



Harrison Ford (fourth from left in previously unseen photo) plays Capt. “Big Jim” Warington in a 1964 Belfry Theater production of “Little Mary Sunshine.” Here he serenades Delavan resident Susanne Seuser, who played Little Mary. Others in the front row are Ronald Mills (with mustache) as Gen. Oscar Fairfax (ret.) and Darien resident Julie Retzlaff as Mme. Ernestine von Liebedich. (Photo furnished by Buzzell family)

Photo proves Harrison Ford began acting career at The Belfry

By Jim McClure

For 50 years, the professional start of movie legend Harrison Ford has been cloaked in mystery.

The facts are clear: In 1964, Ford dropped out of Ripon College in Central Wisconsin just a few months before graduating, electing instead to start acting professionally at a little summer stock theater group called the Belfry Players just outside Williams Bay in the Town of Delavan. He married a woman he had met at Ripon, was the last-ever Resident Actor at the Belfry Theater, and after six plays acting, singing and doing carpentry work on and off stage, headed with his new bride to Los Angeles in hopes of perhaps making a career in motion pictures.

But a good police detective, like his character John Book in “Witness,” or a dedicated historian like Jack Ryan in “Patriot Games,” not to mention a noted archeologist like “Indiana Jones” would be hard pressed to find any evidence that Ford was ever in Walworth County or that he was first paid to act here.

If one were to scan every possible biography, leaf through the voluminous magazine articles written throughout his career, or simply scan the thousands of photographs available on the Internet, not a single image exists of Ford at the Belfry. The same goes for any of the programs

from the 1964 season.

So what about Harry, as the Chicago-born actor was known in the years he was at the Belfry?

A dedicated search for any artifacts of his time here has just been completed by the performing arts group Transformative Arts, which bought the theater complex last fall at auction. He is of course mentioned as an alumnus in the programs of the last plays put on in the 1990’s along with fellow well-known Belfry alumni Paul Newman and Gary Burghoff of *M*A*S*H* fame.

Transformative Arts spokesman Nathan Bond spent most of the spring and summer supervising and sifting through more than 80 years worth of items stored or abandoned in the main structure, an 1880’s Mormon Church, and its two story Belfry House dormitory that once housed actors, workmen and stagehands. The contents nicely supplemented the collection of a local history museum, and filled two or three giant Dumpsters once anything unique or valuable had been set aside.

“I have stuff from all the seasons from 1934 onward,” says Bond. “It’s a phenomenal collection of things, and not a single picture of Mr. Ford on the stage,” or anywhere else in Williams Bay. I have no photographic evidence of Ford on stage and that’s really a burr in my saddle because

how can we have all these wonderful photos of all these people who have played here and not have a photo of one of the most famous people who did?”

After the most recent of a series of *Beacon* exclusive articles on the auctioning, purchase and future plans for the property, Delavan resident Allen Buzzell, who acted on the stage opposite Ford, called the paper and said he wanted to get in touch with the Belfry’s new owners to offer some advice and additional historic items.

Among them, original scripts from 1964, local newspaper reviews, box office tallies and photographs, all belonging to the 90-year-old former seaman and actor who remembers Ford very well.

“He was an excellent actor, singer and carpenter, truth be told, good at everything he did,” says Buzzell, who displayed a script for “Damn Yankees” from the 1964 season in which he acted as the Commissioner and traded lines with Harrison Ford as “Joe,” in the last week of August.

“At one point I forgot my lines,” Buzzell says with a laugh. “Fortunately Ford got me through it by feeding me a line or two, He was a real pro.”

With Buzzell’s files comes the first look at Harrison Ford, in the 1964 program, and the first written descriptions of his summer 50 years ago when he debuted here as a professional actor.

The picture in the program shows him in a tattersal shirt under a prep sweater with a thick Beatle cut, no doubt heavily influenced by the recent appearance of the Fab Four British rock stars in America, and the description:

RESIDENT ACTOR

HARRISON FORD of Chicago is a graduate of Main Township High School (the correct spelling is Maine, as another MTHS alum, Hillary Rodham Clinton, would attest) and just finished four years majoring in Philosophy at Ripon College. He has appeared as El Gallo in “Fantasticks,” Jerry in the “Zoo Story,” Mr. Antrobus in “The Skin of Our Teeth,” and many others. He has also directed “The American Dream” and “The Zoo Story.” In Chicago and Ripon he has appeared as a singer with folk singing groups. Harry is a 6’ 1” blonde with hazel eyes. He was married at the early part of this season. He is 22 years old.

Ford’s singing voice apparently made quite an impression in the several musicals the Belfry Players put on in 1964. In Buzzell’s clipping of a preview of “Damn Yankees,” the *Delavan Enterprise* says “Resident Actor Harrison Ford will again display his fine singing voice in the part of a baseball player, as he has in other productions.”

