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The Marriage

To begin with, it was a really strange marriage.

The tale of how Disney World's costumed character performers, who represent innocence and childhood fantasies, came to be Teamsters, a union known for truck drivers and past Mafia ties, started in the early 1980s, with the original matchmaker—a union organizer named Carl Crosslin.

It was 1982 and not long after former president Ronald Reagan had fired air traffic controllers in a watershed moment for the weakening of US labor unions. At the time, there was just a single theme park at Disney World, Magic Kingdom, built on central Florida scrub land that Disney had secretly acquired, parcels at a time, more than a decade earlier. The resort's second theme park, Epcot, would open just a few months later, and over the following decades, a third and a fourth theme park were added—what's now called Disney's Hollywood Studios and Animal Kingdom.

Crosslin, a Teamster business agent with a Tennessee drawl and an unloaded gun sometimes packed into his waist, had represented truck drivers at Disney World since before the theme park opened in 1971, when the truckers hauled construction equipment for the building of Magic Kingdom. At one point, he also was president of Local 385.

One day, while Crosslin was in a break room in the warren of underground tunnels hidden underneath Magic Kingdom, some character performers approached him. They knew he was a Teamsters business agent, and they asked him if he would help the costumed character performers join his union. Crosslin was intrigued. Here were performers who were the most visible workers at the theme park resort, and they wanted to join the union of Jimmy Hoffa, whose disappearance in the 1970s was one of the great mysteries of late-twentieth-century America. Though best known as a union for truckers and drivers, the Teamsters represented all kinds of workers, so Crosslin thought representing the performers behind Mickey

Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy might be a stretch but not completely out of the question.[1]

From his dealings representing workers in operations, maintenance, and transportation, Crosslin worked closely across the table with Disney World's vice president for labor relations. Disney officials respected him enough that they once had offered him a job to switch sides and join the company's labor relations team, but he turned them down. The Disney vice president told him to keep the organizing efforts of the costumed character performers low-key because, he said, "we don't want this stuff in the paper and everybody knowing what's going on." Crosslin was fine with that, but he warned the Disney vice president not to use a popular tactic for stopping organizing efforts then: hiring a good-looking guy, usually an actor, to sweet-talk the character performers, many of whom were women and gay men, out of joining a union.

"I know what you're going to try to do," Crosslin recalled telling the Disney executive. "You're going to do what Hearst used to do and get a good-looking guy out here and talk up all the girls, telling them, 'Oh, you don't want to go union.'"[2] Hearst, of course, was William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper baron. Although his newspapers favored progressive causes, Hearst was notorious for breaking strikes at his own newspapers in the early half of the twentieth century.

The Disney bigwigs in California ended up sending a Rock Hudson look-alike to Florida. He was six-foot-two and carried himself like the movie star. Crosslin spotted the Rock Hudson look-alike talking to the costumed character performers in the Magic Kingdom tunnels before and after shows, telling them that the company would take care of them. Crosslin was angry and vowed to throw everything he had into organizing the costumed character performers.

"I told [the Disney vice president], 'We will have a private vote, but once you start pulling that stuff, I'm coming after you,'" Crosslin recalled. "And he pulled it."

Crosslin came to the Teamsters by way of the machinists' union. He had arrived at the Teamsters to negotiate contracts for truckers and UPS drivers from Tallahassee to the Florida Keys, running up 85,000 miles a year on his truck without leaving Florida.

Crosslin started his drive to unionize the characters by talking to the performers individually to find out what they wanted. Their biggest concern was not more money but clean costumes and eliminating pubic lice

from what they wore. "One guy told me the costume was so smelly he didn't want to put it on, but he did it because he needed a job," Crosslin said. The Teamster organizer promised the man that he would never wear a dirty costume again if he voted for the union. After that, Crosslin tried to smell as many of the performers' costumes as possible, so he could get a sense of what they were dealing with. "They all smelled pretty bad," he said.

