

DON LESLIE, 69: CARNIVAL PERFORMER

Obituaries

**'Tattooed king of the midway' was a tough act to swallow; A counterculture hero among tattoo aficionados, he toured fairs and agricultural exhibitions across Canada to demonstrate a taste for steel and simply display his highly decorated skin**

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VICTORIA -- Acclaimed as the "tattooed king of the midway," **Don Leslie** shocked fairgoers with his death-defying skills. His legendary finale involved the insertion into his mouth of five long swords, a mark that surpassed that of his mentor both in length and numbers, earning a citation in the Guinness World Records.

"Down the hatch without a scratch," he always promised, though it must be said that he eventually abandoned the stunt after an accident in Seattle in 1989 when he came within a razor's edge of becoming a living kebob.

However, he remained on the road for many more seasons, appearing in Ontario and Western Canada. He astounded and appalled crowds at the Red River Exhibition in Winnipeg, at Klondike Days in Edmonton, and the Stampede in Calgary. After eating flame as an appetizer, Mr. Leslie would hammer such unlikely items as an ice pick and an iron spike into his nostril. He removed nails from the same cavity by using the claw of a hammer. As some in the audience winced, he maintained a steady patter of quips, usually with reference to clearing his sinuses.

"You have to be careful," he explained to a credulous Edmonton Journal reporter. "The nail ends a quarter of an inch away from the brain, and if you puncture the membrane your brains will spill out."

Known as Mr. Sideshow, the adept and agile performer lured slack-jawed crowds by performing as the Human Blockhead, the Human Pincushion, and the Human Volcano. On slow days, he merely needed to remove his shirt to display the bright palette that was his skin, a shocking tableau in the days when a single tattoo, never mind a chestful, was a sign of degeneracy, criminality, or worse.

Mr. Leslie's rich accounts of sideshow lore led him to be celebrated in recent years as the last, living remnant of a colourful breed. He was honoured as a counterculture hero, especially among tattoo aficionados.

Donald Paul Leslie's father was a Nova Scotia man of Scottish and Mi'kmaq ancestry who worked as a carpenter, fisherman and housepainter.

An unsettled home life led the boy to run away from his home in Boston at age 15. Though seized by juvenile authorities and returned to his family, he ran away again to join a circus. An enlistment in the U.S. Marines at 18 proved short-lived, and Mr. Leslie would spend his life as a sideshow attraction and street performer. He worked for the circus as a labourer and animal handler before learning the rare skills that would provide his livelihood.

His first job was on the pony ride. He tore tickets and assisted the children in mounting and dismounting. The ponies rode across the midway from the bally stage, so the boy got a good education in the wonders of the sideshow. The sword swallower offered a mesmerizing glimpse of the possibilities.

Mr. Leslie was taught the fakirs' ancient art by an Argentine who was, by all accounts, more adept as a fire-eater than a sword swallower. He instructed his pupil to gag and choke when inserting the blades, insisting the struggle made the act the more dramatic.

Only three years later was Mr. Leslie told the technique he'd been taught was faulty, making risky an already dangerous feat.

The error was spotted by Harry Doll, the proprietor of the Doll Family circus, which featured a family of midget performers who had appeared as Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*. Mr. Doll introduced Mr. Leslie to Alex Linton, a Dublin-born performer who was known for swallowing several blades in a sword sandwich. (Mr. Linton had been taught by Prince Lucky Ball, an American who had taken up the craft after being mauled as a lion tamer.) Mr. Leslie had his mentor's name and image tattooed on the back of his right hand.

He had gotten his first tattoo not long after running away from home. Many more would come. His chest displayed three horse heads surrounded by a lariat and flanked by draping American flags, while his back depicted a shipwrecked damsel shown before a setting sun and an oversized stone cross bearing the words "ROCK OF AGES." Each elbow sported a spider's web, while a panoply of cherubs, hula girls, and elephants adorned whatever bare skin was left.

In winter, when performers in the travelling sideshows settled in warmer climes, he worked as a tattoo artist, a skill he learned in the 1950s from Lyle Tuttle, a California artist who remained a lifelong friend. According to the Sword Swallowers Association International, Mr. Leslie in turn taught Mr. Tuttle the secrets of sword swallowing one night by using the only prop on hand, a heavy stove poker.

Captain Don, as he became known, cemented his reputation as the greatest of living sword swallows by downing a sword sandwich consisting of five long swords. While most of his dwindling fraternity did so by placing the blades flat on the tongue, he provided an even greater spectacle for the audience by taking the swords in perpendicular fashion.

It was while demonstrating this for the launch of a photographic exhibition at an art gallery in Seattle that one of the blades scissored. He suffered internal bleeding and finally swore off the diet of steel.

Soon after, he was hired by Conklin, the Canadian carnival company, to perform and produce a sideshow. He said he spent \$60,000 putting together what was billed as "The Last of the Old-Time Circus Sideshows." The sword swallowing was left to his friend Lady Diane Falk, with whom he had toured Polynesia and whose name and image covered the back of his left hand.

He had many adventures in his life on the road. As a street performer in San Francisco in the 1980s, he billed his act as *The Circus of the Radical & Eccentric*.

When he was hired to manage a strip club, he promptly fired the dancers and hired sideshow acts.

He once had to take a troupe of monkeys in lieu of payment. He set out on a long trek that did not end well. "All I know is I was drunk, bruised up and in jail, and my car was a total wreck," he told *Skin and Ink*, the tattoo magazine. "Goddamn monkeys can't drive worth shit."

Over time, legislation and good taste brought an end to the displaying of the sideshow attractions whose interest rested in their misfortunes at birth, popularly known as freaks. This led to the marvel acts all but dying out until a younger generation revived the traditional arts in the 1990s with such touring shows as the *Jim Rose Circus*.

This interest created a new audience for Mr. Leslie, who once again found himself and his rare talents in demand. Invited to tattoo conventions, he returned to sword swallowing, although he was more careful and less ambitious in his display.

A wiry man whose untidy, longish hair and bandanna made him look like a weary Willie Nelson, Mr. Leslie bemoaned a cultural shift that made him less unique. These days, he complained, people in the audience sometimes sported more tattoos than he did.

He was diagnosed with throat cancer around the time of his last birthday. His friends believe his half-century as a performer, especially as a fire-eater, caused the disease.

He never regretted his chosen profession. In it, he found family.

"The sideshow is a tribe inside a tribe, a family inside of a family," he once told an interviewer. "Circus people are close knit, but the sideshow is close knit again, inside, tighter than that. And the only normal people, if you will, whatever that is, were the marvel acts ourselves – fire-eaters, sword swallows, tattooed people, those of us who purposely made freaks of ourselves."

## **DON LESLIE**

**Don Leslie** was born on Dec. 26, 1937, at Cambridge, Mass. He died on June 4 at Chico, Calif. He was 69.

He leaves a daughter and three sons.

Illustration

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