It had a kitchen, front door, living room and the obligatory staircase to nowhere. I had completed the staircase and landing when it was decided to add more space. The new studio was over 1,500 sq. ft. So like a good little trooper I began to disassemble the set to move it. I wanted things to stay together, so I used large nails. Removing them proved to be a challenge. One particular nail was very stubborn. I was on the steps, had a lever under it; it would not move... then it flew out of the hole. I mean it took wings, sailed into the upper atmosphere and went into orbit. I (the launcher) was going the other way. I fell about two feet... and shattered my left arm. Note I did not say break.

I was alone at the studio. I lay on the floor for a couple of minutes trying to figure out why I was in such pain. It became obvious every time I tried to move my left arm, but the pain was coming from my entire arm. I could not stand, so I crawled to the soda machine and purchased a Coke. I sat on the floor before the Coke Machine Idol and sucked down the pop. This gave me enough energy to make it to my car and then the hospital. Exciting stuff, eh? Well, there is a moral to the story.

I had experimented with screws off and on, what I did not like was the cord on the screw gun. I really did not like any screw gun that I purchased. I had to continue to work and it was proving difficult with one arm strapped to my body. Then by accident I discovered The Makita 9vdc cordless drill. I now own several. The sitcom stage was a combination of nails and screws as I slowly and painfully made the transition from the love of my life (nails) to screws. What I have learned is that I was a fool. True screws

cost more and may take a little more time to set in place, but I could build anything now. I did not have to build walls on the floor and tilt them. I could build them in place because I no longer needed a firm surface against which to pound.

The real beauty of screws is flexibility. The entire haunt was assembled with screws. We changed it twice after we opened and once at the request of the fire department. The inspector had a concern, I agreed and while he stood there and watched I went zip, zip and zip. It was done. He was appreciative, as he did not have to come out again, and I was amazed. I have used screws exclusively since then. Except for hidden nails that hold wire mesh in place for cement or plaster.

The 4x8' wall panel goes together quickly. Not as quick as a nail gun, but the wondrous thing is that that same panel comes apart again to become something else as quickly as I screwed it together. I have over 400 panels. Most of them were built in 1990. Some of them have gone on to their final resting place, but most have remained. They are easy to repair, convert and modify. There were no nails working their way out to attack customers or to fight with me when storing the panels. And when a screw does get loose in its hole, you have two choices. Replace it with a longer screw or move it a little one-way or the other.

Other than the discovery of screws our year was rather uneventful. Another version of the central corridor made its debut. We used nearly all-available space and had fun building the haunt. This was the first year for major help during construction from students and parents. The arrival of the screw would make a greater impact next year, as I would simply go crazy.

Bridge of Doom, 1988

The haunt included both classrooms. The largest was the sitcom studio and it contained the first planned central corridor. The last two years the central corridor happened as a result of other developments. This year the haunt was planned around the central corridor. The transition was made easier with the use of screws. I had yet to find three-inch screws, so the 2x4s were nailed, but the wafer board was screwed to the frames to form single sided panels.

The 900 sq. ft. classroom contained my first bridge type effect. The trap door bridge was 16' long and 4' wide. Its ascent and descent ramps were 8' long. The bridge was 3' off the ground with a trap door centered in front of the descent ramp. The door was hinged facing the open side towards the customer, had a creature attached to its underneath and was chained to keep it from flopping open more than 30 degrees while being operated.

The bridge was enclosed in white fire proof plastic, had a protected entrance and exit. Fog filled the enclosure. The creature had Red LEDs for eyes. As the customer approached the trap door it would pop up, the creature would bounce around and they could see its glowing eyes. A slow pulsing strobe was set at 90 degrees to the bridge and illuminated one side from the outside. The entire fog filled bridge would glow briefly. Walking through the enclosed bridge was a terror filled treat. The fog limited vision, the strobe would blind you, a sound track of rushing water filled your ears and a trap door

rattled ahead with something horrible trying to get out, who could ask for anything more?

This was my first and last trap door. It failed. I had a 12-year-old girl and her friend operating the effect. I had no idea how strong two little girls could be. One night they broke the chain loose, the trap door flopped up and over and became a hole in the floor. The girls did not know what to do, they could not pull the door back over from below, so they decided to wait for the customer to pass by. The customer fell through the hole, hurt her leg and I had \$145 bill to pay for emergency room x-rays.

I have seen trap doors in other haunts and they solved the problem by placing several very large chains over the trap door(s) as well as a path that did not require the customers to walk over it. We repaired the effect and it did not fail again. Because I was using children someone got hurt. They were not mature enough to do there job correctly. And yes they were told not to let anyone cross over the bridge if the door did not close properly. This was in reference to the creature's limbs getting caught in the door as it closed and was the reason for two people. One to fix the door while the other stopped the customers till it could be fixed.

This incident, and several other minor ones yet to come, planted the seeds for doing away with volunteers. Paid actors brought a different set of problems, but they did improve the safety and quality of the show. Age also became a factor. Maturity and responsibility are attributes necessary for producing a better show. I will never do away with young people. I have a couple of events where a child as young as six can take a six six male to his knees. The big change to come was how to use children and what to expect. And much to my surprise, this information would apply to adults as well. Actor placement is a science. You must understand your show, what it is that you expect each scene/event to accomplish and the mentality needed to reach this goal.

My greatest achievement is a core group of actors capable of executing all scenes/events as well as performing security and maintenance duties. From this core it is easier to train new actors. Dedication in an actor is difficult to find. It is the number one attribute to look for. No matter shape, size or sex; dedication is what matters in a haunt. Dedication brings with it two other important attributes. Dedicated actors (no matter the age) tend to be more mature and responsible for their age.

Maze Craze One and Two, 1989

As Lady Luck would have it, we added another location this year. A failing mall became our second location. We were afraid to move our haunt completely to the mall, so we opened two haunts. The school haunt was typical, no bridge, instead we built a large maze with two foot wide passageways. The maze had a four-foot wide exit corridor completely around it and many chicken exits to this corridor. But only one true way in and out. The maze contained three cubicles for actors to pop out. The advantage to two locations was that we could refer customers.

The mall location offered many advantages. First was 10,000 sq. ft. of space. It was so large that we could not use it all the first year. It provided us with shop, construction and much needed storage space. This was the first year that we painted all our panels. The color of choice was black (or is that lack of color?). The haunt was

similar to the school haunt, in that the first half had actors and scenes and the second half was a maze. It did not have a central corridor. This would prove to be an error on my part. The choice for lighting was, little to no light. The sound system was your regular stereo speakers and turn up the volume. The new panels were all double sided.