The performers who played the smallest characters, like Mickey Mouse or one of the Seven Dwarfs, tended to be young women or little people. Even though the performers took great pride in bringing these animated characters to life, managers looked down on the costumed character performers and did not treat them with respect.

"Managers thought they were kind of stupid," Crosslin said. "You had midgets and you had dwarves. One dwarf said to me, 'I've never had another job.' After he said that, he told me, 'Don't look so sad.' And I said, 'I will because what else will you do if not this job?'"

The workers did not have enough time to get into their costumes in the tunnels at the start of their shifts. "They would say, 'Here's the costume. Get out there,'" Crosslin said. "They were filthy, and they would say, 'Go ahead and put them on anyway.'"

Crosslin's efforts were not the first attempt at unionizing the costumed character performers, who were categorized separately from performers who sang or acted with spoken lines at the parks. Those performers with singing or speaking lines were represented by the Actors' Equity Association, which wouldn't organize the singers, dancers, and actors at the parks until about a decade after the Teamsters' drive.

In the early 1970s, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators had made a bid at turning the costumed character performers into a union bargaining unit, but federal labor judges rejected the idea in a slap to the characters' furry faces.[3] At the time, the sixty-two costumed character performers were called "pageant hosts and hostesses," and their job description, only two years after Magic Kingdom opened in 1971, included "being seen in the park, posing for pictures, participating in shows, and sometimes going on trips and appearing with other employees in television commercials." They were earning between $2.75 and $4.35 an hour.

Disney World officials argued that the costumed character performers did not deserve to be considered part of the theatrical workers' bargaining unit since they were no different from regular workers. They said all workers at the park were entertainers, not just the ones who dressed up as Mick-

ey and Minnie. The company also argued that all employees wore costumes, not just the character performers, whether it was the "Jetsons"-like clothing for workers in Tomorrowland or the straw and felt hats in Frontierland.[4]

In late 1974, the matter went to a three-judge panel of the National Labor Relations Board, a federal panel that enforces labor law by investigating and ruling on claims of wrongdoing brought by workers, unions, or employers. The judges on the board said the costumed character performers did not belong in the bargaining unit with the theatrical workers, since they were no different than other Disney workers who operated rides or cleaned the park. The costumed character performers, they reasoned, worked the same hours, used the same entrances, shared the same break rooms, and worked side by side with other Disney workers. "The 'characters' are not actors; they do not constitute a craft," the National Labor Relations Board judges wrote. "They are essentially unskilled or at best semiskilled individuals whose working conditions, benefits, etc. are similar to those of other employees working in the Walt Disney World complex. In view of the foregoing, we find that the pageant host and hostesses do not have a community of interest separate from that of other employees to justify establishing them as a separate appropriate unit for bargaining purposes."[5]

That lack of respect for what the characters did, as shown by the judges, also carried over to Disney World management, according to Crosslin. Managers didn't provide the character performers with enough attendants to run interference for them against annoying guests, some of whom who would touch them inappropriately or punch the performers who dressed as Disney villains. A worker who played Captain Hook, Peter Pan's nemesis, told Crosslin, "If you can promise me that I won't be kicked in the shins by another kid I'll vote 'yes' for the union."[6]

"I said, 'You got it, buddy!'" Crosslin recalled.

Because Crosslin was already representing other Disney World workers, his badge gave him access to the all-important tunnels under the Magic Kingdom park where workers hung out. If he saw costumed performers in the tunnels, he would stop and talk to them. He staked out break rooms and bought coffee for performers in the cafeteria, meanwhile talking up the importance of being in a union. He got the weekly schedules of the shows being performed in the Magic Kingdom so he could catch performers before they went out into the public parts of the park and when they came back.

The character performers were unhappy with the favoritism shown by some managers and the lack of seniority in the handing out of assignments. They also did not like having a two-year limit on how long they could work