

April 11, 2004-----

ACAPULCO, Mexico -- There's not much room left for singular expression on the road. Las Vegas is a theme park in the dark. As Times Square celebrates its 100th anniversary this month, it has become a destination for squares. When did we have to spell-check f-u-n?

But Dick Cheney can't mess with jolly Acapulco.

If you know where to go in Acapulco, you can sleep, drink and eat in the iconoclastic trail of Frank Sinatra, Johnny Carson, Elvis Presley and others. These hipsters took holiday to Acapulco and let their freak flags fly.

Acapulco (Indian for place where the reeds were destroyed) was born in the late 1940s as a seaside getaway for Mexico City residents. A highway between Mexico City and Acapulco was built in 1945, which made the trip between the two cities only six hours. Now, on the new Auto Pista, you can do the road trip in less than three hours. Direct international air service began in 1964, and Acapulco took off as a jet-set destination.

Howard Hughes lived here and died here. Bob Hope and John Wayne vacationed in Acapulco. In the 1950s, Johnny "Tarzan" Weissmuller and a bunch of his Hollywood cronies bought Los Flamingos, a pink hideaway hotel on top of a 450-foot cliff, one of the highest points of Acapulco. Weissmuller died in 1984 in Acapulco. He spent the last four years of his life in a secluded roundhouse that still stands at Los Flamingos (www.acabtu.com.mx/flamingos). Current hotel owner Adolfo Santiago was a busboy back then and he recalls Weissmuller yelling his "Tarzan Cry" late at night while fighting the advancing stages of dementia.

The magnet for these stars was late Swedish bandleader Teddy Stauffer, known as "Mr. Acapulco." Considering what a big shooter Stauffer was, there are few people around Acapulco who can speak in depth about him. Stauffer died in 1991 at the age of 84. He remains a guarded mystery.

I have visited Acapulco twice over the last few years. One of the best Stauffer experts I found was Chicagoan Jimmy Rittenberg, who co-owns an Acapulco version of his famous Mother Hubbard's tavern at No. 10 Avenue Horatio Nelson in the Costa Azul neighborhood.

Stauffer organized and promoted the legendary La Quebrada cliff divers off the Pacific Ocean. He led a swing band in the La Perla nightclub at the Hotel El Mirador at the cliff. During the 1930s, Stauffer cut nearly 300 records with his big band the Original Teddies, which were a popular touring act in Europe. The El antiQuario Magazine reported that a copy of 1940's "El Swing De Los Fabulosos

Teddies" (released in Mexico City) can fetch up to \$200.

Stauffer left his homeland in 1941 on a refugee ship escaping Nazi oppression. He was denied entry into the United States. Stauffer had swastika stamps on his passport, which he acquired during his tours with the Original Teddies. Stauffer was booted out of America on a bus heading for Mexico City. He opened a nightclub in Mexico City before relocating to Acapulco in 1943, where he managed the Casablanca Hotel.

In January 1965, Stauffer opened Acapulco's first discotheque, which was called Tequila A Go-Go. During a 2002 interview in his Acapulco flat, legendary cliff diver Raul Garcia told me he met his wife when she was working coat check at Tequila A Go-Go. Garcia said the club was a favorite stomping ground of Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr.

Stauffer was married five times, although his sexuality is of debate in Acapulco. His first wife was Faith "Chula" Domergue. Stauffer married her in 1946 while she was dating Howard Hughes. The newlyweds spent several months in a lavish home in Beverly Hills -- which belonged to Hughes. One time Hughes called home when the conversation swung over to "Mr. Acapulco." Hughes told Domergue that Stauffer was a bum and never worked a day in his life.

Stauffer married actress Hedy Lamarr in 1951, but their union lasted only nine months. Lamarr wanted out, in part, because of "the bad weather in Acapulco."

Common sense dictates those in search of all things Teddy head to the Villa Vera Hotel, Lomas del Mar No. 35, Club Deportivo, which was developed by Stauffer and Nebraska businessman Carl Renstrom. Stauffer decorated Renstrom's first bungalow on the property, called "The Lana Turner" suite. Liz Taylor married Mike Todd in what was originally the Renstrom family home (Villa No. 6). Renstrom named the property after his oldest daughter, Vera.

Rittenberg was a major player in the Chicago nightlife scene during the mid-1970s when he opened the Faces disco. In 1980, he ran a popular Lincoln Avenue country nightclub called Rodeo. Rittenberg has been wintering in Acapulco since 1973.

"I lived across the street from Teddy for the last 15 years of his life," Rittenberg said. "He lived in Villa Vera above the tennis courts. And I lived in a condo called Tiffany where I could see his place. He was very spry in his last years. He was a huge guy, about 6 foot 3 inches with a big head of white hair. Very dignified looking. Some say he was a Nazi. Some say he wasn't. The stories I heard was that maybe he wasn't in the party, but he was able to get along very well with the Nazis. At any rate, he made Acapulco the big mecca it is."

Pat and Richard Nixon celebrated their 25th anniversary at the Villa Vera, and Elvis

stayed on the compound in 1963 when he was shooting snippets of the movie "Fun in Acapulco." Stauffer played tennis on the hotel grounds. I've visited the Villa Vera twice trying to find someone who connected with Stauffer. On my trip last year, I met German Figaredo, bartender of the villa's Palma Real Restaurant. Figaredo has worked at Villa Vera for nearly 30 years. His father was a popular radio announcer in Acapulco.

"Teddy loved to play the violin," Figaredo said over lunch. "He even played the violin in the pool. He was a very close friend of Erroll Flynn. Did you know Erroll Flynn built the first tennis courts in Acapulco?" Stauffer was an accomplished tennis player, but he liked to throw the matches in his favor in order to impress women.

Rittenberg adds, "He was decent about it. Gregorio was the tennis pro there during the 1960s and '70s. He takes care of my apartment. Teddy had a decent game but in a straight match Gregorio would kill him. Gregorio set up matches for Teddy and everybody would lay down when the broads were around. Bandleader. Big shock of white hair, like Cesar Romero. He wins tennis matches. He was very congenial. He tried to have it all going."

I was able to track down Stauffer's 1976 autobiography *Forever Is a Hell of a Long Time* (Henry Regenery Co., Chicago, \$9.95). The 303-page tome is a hell of a read. Stauffer ends his colorful memoir by teaching a 10-year-old boy how to play "Cada Noche un Amor (Every Night in Love)" on the kid's new violin.

Stauffer writes that he was shackled up with a "semi-nude" woman, showing her Europe on an atlas, when the boy came knocking on his door -- at 3 in the afternoon. Stauffer hears the young voice and writes: "I light a cigarette, curse again as I spill a half glass of tequila on the tile floor, and go to the door. I open it slightly, smoke drifts out, and I see a dark-skinned, wide-eyed boy, well-dressed, neat, the image of a young Benito Juarez."

Now, this is what I call passing the torch.

Stauffer's spirit still defines the Villa Vera. Today the newly remodeled resort includes suites with shaded pools, villas with private pools and small homes on a hilly 15 acres that overlook Acapulco Bay. The complex consists of 67 rooms, 20 swimming pools (11 of which are private), two professional tennis courts where Stauffer fixed his games, a spa and gymnasium. It is a fitting tribute to free thinking.

In his memoir Stauffer writes: "I've never operated a funeral home. I write, paint, create.

"And should a lovely lady come way by chance, I love.

"If this is what some people call being a playboy, then perhaps I am.

"I just look out over the softly moving palm trees and the azure-blue Acapulco Bay and say to myself every morning, Another goddamned day in paradise!"