This new location provided several new problems. All previous haunts had been built on carpet. The floor at the mall was concrete. The panels would slip and slide as customers bounced off the walls. We had to constantly walk the passage and realign the walls. The ceiling was white and made light control difficult, the solution was less light. This was bad for several reasons. Without areas of brightness, the dark areas were less effective. The sound was very uneven and because of the volume not much more than noise. Which was OK except for the fact that as you walked the path the sound would go from soft to deafeningly loud. It would be a couple of years before I solved this problem.

The year would be known as a learning experience. The facade on the mall exterior was black and white. The mall haunt was black and white (with droplets of red). We operated the mall haunt for the month of October, but the school haunt operated Friday and Saturdays only, except for the last weekend, then we were opened through Tuesday night, Halloween. The school haunt made as much money with its limited run as the mall haunt. The addition of the new haunt stretched our resources to the breaking point and created more stress than it was worth. The school haunt used all volunteers and the mall haunt had the first few paid actors.

No central corridor in the mall haunt made life miserable for us all. It was difficult to move from scene to scene. We could not easily leap frog ahead of customers on slow nights when we had few actors and we could not monitor what the customers were doing. Several couples managed to slip out of the haunt area into the empty space and find happy hiding places. This is one of the reasons a guy brings a gal to a haunt, get her all worked up, frightened, then comfort her (LOL).

'89 found new uses for haunt materials. The mall location became "Winter Wonderland" for Christmas. The panels were arranged to form walkways (they were covered with red and green convention taffeta), wafer board was painted to resemble cobblestone for the path, 100 illuminated Christmas trees were arranged along the path, white cotton bunting filled in the space between the walls and the cobblestone path to complete the illusion. The entrance was a magical ride in Santa's sleigh, which brought you to the Winter Wonderland trail. Customers would follow the trail to the first of three stages. The guide would ask the customers to be seated. Students would perform a comical seasonal production. When the performance was completed the customers would move on to the next stage and finally the exit. School literature was handed out along with mistletoe.

Winter Wonderland was not a financial success, but it was a school success. Out of this event a permanent theater was built in the mall and regular shows produced on Saturday and Sunday. This gave the students training in front of live audiences. The seasonal nature of the haunt business limits our income. Yes there are exceptions, but as a rule we make money one month out of the year. Finding alternative sources of income for our investment will help us all make a little more money.

First Parking Lot Haunt, 1990

It was decided to move both haunts to the mall. The haunt inside would mirror the classic school haunt and be opened weekends only. Customers entered a replica of the bridge of the Starship Enterprise (Next Generation). It was a display, no scares here. The customers would pass through the operating turbo lift doors into the Tardis (from Doctor Who). A lightening display hung overhead and the theme music prepared them for being transported through time and space to the living room from Hell and the first series of scares. On the couch was the dysfunctional family, the distraction. Flying through the air came one of their children and as you tried to escape another child came at you from the fireplace. The path was a twisting one.

The dark path began to glow red, a large blood red shower, running water, shadow of girl being hacked to death and her parting the curtain. She would lean out, pleading for help. She was the distraction, another hacker was positioned on a platform above the shower, and he was already leaning out over the customers, waiting for his cue. No one ever bothered to look up, till it was too late. The girl in the shower was wearing a nude body suit, the blood painted on and soap bubbles strategically located. The customers looked at her, the shadow of hacking and were totally destroyed by the scare from above.

Pace came into play here. After the shower, things slowed down. The wedding scene was mild and the passage scares almost comical. This all lead up to the dentist. This scene was played for laughs; the scare came from the opposite direction of the dentist. Our seven-foot creation slipped up behind the customers as they enjoyed the dental antics. The scare was nothing more than a startle, OOPS, something big is behind us, they would scream and run or was it run and scream. It was difficult to tell.

They were not able to run far. The path led directly into a room of massive fallen beams. No clear path, strobe lights and many blind spots for actors to pop out of, which they did. Once the customers exited, they found themselves in the largest haunt room I ever constructed. One scene, 1,000 square feet, 50 white trees in a landscape of white snow covered earth. A cobble stone path wound through the eerie strobe light landscape. A wooden fence outlined the path, which split in two at a fenced enclosure. Screams came from the fenced area. Customers could go to the right or left, but something very large seemed to be before them. It was a giant spider. More than eight feet in length, it would rise seven feet above the ground, its ten-foot long legs bowing beneath it. Suddenly it would drop back down onto the girl it was tearing apart. Customers would pause, the exit was clearly visible, they would chose a path to the left (or right, it made no difference) once the choice was made the spider would raise and lean over the path. Some would back up and take the other path; the spider would lean over it, too. Eventually, they would escape.

The indoor haunt was built around a central actor break room. Emergency customer exits emptied into this room and it had two exits to the outside. It allowed our actors to move from scene to scene and was a learning experience for central corridor development.

The outdoor haunt was larger, more than 6,000 square feet. It was one big black blob with some white trim. The press loved the indoor haunt and stated that the outdoor one was a waste of money. This haunt had two central corridors, as I had not figured out how to have only one central corridor. It was nothing more than a twisting path in

darkness. Scene illumination was at a minimum because we were operating from a generator.

The building and fire department inspected both haunts. They had a one-page handout that I received when I applied for my temporary CO. I have not a clue as to what they were doing, looking for or expecting. The handout was common sense to me (at this stage in my development as a haunter). My personal observation was that they were on an information gathering expedition. We passed both inspections. The indoor haunt made more money, got better reviews and was more fun. The outdoor haunt had more customers exiting early. My conclusion was that more detail was needed. Customers appreciated set design and props. Several customers revisited the indoor haunt; to the best of my knowledge no customer visited the outdoor haunt twice.

Yo! Can You Swim?, 1991

This year was memorable for many reasons, none of them good. I was talked into using a tent (something I will never do again). This 40x100 foot fabric disaster was a nightmare from the time it went up. I ordered a tent with eight-foot sides (my haunt panels were 4x8) and they put it up with seven-foot sides (standard tent configuration). So here I am raising the tent sides with my panels and creating another problem. When it rains the tent collects water. The interior tent poles are not in the customer path, but the outside perimeter ropes make emergency exiting a challenge. Are we having fun yet?

