

Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing



Ex-Wallenda Now Walks Alone

Leon Fort'e was in his early teens when his sister married into the clanish Wallenda family, who's unequaled seven-man pyramid on the high wire amazed the circus world until their disastrous fall in February of 1962 in Detroit, killing two and paralyzing one.

Fort'e tried the wire and found himself at home, and at 16, in 1952, he became part of the pyramid, the bottom lead.

Through Mexico and South America and the states, that thin wire, 45 feet above the netless, body crushing earth, became his daily livelihood.

On his shoulders, as on others, rested the lives of the rest.

Dieter Schepp, who later held Fort'e's position dropped his 40-pound balancing pole and set off the tragic collapse of the pyramid.

I talked to Fort'e when he performed at the county fair last week. He's a slim 173 pounder, fair haired and not too talkative. He works alone now.

"It figured out to about 180 pounds on my shoulders under the pyramid.

"Our performance was always a very serious situation. Karl Wallenda, always the boss, called out sharp instructions in German as we formed and moved across the wire. Like, 'Ready!' 'Slowly out!' 'Watch it—stop!' or 'Watch the wind!' We had plenty of close calls.

"One time in Nicaragua there was an earthquake. We were in the middle of the wire. We couldn't go back. We had to continue at our normal steady pace.

"People were rushing out of the tent and someone said the 'deadmen,' or anchor posts were working loose. All through this each of us had to keep his nerve and not break—and we made it.

"I looked down and there was only one man left in the stands, an American, clapping his hands off!"

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"Once in Detroit I had a 104 temperature. Karl, the boss, came to me and said, 'How do you feel?' Before I had time to answer he said, 'You look good, come on!' said Fort'e.

It was thought that Schepp was sick when he dropped his pole and Schepp died from the fall.

"Sometimes on the wire we'd get out of step which tended to pull the pyramid apart. This was dangerous and took some quick adjusting. We talked up

there, but we didn't discuss women," he said.

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In 1955 Leon broke away from the Wallendas to seek his own fortune on the wire. He formed a trio which included Gene Mendez whom he considers one of the greats.

Fort'e went solo in 1960. Now 29, he works 30 feet in the air without a net.

He mounts to his working area by walking up the inclined guy wire, a rarity in itself.

He is one of the few men to perform stunts without a pole at that height, or to perform summersaults (with pole).

One of his most dangerous feats in the giant swing, swinging completely around the wire by his hands. He was doing this for the movie "Jumbo," slipped and flew in a 65-foot arc before crumpling to the ground, luckily with only a fractured nose. This was three days before the Wallenda tragedy. Yet he went on to Canada to help the depleted Wallendas keep their show dates.

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"Wire walking depends on a natural ability, plus experience, plus a desire and confidence. We all have fear in us, but it's a matter of conquering it and keeping it on the inside and not letting it show on the outside," he said.

It is Leon's ambition to revive the pyramid.

He wants a Wallenda in the act and he has been training Steven Wallenda since he was three. He is now 16 and Leon thinks ready. He figures it will take him about two to three years to bring it off.

In the meantime, Leon Fort'e has a dangerous road to travel. Alone.