

## Giving thanks to cherished mentors: Otto Persson, Albert Sahlstrom, Herbie Weber, & W. H. Bacon

By R.W. Bacon

When I look back at my career in the performing arts – and my earlier career as a journalist/editor – I can hardly believe how lucky I was to encounter inspiring mentors in every area of interest.

When I was a young reporter and editor, starting out before college at age 15, there were always hard-nosed, no-nonsense, encyclopedia-brained, veteran arbiters of usage presiding at the “city desk” of various newspapers who went to great lengths to make sure I became just as cranky and disciplined as they were. Today I’m grateful.

As a young publication designer, it was Edmund C. Arnold (1913-2007), the world-renowned design and typography expert, who took me on as one of his assistants and disciples, and then imparted a lifetime of lessons. (*This great man is profiled on the Editorial & Design Services page.*)

When I embarked on what would become a 35-year career as a circus/variety artist, who could have expected to encounter, quite by chance, some of the greats in their field? And further, who could expect that they would take an interest in me and share their expertise and wisdom so freely?

Of course there was plenty of cross-fertilization, commingled creativity, and reciprocal encouragement among my friends, contemporaries, and “fellow travelers” in my various specialties. This page, however, highlights a select few master performers who devoted time and interest, and influenced my approach to the craft over many years: unicyclist Otto Persson, juggler Albert Sahlstrom, tightwire artist Herbie Weber, and my father, sleight-of-hand artist, big-band singer, escapologist, six-gun twirler, and more, W. H. Bacon.

### Otto Persson (1937-1994)

One summer night in the 1970s I was regaling audiences at Salem Willows (Mass.) Park with snappy hot jazz and novelty blues on banjo, guitars, and harmonicas when Otto introduced himself in between sets and invited me to play at his club.

I looked around to see if I could spot the neon beer signs on his windows. There were none. Then he told me, no, it was not a nightclub, but rather a souvenir shop, joke shop, and magic shop. And once-a-month it was the meeting place for a small club of



**Hey Otto!  
Watch out  
for that fence!**

As a unicyclist, **Otto Persson** (1937-1994) was known for his physical comedy, such as his head-over-heels crash-and-flip over a split-rail fence ... six times-a-day.

energetic jugglers, retired unicyclists, leaping acrobats, artistic roller-skaters, cornball comedians, ancient saw players, vaudeville tap dancers, and avid amateur clowns. I just had to check the place out. Then I became one of its denizens.

I would learn that Otto was an accomplished professional unicyclist and physical comic, and was a former officer of the International Jugglers Association in the 1960s. He had wrapped up a satisfying run as an entertainer and was now pursuing his career as a high school physics teacher. Maintaining his home, shop, and club at the old Salem Willows amusement area was his way of staying connected to showbusiness.

Otto was a scholarly sort who took his physical comedy seriously – he was well-known for his spectacular spills off his unicycle – head-over-heels over a split-rail fence – which he used to perform six times a day! (Eric Persson followed his older brother into the profession, and we shared lots of laughs as well as progress as juggling buddies for many years.)

L.J. & I are indebted to Otto for his friendship, encouragement, and insights; for his role as facilitator in bringing like-minded enthusiasts together; and for sharing his experience in the business end of entertainment. When I began researching and writing about the applied physics of juggling, he was the answer-man I needed. Otto is no longer with us, but he followed our career with interest all the way. Thanks, Otto!

### Albert Sahlstrom (1920-1990)

One Saturday morning in 1955 I watched two jugglers race around on my family’s little black-and-white TV screen. The act on *The Sealtest Big Top*, fresh from Denmark, was “The Virginias.” They were dazzling.

About 20 years later, after my own professional showbusiness career was under way, I met these two jugglers, Albert & Mina Sahlstrom, beginning a friendship and a cherished mentor relationship that would last until Albert’s death in 1990.

When I met Albert, I regarded him as the refined version of the juggler I was working so hard to become. We shared a similar repertoire – Albert juggled balls, top hat, cigar boxes, clubs, and more, with a speedy, quirky style that at once charmed audiences. As a precision club-juggling team, Albert & Mina set the standard with their signature trick, the running leap-frog take-away. And their crisp club-passing was just the style for my wife and partner, the speedy club-juggler L.J. Newton. Albert was a versatile juggler, an accomplished physical comic, and always a gentleman. Over the years, whenever our paths crossed, we spent countless hours talking about juggling and showbusiness. Always full of encouragement, good humor, and wisdom, he was “the old pro,” and all I had to do was listen. Looking back, Albert was invaluable to me. Thanks, Albert!

**Albert & Mina Sahlstrom are profiled in a separate in-depth article elsewhere on the web site.** The article includes more photos, as well as information about *Circus Miede* and the “Royal Danish Circus.”

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For over 40 years, the running leap-frog take-away was the signature acrobatic juggling stunt of **Albert Sahlstrom** (1920-1990) and his wife, **Mina** (1920-1992).

### Cherished mentors ...

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#### Herbie Weber (1914-1991) & the Wire Walkers

Even back in the 1970s, as a jazz banjoist/guitarist, uke player, comedy dancer, and juggler – with separate unicycle and rola-bola acts – I had plenty to keep myself busy. However, in the span of just a few months in the 1970s, I worked with two of the *most publicized highwire artists* of all-time, Karl Wallenda (1905-1978) and Philippe Petit (b. 1949) – and Herbie Weber (1914-1991), arguably the *finest tightwire showman* of all-time. We worked with Herbie often over the next decade, and it was he who inspired me to learn the tightwire, rig one up in the yard, and assemble a modest low-wire repertoire of juggling, hoop-jumping, and comedy.