This year I was in collaboration with another person. He provided the haunt design (no central corridor), location, prop suppliers and we shared advertising for both haunts. Another mistake I will never make.

The location was an old amusement park parking lot. The city had some concerns about the fact that I was in the 100-year flood plane. Other than that it went smooth with the city. The fire inspection lasted less than five minutes and I would have missed it all together had I not noticed their car leaving. My helper let them in and then they were gone. The other person used the same basic location the year before and he gave me volunteer contacts. Another mistake I will never make, using someone else's volunteers.

This is going well. I have not even opened and I have learned so much. Oh, well, the props are delivered opening night after we have opened (a little late). The volunteers are less than reliable, but the customers come. The show is not its best, but Saturday night most of the props are in place and the show is getting better.

The show is making money and we are all set for Halloween week. Then comes the 100-year flood. It rains and rains and the haunt is under four feet of water the four days before Halloween. We are closed Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday morning I arrive (I inspected the site midnight Wednesday and the water had gone up!) and all the water is gone. I sit in my car for a moment trying to figure out where it all went, then I begin not to care... a few moments go by and I realize that if I get my tail in gear I can open tonight.

So much for good news. Everyone has written the haunt off. I can find no one to help. Then I remember a news story about the homeless. I drive to downtown *** to the area of the report under a bridge and hire twelve homeless people. I drive straight to a food place and feed them all. These folks worked their tails off. Cleaned the haunt,

which was full of mud and other debris, and we opened on time.

Now all during the day the weather is great, an hour before opening a blizzard arrives, driving rain, sleet and hail. It is so cold that wet things inside are cracking. After all of this we still did a little more than 1,000 people. My actors were the homeless people. They did an excellent job and I have since used other homeless people as actors with great success.

This haunt was the first time that I used the 70-volt sound system. It was great. I installed battery back up emergency lighting and created the final event (last scare in the haunt) that I still use in my current haunt. I built electronic effects, a cross fader, simple fader and audio effects generator. Loop audiotapes were used for the first time and I began to have reservations about masks for actors.

The flood damage did not come to full light until the haunt was taken down. Many items had to be thrown away. Some items were washed away. The port-a-pot floated about a block away. The month contained one more exciting event. The police chased a car into our parking lot. The occupant jumped out and disappeared. They shut us down for about twenty minutes, till they caught the guy. We had more police cars, ambulances and fire trucks than I could count. One saving grace is that we had a police officer for security. With him on our side the transition from haunt to search area to haunt went smoothly. What we go through for the sake of our craft.

Mutual Beneficial Affiliation, 1992

Last year is still in my memory, engraved. Another problem '92 had been that the haunt was too far from the school for volunteer support. I approached an amusement facility. They had go-carts, two arcades, paddleboats and more. They were very interested, but could not say yes or no because they were in the middle of a management change. About this time an indoor go cart track opened a mile from the school. They welcomed us and saw an opportunity for joint promotion. The city threw us a new curve with a parking restriction, which we blew out of the park with permission for parking from our neighbors.

This haunt was a new design. No tent, a central corridor that ran from one end of the haunt to the other and outdoor elements mixed with the indoor ones. I developed my core group of actors from this haunt season and began to experiment with room designs, effects and scare concepts. The first week was devoted to trying this, then that and then rearranging entire scenes, walls and all. It was fun this year, we had a blast.

The first event was a walk through ghost. The customers walked through an air-powered fog that a live image was projected onto. Customers entered the room and were held in a jail cell. On the other side of the bars was the ghost. She would talk briefly and then reach out opening the jail door; the customers would exit the cell walking through her image. It was a great effect, except that Castle Dragon (the Haunt was named this year) was portable and air currents ran through it like water through a sieve. After its success on opening weekend I had to remove it, because the air currents competed with the closed air system and destroyed the illusion.

It was replaced with a 20Kcps tone generator. Customers entered the darkened

cell, were left in the dark for a brief moment, the sound was activated and nearly every group had at least one person react to the unheard sound. The cell door would open and the sound was discontinued. This effect remained for the season. It was briefly visited by its sister effect the 100 watt 20cps tone generator. This caused some extreme reactions. One person got sick and threw up, others would not travel down the hall and still another looked to faint. This experiment lasted about an hour one evening and has not been repeated.

The wall made its debut this year. It was one of those brainstormers that created problems a plenty. Customers would enter a room with a platform. On the wall behind the platform was a sign that said "Creature on Break". As soon as a customer reacted to the sign the wall the sign was on would spin around and reveal the monster. The original platform was square. Customers went out of their way to stumble over it. White posts added to the front stopped this and in latter years I cut the platform into a half circle and removed the posts. It remains to this day as one of the best effects I ever designed.

Edgar Allen Poes' story of the Pit and the Pendulum inspired my next creation. The pendulum was twelve feet high. It was the first outdoor event. The blade was an eight-foot arc swinging over the body of a lovely young lady. The room contained a rack where additional tortures were being conducted. Customers had to walk between the two events, but the scare came from above.

I had fun the summer before the haunt opened. But I was not able to complete all my creations. One item not installed but nearly completed was the Lava Floor. It contained cracks of Plexi glass looking like red lava illuminated from below. Skull Cavern was only partially installed. I had visited a haunt the year before that had great caves and caverns. The creator told me there was no way to make something like it portable. My portable Skull Cavern has grown each year and even now in its state of disrepair awaits its rebirth for 1999. It was not used in 97 or 98 due to budget constraints.

The raceway and the haunt worked together promoting the event. We created package entertainment deals for customers that wanted to go through the haunt and race. The volunteers from the school kept costs down and the giant quad searchlight brought in the crowd.

Rowdy Guests, 1993

The raceway was attracting rowdy guests. Year two at the same location. The city had a major cow over the parking. I have yet to understand the reasoning behind it. We never caused any crowd problems, traffic difficulties or emergencies. We had more parking than we could eat, but because the parking lot was not part of the property for the permit it could not be included. This technical problem would make this our last year with the raceway. Which was not all bad, because as I mentioned, the crowd they attracted was becoming rowdy.

The lava floor went in this year along with a 90% completed Skull Cavern. A metal roof was added to the castle and two scenes with twelve-foot ceilings. The pendulum was now inside (the actors would be dry this year) and the Lava Floor filled the other twelve-foot ceiling space. An under ground fog system in the cemetery used

fog juice of my own formulation.

