

“Growing Up in Disneyland” by Ron DeFore

Foreword

This is not a book all about Disneyland and Hollywood. Although Disneyland was my “backyard” for five years of my childhood, “Growing up in Disneyland”—with all its different “lands”—is more of a metaphor for my entire life beginning with growing up in a “Hollywood” celebrity family and into adult life filled with countless jaw-dropping experiences and career changes. Yes, there’s been many Hollywood-type books written, so for years I thought writing such a book would be redundant or just overlooked. I mean, who cares? Who would be interested?

My father, Don DeFore, was a well-known celebrity in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s, a beloved actor of his time, along with Ozzie, Harriet, David and Ricky Nelson, Hugh Beaumont and Barbara Billingsley (“Leave it to Beaver”), Robert Young and Jane Wyatt (“Father Knows Best”), Shirley Booth and many others, because they were America’s first TV families when television was in its infancy. TV was a small box with black and white images that offered up good, wholesome entertainment that post-World War II families savored. Even later in life when his movies and TV shows were in re-runs, he still attracted many well-wishers at restaurants and other public places. Why? Not just because of his celebrity but because fans sensed that Don DeFore was never just acting, but projecting his genuine, “regular guy” personality that made him both endearing and enduring and loved by millions of fans.

As for interest in my life, other celebrity sons and daughters surely had exciting experiences. But did they have equally incredible brushes with history and amazing encounters similar to that of Forrest Gump? I’ll let you be the judge!

After years of telling my life’s many stories in conversations and public presentations, the number of people telling me to write a book reached critical mass. I’ve now come to believe at least *some* people *are* interested. At minimum, this book will chronicle the achievements of one of America’s favorite character actors. But I must emphasize this is not meant to be a comprehensive biography of my Dad. There are historians that know far more about every character he played and interesting details about each production. Many of his accomplishments happened before I was born. It is this period—his early live theater, film, and TV career where I use my Dad’s own words. For the first time, portions of his unpublished autobiographical memoirs, *Hollywood—DeFore ‘n’ After*, are published here. Only minor editing was applied for clarity. *His writings are in italics*. Some portions of the book are not in chronological order so for reference, Don DeFore was married to Marion Holmes and had five children – Penny, David, Dawn, Ronald (me), and Amy/Autumn. Amy was her birth name, but while attending UC Santa Cruz, she changed her name to Autumn. It’s a California thing.

This book is a hybrid between Dad’s memoirs and my autobiography. It includes episodes of my life and my Dad’s that people have found unusual, interesting, and in some cases, pretty amazing. Although the first part covers most of my Dad’s career highlights, this is mainly my story of growing up in a celebrity family, and many of the amazing experiences afforded me because of it and my upbringing. As you read this book, you may agree there are similarities in

my life with the fictitious character Forrest Gump. I've gone from Brentwood to Hollywood to Washington, D.C.

Being in the public relations business the later part of my life, I've learned to "give the headlines first" or at least some of them. Grab people's attention up front, and they're more likely to want to hear "the rest of the story" as the late, great Paul Harvey would say.

So here are just a few headlines I will expound upon in my book:

- ★ My Dad, Don DeFore, has a star on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame. Many younger people reading this may not recognize him by name, but in the 1940s, '50s and '60s his name and the characters he played were well-known to most Americans.
- ★ In the 1950s he was "Mr. Thornberry," or "Thorny," the next-door-neighbor character, in the tremendously popular weekly TV series "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet."
- ★ In the early 1960s he co-starred in his own hit TV series, "Hazel," playing the head of the household, Mr. Baxter, or "Mr. B."
- ★ Dad was in more than thirty feature films, co-starring in about a dozen with Ronald Reagan, John Wayne, Rock Hudson, Spencer Tracy, Betty Hutton, Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, and Groucho Marx (a full list is on my website dedicated to his works: www.defore.net).
- ★ He co-starred in Charlton Heston's first feature film, "Dark City."
- ★ In "My Friend Irma" Dad got co-star billing above "introducing Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis." Similarly, with Doris Day's first feature film, "Romance on the High Seas," as well Elizabeth Scott's first film, "You Came Along."
- ★ Dad was the only person to own his own concession in Disneyland that displayed one's name: Don DeFore's Silver Banjo Barbecue restaurant in Frontierland.
- ★ Our family got to meet the Beatles during their 1964 U.S. tour. My sister, Dawn, kissed them all. My new 8mm captured the only known film of that private party in Brentwood.
- ★ As a real estate agent in Encino California, I showed a house to Michael Jackson.
- ★ I got to meet Led Zeppelin and was the only on-stage photographer (other than their own) at their September 4, 1970 Los Angeles Forum concert.
- ★ Mike Love, lead singer of the Beach Boys, asked me to be his PR guy for the 1986 "Live Aid Concert" in Philadelphia. Before he dragged me on stage, he stationed me in their backstage mobile home with Brian Wilson. What an experience!
- ★ I did a show with Robin Williams at which he and I arrived before anyone else and spent at least 30 minutes talking. But I don't recall saying a word!
- ★ The Robin Williams experience was during my mid-life crisis (at age 26) when I was a Disco DJ – "The Flying DJ" of L.A.'s famous Dillion's Discotheque. I actually flew above the crowd in a space suit. I've got video to prove it, however, I never listed that exact job description as I later became...
- ★ A political appointee in President Ronald Reagan's Administration—holding three positions (wow, good thing they didn't see the video!).
- ★ Dad produced one of Ronald Reagan's early political events in 1961 at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium.

- ★ Dad received hundreds of personally signed letters from famous people including presidents going back to Truman. One of the many from Ronald Reagan is a hand-written letter (including the addressed envelope).
- ★ As a featured singer with orchestras in the 1930s and early '40s my Mom, Marion Holmes, made "I'm a Little Teapot" famous. She also had a pretty well-known matron of honor at her wedding: Judy Garland (for younger readers, "Dorothy" in the "Wizard of Oz").

For those who find interest in any one of these experiences – hold on! To quote some famous people spanning all generations:

"You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet"

Al Jolson

"You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet"

Bachman -Turner Overdrive, Avril Lavigne

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