Once again, I pursued this interest even though I had more than enough to do with my time. But I proceeded with the design of portable rigging with the idea of offering show producers another separate act – until my wife and partner L.J. Newton brought me back to my senses. “We can’t fit another thing in the truck,” she said. “If that tightwire rigging goes in, then there’s no room for me. I’m out.” She was right, and furthermore we didn’t *need* to do the wire act. The tightwire remained in the backyard just for fun and challenging exercise only.

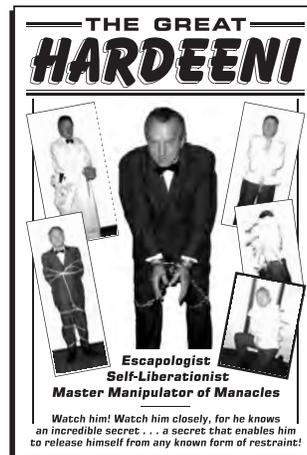
Nevertheless, as I look back at those years, Herbie Weber stands out as a role model for excellence. Herbie worked at blazing speed on a springy eight-foot-high wire, dancing and vaulting to high-energy Latin music. He performed in circuses around the world with his wife as “Los Latinos – Dancing Stars of the Tightwire.” His career began in vaudeville, included Broadway and Hollywood, and extended well into his 70s. I was fortunate over the course of a decade to



**Herbie Weber** (1914-1991) had a sensational low-wire act. But he also had a second thrilling act, his “Sensational Foot Slide For Life,” in which he climbed an inclined wire to the very top of the arena, then slid down backwards, standing up. As he reached the arena floor, his return was punctuated by a thunderous blast detonated by his assistants..

spend many hours absorbing the vast showbusiness wisdom of this great artist. Thanks for everything, Herbie!

*An in-depth profile of Herbie Weber, with photos – and my recollection of “picking the brain” of circus legend Karl Wallenda – is elsewhere on the web site.*



**W. H. Bacon** (1922-2001) performed as a big band singer, sleight-of-hand artist, and as an “escapologist” in the tradition of Harry Houdini. He met legendary marksman and knife-thrower Paul LaCross at one of our shows, which led him to take up Wild-West-style gun-spinning in his retirement.

#### W. H. Bacon (1922-2001): Performer ... and Dad

Where do I start? W. H. Bacon (1922-2001) was a sleight-of-hand artist, escape master, big-band singer, six-gun twirler, aviator, telegrapher, Eastern mystic, radio announcer, short-story writer, ... and Dad. I must have left something out. Yes, he also had a 37-year career in aviation with a major airline.

In the year following his death in 2001, I wrote two monographs as a record for the family, one on his performance career, the other on his aviation career. These were prompted by my discovery of his own memoirs of his years at sea in the U.S. Navy and on merchant ships. So what follows represents only a fraction of the content of what could easily be a 300-page book.

As a teenager, W. H. Bacon was a hotshot Morse Code telegrapher – he was courted by the U.S. Navy, even though he was underage with just a 9th-grade education. He was already blessed with full, resonant baritone that boomed from his small frame, and he began singing the popular songs of the day with the Navy big band and small combos.

During his decade at sea he used his off-duty time to practice sleight-of-hand magic obsessively, and to read and study ancient history and philosophy. After WWII he performed elegant sleight-of-hand – his specialty was cigarette manipulation – in nightclubs in Europe and the U.S., and had the opportunity to observe and learn from all manner of variety artists in performance.

Some of my earliest memories are of my Dad practicing in front of a three-panel

mirror. And he was always singing, to “keep his pipes tuned” – after all, we lived in an area of New York where Louis Armstrong, Tony Bennett, and Ella Fitzgerald all lived within 10 blocks. When we got our first TV in the mid-1950s, I would sit next to my Dad while we watched the variety shows, and he would quietly critique the acts. He would say things like “That effect would have been better if he turned 15 degrees to the left.” My father would take me and my sisters to circuses and shows at every opportunity.

When I was a teenager, my father began his years of study of escapes in the tradition of Houdini. Then he used his stage experience to craft a new show and persona, “The Great Hardeeni.” His resonant voice and his preparation made him an excellent speaker. But what really put his act over was his carefully conceived character, and his progression from serious mystical pronouncements to self-deprecating comedy. Of course I heard the detailed play-by-play of his every thought, practice, and performance at the kitchen table, whether I wanted to or not.

Throughout school and college years my two passions were athletics and journalism – only in my early 20s did I begin to perform early blues and jazz on a half-dozen instruments. When my interest turned to performing, I realized that just being around my father had given me a tremendous head-start. By osmosis I had learned effective public speaking and stage comportment. By his example I had learned show organization, preparation, and practice.

In my adulthood, my father lived over 1000 miles away, but still there were a great many long conversations with “Professor Dad” about “the noble profession” of the performing arts. He called them “our telephonic meetings.”

There was no end to W.H. Bacon’s intellectual curiosity ... or love for his family. After he died there were neighbors that knew nothing about his performance background. When he was on stage, he had full command of the crowd. When he was off-stage, he was happy being his quiet and friendly self – another great lesson from the most valuable mentor of all. Thanks again, Dad!

#### A final word ...

So that wraps up a look at some extra-special mentors. But there are others who deserve gratitude as well: (1) the teachers and coaches that made sure that giving one’s best effort became a habit; (2) the thousands of fellow performers with whom we shared encouragement and support onstage and off; and (3) my first-grade teacher at P.S. 148, who impressed on me early on – with her own crabby disposition – that you never get anywhere being a miserable grump. ■