A scene that is now a castle staple was created this year. It is known as the guardroom. It was so intense that customers trying to retreat from it hit the exit door hard enough to take it off of its hinges. It is simple. But complex. In a nut shell customers must pass between a little girl in a jail cell and a large man (no mask) sitting at a table. The reality is that the event is much too complex to describe here and may become a topic for another column.

The spider web from last year is moved and improved. It is lowered to the point of forcing most people to crawl near its end. Its path has changed and many nasty things are caught in its web. Customers have to bump into the objects trapped by the web. They are of many different textures, shapes and sizes. The coffins in the cemetery use an oil based fog system. The air driven device is placed inside the coffin; fog builds up and seeps out of the cracked lid. A red light in the coffin adds color to the fog. The oil foggers cost pennies to operate and the compressed air is used to blast customers and operate other air driven effects.

The fire department requires a smoke detection system this year. It includes horns and strobes at the exits and two fire pulls. The fire department wanted the fire pulls in the customer path. I explained to them that this was not wise, as customers might pull them for fun. I held my ground and eventually got my way. The fire pulls were installed in the central corridor, one at each end. Low-level exit signs that would illuminate if the alarm sounded were required, also.

New exit doors were built for this year. Last year a curious thing happened. The building inspector thought that the doors marked exit were only directional signs and he asked me to pop out the arrows. He did not realize that they were exits because the doors were painted like the walls. This year marked a new design. Exit doors were painted to look like doors. The exit signs were clearer and the low-level exit lights were added.

Another growing concern of the fire department was extension cords. I solved that problem by constructing a low voltage lighting system. The castle no longer had any 110vac inside and we did not have to worry about being fried every time it rained. The central corridor was refined and was proving its value. On the slow nights five actors can run the whole show and the customer has no idea that the same people are scaring him over and over, because we have time to change clothes between scenes. And yes, on these nights we use masks (oh what a terrible admission, help!).

One event stands out for this season. It brings to the forefront ones customer base. On a busy Friday night a customer pulled a gun on one of my actresses. Scared the hell out of her. We cut him off within seconds and sensing that he was trapped he exited and ran like a bat out of hell. Our security is good, but there was no way we could prevent a customer from doing something stupid. We responded incredibly fast. The girl was rattled, but because we were there by her side in seconds she settled down and finished the season. The incident played out like this. The girl spins the wall around and tries to scare the customer. The customer pulls his gun and approaches the girl who is on a raised platform. She yells (not the haunted house type of yell) and has another actor by her side before her mouth closes. The customer backs up and looks around. Emergency lighting comes on; all sound and effects stop while the customer is still in the room where the event began. Security is blocking his progress forward and a police officer can be heard talking on the radio and asking for back up (love those police radios, don't care

how much they cost per hour, one officer is worth twenty security guards). The customer turns around the way he came and takes the first exit. My staff, because of the gun, does not pursue him but he runs like we are hot on his trail.

Fall Festival, 1994

I had a friend in tight with a city government. His club was one of the groups that rented the castle for a dinner party. They all had a grand time and he had an idea. Produce a joint production between the city parks and recreation department (which used to produce a Halloween haunt and hay ride till their own fire department made it too expensive for them to continue) and the school. We were looking for a home and a better crowd, a match made in heaven (ha!).

This would be my first Fall Festival Production. I convinced over 100 vendors to rent space, a carnival to set up rides and provided continuous entertainment on Halloween weekend. The event was a success in that it lost no money. We would have made money if not for the \$8,000 fire sprinkler system we had to install. It should have cost us about \$4,500, but the fire chief changed his mind on what he wanted installed. I now own a sprinkler valve system for a ten-story building. This could be funny, if not for the fact that the system he designed was not adequate and I had to modify it. He wanted a bell on the valve. If a sprinkler head were activated, the water traveling through the pipe would mechanically ring the bell. This was great, except who could here the bell? As I suspected, the bell could not be heard over the screams and sounds of the haunt. I added a pressure switch, which was directly connected to the fire alarm system. This covered me if a sprinkler head went off and if something happened to the systems water pressure.

Castle Dragon has changed very little. Experiments continue during the first week of operation. Most of them are failures and are removed. We added a hayride and it did very well. It was designed for family entertainment and not too scary. It became very important as early in the season before the Fall Festival I discovered that the drainage in the park where we had set up was not very good and the park flooded. It did not flood where the castle was, but the road to the castle flooded. We used the hayride wagons to bring customers to the Castle and the hayride.

Political affiliations with public officials are, at best, fickle. I will have to relate the story in a blind way to protect the guilty. Income from the hayride and the castle went to three charities, the acting school and two service organizations. One provided actors for the hayride and the other actors for the haunt. Members of these organizations were prominent citizens in city government, like the mayor. These people became, er, difficult. And they were prone to pitching unique fits. An example: the castle was open and customers were making their way through it. The cemetery fog machine ran out of fog juice, the ranking volunteer came screaming down the central corridor that he could not work under these conditions, without the fog. He was very vocal and not alone. I could present more examples, but suffice it to say, volunteers (these were adults) bring with them a unique set of problems.

The weekend before Halloween I was witness to a potential crime. The reality is that we will never know the what and/or the why. This was the weekend that customers

were riding wagons to get to the haunt. Three teenage boys entered the haunt. One was celebrating his sixteenth birthday with his older brother and a friend. The birthday boy was to have his day celebrated by being bashed into walls, doors and props by his brother and friend. Security was tailing them by the second scene, but several guests were between security and the three boys. It seemed all in fun, but security followed the boys out of the castle. Once outside the birthday boy passed out. Because the guests were being ferried back and forth via wagons, all the guests in the group were trapped waiting for the next wagon. As the incident developed it appeared (at first) that the boys were claiming that he was injured inside. Again my hat is off to the police. My officer called for back up. In a matter of minutes flashing lights and sirens enveloped the haunt. The sirens ceased, but the flashing lights continued for over thirty minutes. The officer was busy. He was taking statements from all the customers that witnessed the boy's antics. The family of the boy *happened* to be on site, and they were delivered by wagon ASAP. At first it seemed that they were about to claim injury via the haunt. This was shot down by the officer. They were surprised (?) to learn that their son was injured by his brother and friend. They became very quiet when the officer mentioned witnesses, not haunt employees. The boy regained some awareness before he was transported to the hospital.