(Continued on page 2)

Ford at The Belfry

Continued from page 1

From swashbuckling space cowboy Han Solo, whom Ford played in “Star Wars” in 1977, to the actor’s action hero take on the Presidency in “Air Force One” in 1997, only the geekiest of Ford fanatics would know that he ever sang on film, doing a brief parody of South Pacific’s “Some Enchanted Evening” as proto-Han Solo character Bob Falfa, a cowboy drag racer in “American Graffiti.”

But it was almost 10 years earlier that Ford began paying his dues and getting paid when he first sang on the stage in the Belfry Theater production of “Little Mary Sunshine.”

“You can see him in that picture clear as day,” says Buzzell, whose son Gregg appeared with Ford in that musical. The is picture made rarer by the fact that not only has it never before been published, but it resides in the North Woods of Wisconsin with a relative for safekeeping.

Now that the picture graces the front page of *The Beacon*, no one need again say that Ford “is said to have appeared on the stage.”

Thus ends the story of Indiana Jones and the Mystery of the Missing Photographs, with one other matter settled by Buzzell. The reporter of this story couldn’t help doing a little archeology on his own, at first penetrating the dusty interiors of the Belfry House prior to its being cleared out, and then finally joining a small daily appearance of souvenir seekers who sifted through the Dumpsters full of cleared Belfry debris.

The most compelling find was a simple green wooden chair painted over several times, and next to it a 1990’s color magazine saluting Ford as the “Box Office Star of the Century,” including full page ads from directors offering congratulations simply signed “George” and “Steven,” from directors Lucas and Spielberg of “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones” fame.

Google “Harrison Ford Green Chair” and up will pop a British website touting



Sunbonnet Sue and Sis was Scene II Resale’s Scarecrow Fest, sponsored by the Delavan Downtown Business Association. (Beacon photo)

also at www.readthebeacon.com



Former Belfry Theatre President Allen Buzzell confirms that the chair Jim McClure rescued from the Dumpster was, indeed, used, and repaired by, actor Harrison Ford during his summer as actor in residence in 1964.

(Beacon photo)

celebrity carpenter Ford featuring a chair not too unlike the one discarded, and applauding the workmanship “made to his specifications” as the manufacturer says with pride.

Allen Buzzell, who retired from the Belfry as President long after digging the first spadeful of dirt for the new theater addition in 1967, looked at the chair with curiosity.

“Nah...that wasn’t made in 1964, but Harry sat on it,” he said matter of factly. Buzzell explains that the chair was in the kitchen of the dormitory and the actors sat

on it during meals, or borrowed it as needed for plays, which explains both the several coats of paint and it being abandoned in the basement of the house.

I turned it upside down to show where I thought I saw Ford’s initials. “Nah...but I’ll tell you one thing...those slats are the work of a carpenter,” said Buzzell reflectively. “It’s been repaired. And Harry Ford was the carpenter.”

After making arrangements to get the photo of Ford onstage to the *Beacon*, the spry and fit Buzzell escorted this reporter to the car as any gentleman of his era would do. On parting he pointed his finger to the humble green chair in the back seat.

Sept. 26, 2014

“If anyone tells you that chair wasn’t used and repaired by Harrison Ford, you tell ‘em I said they’re a liar!” he said.

Now, who would doubt a “Damn Yankees” cast member? Back at the Belfry, spokesman Bond was asked what his reaction would be if a photo of Ford was found by *The Beacon*.

“Jim, if you told me you had one I’d give you a hug and a kiss...well maybe a hug,” he backtracked.

The Beacon reserves the right to decline all hugs, but thanks to the Buzzell family, perhaps everyone can embrace the fact that Harrison Ford did act...and sing...at the Belfry.



SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKEN

Every Wednesday

\$8.99

\$3 DOMESTIC BEER

\$4 IMPORTED BEER

Hours: Mon.-Sat. 5 am-10 pm; Sun. 6 am-9 pm

620 N. Walworth Street, Darien, WI • 262-882-5515

GENEVA LAKE WEST CHAMBER of COMMERCE

Personally Invites Your To Their

COMMUNITY EXPO

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 21

Geneva Ridge Resort - Aspen Room

Community Expo from 5:00-8:00 p.m. · Raffle Drawing at 7:35 p.m.

Candidate Forum 6:00-7:30 p.m. - Alder Room

Moderated by Lynn Ketterhagen of Geneva Lake Conservancy

Learn more about businesses in your neighborhood. Visit informal booths, meet business owners and receive special offers on products and services

COMPLIMENTARY APPETIZERS

WINE TASTING

RAFFLE PRIZES



Sponsored by:

Mercy Health System, Fontana Family Chiropractic, George Williams College of Aurora University, lia sophia jewelry, Sherwood Lodge/Williams Bay Care Center, KRW Tri-County Tobacco Free Coalition

FREE ADMISSION · OPEN TO THE PUBLIC