I am sure that had I not had a police officer as security that we would have been sued. I did not think to interview customers, I was too busy controlling the crowd and arranging for transportation. The radio police officers carry proved to be valuable and save time. Yes, we had a cell phone and two-way radios for communication. But, when a police officer makes a call on his radio, the reaction time is quicker. A potential disaster was avoided because we were in control and there was a police presence before and during the incident.

Another fun thing happened this year. For those of you that have purchased my books, this will help you to rest a little easier about my designs. Hail and a twister preceded the storm that flooded the park. It ran along the power lines about two hundred feet from the castle and took out several transformers. I was in the castle during the storm. The castle came through without much more than a few hail dents. What makes this funny is that as soon as the storm passed the cities building department truck (one of those four door diesels) pulled up to the castle. There were six employees inside. They rolled down the window and looked at me and the castle with disbelief. Money exchanged hands and they drove off. I recognized one of them as being the one giving me grief over the design and telling me that the building was not safe. He, who laughs last, laughs best.

Fall Festival Flop, 1995

As usual, I screwed up. The '94 fall festival production went off so smoothly that the city decided they could run it. Little did I know? Anyway, I proceeded under the

assumption (we all know what the word assume means) that they produce an event at least equal to my own.

On this I based my plans. I built a brand new haunt for little kids, expanded the castle and purchased \$8k in props. Part of the castle improvement was a new grand entry and pier and beam floor. Castle Dragon was closer to its finished form. The fire department that cause me so much grief the year before barely looked at the castle and did not bother to test the fire alarm or sprinkler systems. The building department, however, produced a parade through the castle.

Unknown to me something else was happening. Powers at be within the city had decided that haunts were bad. These are the same people that produced an annual event for ten years. The staff necessary to produce the fall festival was never assigned. The event was not produced. The driving force behind my demise was the Soccer Association. It seems that they decided that they did not want to share the use of the facility with a haunt. This park was huge. The entire soccer facility was in the rear of the park. Had its own parking and could not be seen from the front of the park, where I was. One week before October I was informed that the city was canceling the event. Even with this four vendors and the carnival showed up. The city did all in its power to make my life miserable. No Parking signs were erected everywhere. Orange temporary fencing surrounded the haunt and the parking lot. And they locked the park gates at 10pm.

They went through a stack of locks. It seems that they kept disappearing. But not even that helped. The season was a disaster. The haunt for kids had one paying customer. The castle itself made less than it made the year before. But on the bright side I had many cool props, ahhhh!

The Pumpkin Patch Kidz (kids haunt) was great. The building had a 24' wide by 24' tall pumpkin for its front. Once inside you watched a special effects video, had monster make up demo and met the Pumpkin Patch Kidz. They were kids with pumpkins for heads in Halloween costumes. Admission included a photo with your choice of Kidz. We had only one paying customer, but we had many birthday parties. Over all it was a success. Considering that the event was canceled.

The carnival operator was not a happy camper. No one had told him anything. He arrived, set up and opened before he realized that something was wrong. He pulled out early and sent his big rides to other events.

No season goes by with out some fun little thing happening. Because of the haunts exposed position to the public, I spent the nights inside its haunted confines. I notified the police that I was doing this, but... Sunday night someone knocking on the front door of the castle awakened me. I looked up and saw flashing red lights everywhere. The castle appeared to be surrounded. I got up, dressed and opened the front door. OK, I never said I was bright, basically kinda dim, for the most part. Anyway, spotlights converged on my location as well as long pointy things. I was told to get on my knees, put my hands on my head and lace my fingers. I hesitated and began to speak, but I'm not that dumb, and did as I was told. In the distance I heard a voice shout, "He's the wrong color". It seems that they were chasing someone and they thought he was hiding in or under the castle. They apologized and I wobbled back into the castle, where I tried to sleep. Of all the things that went wrong in '95 I could not imagine things getting worse, gee, all I had to do was wait till '96.

Majestic Ranch, 1996

This was the best deal yet, a horse ranch of about 60 acres. The castle was situated deep within and held a commanding view from its hill. Castle Dragon has reached its final form. The raised steel roof was sloped for drainage. The sprinkler system hung from it, instead of being positioned on the walls. The ranch would set up the hayride and I would direct the actors. A good advertising budget was split between radio and newspaper. The guy seemed sharp, we agreed on what to do and we did it. And if you believe that that is the way it went down...

The fire department arrives for its inspection and discovers that they made a mistake. The fire hydrant is too far away and they will not let me open. I said, "Excuse me, you guys approved these plans". They said sorry. Well, I had spent a small fortune on installing a fire alarm and sprinkler system, only to be forced to remove the roof of the haunt so that I could open. It seems that there was some confusion as how to classify the haunt once I removed the roof. By the time they make a decision, October was over and I was gone. Removing the roof got me open, but I had no working safety systems in place, other than fire extinguishers.

The advertising did not seem to be working. Then I discovered that we were on a country station, too late. I walked up to the main entry area and noticed a DJ set up with a station van. We were doing a radio remote and not one person was responding.

But my problems were only beginning. The ranch folks did not like the way the hayride was set up. They took over, added real guns firing blanks and dangerous horse stunts in the dark. They became careless in the loading - unloading procedure. A horse drawn wagon rolled over a log, displacing the driver and the wagon rolled over him. There were more than 1,000 people on site at the time. We gave out refunds to more than 900. During the incident no new customers that arrived stayed to purchase tickets. Not till all the customers on site during the accident were gone did we begin to make money again. Our business was zero on the Saturday before Halloween for an hour and a half.

The ranch tried to make off with all the money. Although I made not a dime, all the actors were paid. The ranch did manage to make a little extra; they stole my steel roof.

The wall was especially effective this year. The guy that did it the year before was back and he wanted to do nothing but the wall. He was awesome. He was too awesome. One Thursday night he comes to me and says that he has a problem. I walk back with him and he shows me that a particular wall will not stay attached to the floor. I examine the wall and discover that the floor is more like a trampoline, it moves up and down. I close the castle, crawl under the deck and see one floor joist broken completely in two and another split nearly the same. I repaired the damage. My actor tells me that a group of four teenagers fell hard to the floor above the spot of the break. I had heard everything. Customers were now going through my floor.

The castle had another visit by a twister; this is Texas. Castle Dragon was built on the site during spring. After it was completed a major storm system crossed its path. Ranch hands witnessed the event. But the damage told the story. The castle was positioned among trees. The southern end of the castle had trees all around it. The

twister hit the southwest end of the castle, picked up the building and set it back down. The large trees on either side of this path were ripped to shreds. These trees were huge, 30-40 feet in height. I know the building was lifted because several of the legs holding the deck up fell off. It seems that I forgot to screw them to the frame, OOPS. The back wall for a distance of 40 feet was pushed in two to three feet.

It took about one hour to reposition the back wall and secure it. Another twenty minutes to jack the deck and replace the legs. The greatest amount of time was spent on cutting the broken limbs and moving them from the exits that they blocked. The twister moved on, picking up an old car and flipping it around. One branch took out the phone cable, but that was a minor repair. I am exhausted and ready to quit the haunt biz.

Hawkwood, 1997

Actually there was a bright side to 1996. A friend told me of a new renaissance faire, Hawkwood. It was early July and I visited their site. They were not ready, but I saw tremendous potential. I had been trying to hook up with a medieval seasonal type operation for some time. My castle would fit nicely into a renfaire setting. At this same time I was noticing little things with my Majestic ranch guy that began to bother me. I seriously considered moving the castle for the '96 season, but the faire owners could not make a decision in time.

After the '96 season was over I contacted Hawkwood again. Could not get anyone to respond. Well, I was at the bottom of my barrel and scraping the bottom to dig deeper. My personal life was a mess (divorce) and the haunt biz was looking none to good. I decided to sell Castle Dragon and look for a less painful career, er, hobby. October '96 through March '97 Castle Dragon was on the market. I talked with many potential buyers and was positioning for a sale when...

I got this email. It was from the *NEW* General Manager of Hawkwood. It seems that they were in a form of management turmoil. He never heard of the deal, with earlier management, to move Castle Dragon to Hawkwood. He accidentally received an email from my bulk mail server and responded. With in a few days we had a deal and Castle Dragon had a new home, a permanent location. My potential buyer snoozed and lost the deal. He really thought I was trying to jack up the price, because he was trying to get the price down by playing me. Oh well, the castle was a heck of a deal at \$100k.

The Hawkwood location was perfect. The 4,000 sq. ft. part of the building was to be in the parking lot. Only the Grand Entry portion would be in the forest. Of course I was broke, actually I was beyond broke, should have sold, but I think I have pointed out that I am not very good at business. And in reality had the bozo with the bucks ever ponied up the dough I would have sold it to him and built a new castle. With barely enough money to keep gas in my truck (it gets 7 miles to the gallon) I take my ball of string and lay the lines for the castles foundation.

Anything I can do that costs no money I do first. A few small trees and brush must be cleared, markers placed for postholes and the path in the forest connecting me to the faire grounds cleared. As soon as I get a few bucks I rent a posthole machine and

sink 75 holes in one day. I cut scarp wood into posts and treat it with sealer. Whenever I find a buck in my pocket I purchase another bag of concrete mix and set another post. The construction process is painfully slow. Not because I am not busy, I am working 12 hour days on the site, but because it is only me. I am taking the castle down and putting it back up at the same time. Hawkwoods season is August through September and I am beginning to think that I will not make it.

In my haste I break one of my Lava floor panels. It will take several hours to repair it, so I decide not to install the Lava floor. Skull Cavern was to have a five-year life and it did. As if on cue it disintegrated while being moved, something else not to be part of the new location till 1999. I did not have the materials to complete the new floor plan. Because this was to be permanent location, I made many structural changes. The castle was still portable and could be easily removed, but it now had more structural members and a sturdier design. The writing was on the wall, it was in red and the blood was mine. I would not complete the castle in time for Hawkwood and I may not complete it in time for Halloween. The task I have chosen is suicidal. Then a miracle...

Out of nowhere I get an email from the local chapter of NERO (a live action role playing group LARP). They are willing to provide volunteers to help with construction in exchange for game time in the castle. Duh, this is a no brainer. They helped with the last of the posts and stayed with me till...

Out of the Mouths of Babes, 1997

Nearly every weekend NERO had volunteers baking in the sun. Well, actually I started work each morning around 5am and stopped by 2pm. I would then move into the forest and work on other projects till my body screamed. The deck came together rapidly. I could not complete the deck, but I had a plan. Once the deck reached the end of materials I began to erect the walls. Weather added to my problems. An incredible storm swept twenty temporarily braced walls from the deck. It took one day to repair the damage and another day to catch up.

The 4x12' panels were neatly stacked on the ground on top of scrap lumber to keep them off the ground. As I removed the next to last panel I heard a unique sound under the last panel. When I lifted the last panel and eight foot rat snake and I locked eyes. I gasped and dropped the panel, the snake did the quickest 180 I have ever seen and disappeared under the castle. I placed the last 4x12' on the deck and took a break.

The castle had 75% of its perimeter in place (no floor for the remainder). I began central corridor construction and completed the Grand Entry. My original idea for Hawkwood was to provide a walk through dungeon. Faire vendors were on site preparing their shops. Two little girls were playing in the forest and asked my permission to look around. I being the kind hearted fool that I am, said yes. While they were playing one of them said to the other "...this would make a cool labyrinth". Now there is an idea.

The castle was perfect for constructing a Labyrinth. I had many secret doors, panels and traps for my actors to use. It was somewhere during this time frame that I realized I was missing two thirds of my metal roof (\$1,200 I did not have). The good folks at Majestic Ranch helped themselves. Two weeks before opening I hired four

workers to pour concrete for the fountain and walkways. This completed the area leading to Castle Dragons' Grand Entry. From the forest approach the castle looked complete, from the parking lot it looked like hell. Strange thing about customers, they thought it was two different buildings.

The central corridor reached 60% of the distance of the castle, the Labyrinth was near complete, roof rafters were positioned to receive what roof I did have and the roof was on the Grand Entry. The faire was laying the underground power lines and my electrical boxes were in place. I began installing the forest walk low voltage lighting system and built the archway entrance to the forest walk that led to Castle Dragon.

In order to raise money to complete the castle I sold the storage trailer that has been my lifesaver. I picked up the materials to complete the deck, central corridor and roof rafters. The castle would only have one third of its roof for Hawkwood.

It was the Friday before opening for Hawkwood. I see the light at the end of the tunnel and it is not the train. I will have one half of the castle opened as a labyrinth, the deck will be completed and the entire perimeter wall will be in place. OK, so I made a mistake, what's new? I was using a box knife to clean a tool. Like a good cub scout I was cutting away from my self. Now here is something new. My left hand slipped off of the object and attacked the backside of the box knife, my arm lost. I sliced a six-inch long gash deep into my arm. How deep? I saw my bone! I jumped up, stood for a moment, planted my left foot as if nailed and did several circles (no lie, just like Curly). I was looking for something but I could not figure out what, then it dawned on me that I needed to protect my arm. I grabbed my clean after work T-shirt and wrapped the wound. Wandered up to the office, they called for an ambulance, which arrived as I was passing out.

The hospital staff was great. I was chattering like a magpie (one of those things you do when things look real bad). The emergency room doctor was a lady and she had several of her interns on hand. My arm became show and tell. The bright side to this is that she had deadened the arm and I had turned my head away. I did hear the wonderfully detailed description of my arms anatomy as she invited the interns to look deep into *MY* flesh (where are ear plugs when you really need them?).

Not all the red on the deck is paint.

Open and Busted, 1997

I am back from the hospital. More or less. My left arm is in a sling tied tight to my body. I am told to do nothing for two weeks. Oh well, I do take Saturday off. I putter around and work on my to do list. Sunday I pick up steam and Monday I am rockin'. I complete the perimeter and begin to extend the central corridor. Tuesday a freak storm takes down the perimeter I have put up. I get half of it back up and leave the rest. The castle is not ready to open. I work at a break neck pace and open Saturday, three hours after the park opens. The NERO volunteers arrive Sunday and the castle perimeter is in place to stay.

It is here that I create my persona as The Mad Hatter. I trade one of my books for my large red and white polka doted hat and become the character I am destined to be (or already am). The hat, a pair of wrap pants and my dragon shirt makes me difficult to

miss. I bark at the entrance to my castle, enticing patrons to challenge the labyrinth. Each week I change the degree of difficulty, create new panels and unique ways for them to move. I provide a clue to those willing to listen. And as it turns out, the clue points the way out. Some customers, in their desperation to escape, scale the walls. Others give up and exit the way they entered. The labyrinth confounds over half of the customers. Those that do not give up ask for more clues and some are able to crawl into my mind (scary thought) and solve the mystery.

My customers love the Labyrinth and I think that I am really on to something. I make enough money to cover expenses, pay rent and purchase materials to complete the castle in time to be opened for Halloween the last two weeks of October.

The first task was to complete the roof. This done the castle interior was completed. Speakers, effects, lighting and props had to be installed before opening. Another deadline I missed. The castle was not ready opening weekend, but it did open. Arriving customers saw fog oozing out of the cracks in the walls of the castle, after purchasing tickets they entered the grounds and walked three hundred feet through an eerily illuminated forest to the Grand Entry of Castle Dragon. The first week I had a small cast of actors. We kept the customers guessing with quick changes. The second week the cast increased, business picked up and Halloween night the line was four hundred feet long.

Castle Dragon was missing Skull Cavern (a mini version was installed) and the Lava Pit (floor panels illuminated from below). New elements were added, but they were weak in presentation due to lack of time, help and money. The hall of knives was to be a backlight scene. Customers walked down a 16' hallway with various sharp objects on the wall illuminated with backlight. An actor (in a black set of clothes with hood) on each side would hold one or two knives against the wall. As the customers moved through the scene the knives would seem to float towards the customers. Sounds great, no money for the backlight tubes. The storeroom was a series of crates the customers had to walk through. Air rams would rattle, move or pop the crates tops. Not enough time to install the air rams.

The scenes were modified in unique ways. The hall of knives became the suddenly appear scene. The actor in black would turn around holding a glow in the dark head. The crates grew legs and walked at the customers. This got laughs and caused some major scares.

My ad budget for 1997 was \$41. The good news is that I paid all my bills, made money and had a good time. I was back in the Halloween Spirit of Scare again. The castle had its good nights and its bad nights (not many of those). Halloween night was my money night. Till then I was not seeing black. The bottom line was that I no longer had to worry about where the castle was going to be or spend money on erecting it each year.

Three Big Mistakes, 1998

Somewhere between sanity and insanity I jumped the tracks and landed in 'la la' land. This is to say that what I attempted to do this year was beyond nuts. For whatever reason, I felt secure and confident. I decided to cater to families on a scale larger than

before. We built carnival games, scheduled dance and acting schools to perform, added food. Poe readings, fun costumed characters, monster make-up and magic. And this was during the day Saturday and Sunday. Saturday night I added a Rocky Horror Review and gross magic. The castle was the main event, but I added a terror walk.

My print advertising focused on the family events. This decision was made because I had no competition. Mistake ONE. Opening week I discover a major competitor fifteen minutes away. They are out spending me in advertising and the cast for their hayride exceeds my entire staff. The sad part is that it was all glitz and no show. The \$15 admission price included two haunts, a maze and the hayride. But the show was terrible. If I am lucky they will not be back for '99.

Mistake TWO. Opening Saturday night a customer openly solicits three teenage girls to work in a "Modeling Studio" (for those claiming to be naïve, this is another name for the prostitution business). He tells them that he works for me. This creates a disaster from which I do not recover. I cancel the Saturday evening entertainment.

Mistake THREE. I am not sure when I woke up, but at some point in time I realize that I had made another mistake. When I originally set the price for admission to the evening events, it was based on a castle only event. I added the terror walk and never changed my admissions price. So, I essentially doubled my overhead and retained the lower ticket price, ahhh!

The first two articles of my series detail more about this year. But they do not mention the falling out with Hawkwood management. They were under the impression that all the daytime customers were paying customers. That the children performing on stage were customers. When I turned in my report, they called me a liar. A cube of dry ice has better relations than I now have with Hawkwood. My relationship is deeper than I have let on, so now I will elaborate.

The first season of Hawkwood I was at Majestic Ranch, yet I found time to shoot a promotional video and give it to Hawkwood for free. While I was building the castle at Hawkwood I also undertook completing construction of one of their stages, even after I cut myself I finished work on their stage before I completed the castle. They were short on cash for some road improvements; I paid for eleven truck loads of tailings (\$495) and told them that I would deduct it from '98 proceeds. They were having problems with a dragon effect for their '98 stunt show. I worked with the staff to repair the effect and when it failed again, I took it upon myself to make the dragon work for each of the shows that weekend. This is the short list of help I have provided. Since my November meeting I have said less than a handful of words to the Hawkwood management. And now the search is on again. This time I am saving up to purchase my own land. Plans call for dual site operation while I install the infrastructure.

Is there a moral? Yes. I have worked with others 'off and on' in the haunt business. If I have learned anything it is that I will not be working with anyone in the future. It appears that the others that I have had relationships with were only interested in short-term gains. Get what you can get out of Corn and move on. The bright side to this is that I am still here and moving forward, that cannot be said for most of the rest.

Hell Hath No Fury Like A Woman Scorned, 1998

Mad Hatter here, and welcome. I will be presenting a new column each week. Topic for the first few articles, The Customer.

Since 1979 I have seen many customers, all shapes, sizes, colors and reactions. To borrow from history "...you can scare all of the customers some of the time, and some of the customers all of the time, but you cannot scare all of the customers all of the time." As a tried and true fall back position my primary goal is to entertain the customer and whenever possible, give 'em a good scare. I would like to say that my efforts have been 100% effective, but alas it isn't so.

What to do? I hate the scene where the customer pitches a fit, demands his money back and rants about what a lousy show we presented. I have played this both ways. Early on I actually gave refunds. To my dismay the customer still badmouthed me all over, up and down the line. Therefore an unhappy customer is something to avoid, because no matter what you do after he is unhappy, you will accomplish nothing positive. And I no longer give refunds.

I have no magic answer on 100% customer satisfaction. In reality I do not believe it is possible. I have, over the years, reduced the number of complaints. As a matter of fact they have declined every year, 1998 we had two serious demands for money back and several people in departing groups that appeared to be disappointed. The true measure of my haunt is in those that take one of the twelve chicken exits before the final exit. 1998 was not my best early exit year, but it did come in number three.

1998 was a year for firsts. I actively promoted a daytime event for small children, and I lost my shirt. Both money back complaints came from daytime customers (families). It seems costumed fun characters, magic shows, free carnival games, make-up demonstrations, ghost stories and... it made no difference how hard I tried... I was paddling up stream in the face of Niagara Falls. True we pleased 99% of the daytime customers, but the two families we did not please stood out beyond belief. One woman continued to call and leave messages into November. The other woman stood around the ticket booth for fifteen minutes (her husband waited in the car) with her children who began to cry. What a scene for newly arrived customers to view, one car pulled up and left. A Roanoke Police car (on routine patrol) pulled up and she left. This family of four paid \$20, they went to every show, toured the castle and stayed for over an hour. From what I was told this family had a good time. Both kids got free monster make-up and bags of candy.

So, why the fit? I have no idea. But from the beginnings of my passage in the haunt biz this had never happened to me before.

This begs the question (of course in hind sight) all things considered, knowing what you now know Mr. Hatter, would you now refund the ladies money? NO, I would not, maybe dig a big hole for her to fall into or arrange a kidnapping by an unfriendly UFO, but no money back. What has happened is that I am now in unfamiliar territory, dealing with different types of customers and I know not what has escaped from Pandora's Box. To say that I understand my customer base is not entirely true, but I thought I had a better Understanding than I apparently did, or do?

Do I have a lesson that I have learned? Not sure. 1999 was supposed to be an expansion of my family theme for Halloween. At the moment those plans have been scraped and the back up plans are slipping into place. I have invested heavily in costumes for little ones, decorations and props. I could build an entire haunt for children,

but... Two major concerns: One, I lost money. Two, the happy ladies. Losing money is normal for me, being the biz wiz that I am, but a parent's rampage is a bit much for me. To see a grown woman, children in hand, making gutter trash look classy is more than I bargained for. The bottom line is that I was not prepared for this, and had no way to deal with it. It began small and slowly escalated out of control and beyond any and all reason.

Customers are income. We must please the majority. My operation is based heavily on word of mouth. These two ladies (early in the season) may have contributed to my poor attendance during the day.

Guilty Till Proven Innocent, 1998

1998 was a year of firsts. During the day I was catering to families with small children. Ahh, but at night it was a different story. 9pm would bring out the new live shows. First a Rocky Horror Musical Review, then a gross magic show to entertain the crowd. We reached for a PG13 rating and may have stepped over a little. Opening weekend, Saturday night, in our open air theater the fun began. To me that evening appeared to go smoothly.

I was not able to watch all the shows, but caught bits and pieces. My job was to circulate from event to event, watch the front gate and provide customer service. I noted the crowd reactions as they left that night. I noticed nothing unusual. No unhappy customers, the normal fun poking by friends of the group member most frightened and the comments about how it was better than last year and how much fun they had. No idea that all hell was about to break loose.

Sunday came and went, then Monday morning arrived, and with it a force five hurricane. I was under investigation for child pornography. I could get no straight answers, till a mom called me. It appears that a man solicited her two daughters and a friend to work in modeling studio, gave them forms and literature and stated that he was one of the sponsors of the event and had my permission.

Lets recap. I was producing a mature show featuring songs glorifying homosexuality, a magic show going where none has gone before and of course I had to be guilty. The Denton County Sheriffs and Lewisville Police Depts. were all after my neck. Unknown to me I had one defender. The local Constable knew better. He defended me and kept them from arresting me. By Tuesday I felt like crawling under a rock, canceled all evening live shows and did my best to discover who was responsible for my situation. Wednesday arrived and I was vindicated, in writing from the police. I felt a little better, happy endings in these things are rare.

The down side is that I invested heavily in the shows. The upside is that it never made the press, whew! I never was allowed to see the documents, nor did I ever discover who was responsible. The problem was resolved.

Or was it? The fact is that this occurred opening weekend, I had the rest of October to worry about whom? And again? None of my cast or crew had any idea as to who it could have been. This could happen to you.

The advantage that I had in this situation was my work with the local officials.

The town of Roanoke Fire, Police, Paramedics and Constable Depts. My contributions and civic participation proved to be more valuable than I had ever imagined. The event was forgotten by all (except me) before Friday opening. My staff and crew never knew how serious it almost became and we cruised the rest of October unscathed.

If, indeed, there is a moral to this story it is...

- 1) If you ever believed things cannot possible get worse, think again.
- 2) Erase any doubt in your minds about how important community relations are.
- 3) And share your horror stories, so that we may all learn and be better prepared.

I have briefly covered some negative highlights of the 1998 season for Castle Dragon. Beginning next week we will travel back in time to 1979, my first commercial/charity haunt. Once there I will proceed forward season by season, not to show you how great I am, no, no... but to reveal to you all the mistakes I have made. It is difficult to learn anything about this business, if all that is ever shared is how great it is. Join me weekly for a good laugh, at my expense, and some unusual information.