



LLOYD WITHROW

Duckmaster

No Ducks, No Glory

BY CASEY L. PENN

Contributing Writer

In his formidable red and gold-trimmed, trainer-meets-dignitary jacket, the Peabody Duck Master—one of three in the world—is a man in command of more than ducks.

Lloyd Withrow, duck master, trains and cares for the hotel's legendary North American Mallards: there is the drake, John Philip Duck (named for the children's book of the same name) and four hens (up to guests to name). He cleans up after them, feeds them their favorite meal of romaine lettuce, and literally rolls out the red carpet for them daily.

When he isn't working with the ducks, Withrow assists with the hotel's guest services. Still, guests know him best for the Duck March, when, under his lead, the ducks make their daily prance to—and later, from—the lobby fountain. For this trick, the ducks enjoy perks of the famous. Not only do they own the red carpet and make the guests smile, but they also make special appearances on local and national television shows (Oprah, The Tonight Show, Today's THV to name a few) and retire each night to their palace on the rooftop terrace of The Peabody Little Rock.

With all he does for the spoiled ducks, Withrow professes no duck envy. He acknowledges, with a smile, that cleaning up after them—or trying to take them anywhere—can be a chore; still, he enjoys training and working with the famous fowl. They've learned his call, and he respects them for the unique heritage

they bring to the hotel. "The Peabody is about service excellence," said Withrow. "The ducks are an integral part of that."

Peabody Marketing Director Todd Scholl likes to remind Withrow, jokingly, that the ducks are the show, but he knows it is Withrow who makes it work. "Lloyd is a promoter. It's built into him," said Scholl, who credits Withrow with successful promotional ideas like KTHV's "Duckmaster for a Day" essay contest and Santa and the Ducks holiday duck march. "When you work here every day, the Duck March becomes part of the scene. You forget how special it is. But Lloyd is so gracious. He takes something that happens twice a day, every day, and turns it into something very special. He has that gift."

During the holidays, Withrow enlists the help of his family to make things extra special. His wife, Deborah; sons Joseph and John Wesley; and daughter, Mary Grace, star in the show with him.

The grand tradition began at the original Peabody Memphis with three decoy ducks, two disgraced hunters, and a large amount of Tennessee Whiskey. In 1932, Peabody General Manager Frank Schutt and his friend, Chip Barwick, returned empty handed from an Arkansas duck hunt. "To not kill any ducks was a humiliating experience in the 1940s in a state polluted with ducks," said Withrow, explaining that the hunters came back with only their live decoys, English Call Ducks.

After drowning their sorrow in whiskey, the hunters were inspired to place their decoy ducks in the fountain and then retire to "sleep it off." The next morning,

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the ducks were still in the fountain, where they stayed for the next eight years. Guests loved the ducks, and in 1939, the legend of the ducks grew once again with the help of Edward Pembroke, who would be the original duck master. An animal trainer by trade, Pembroke joined the staff after a train wreck put the Ringling Brothers circus out of business. "When Mr. Schutt found out that Pembroke was an animal trainer, he asked him, 'can you do something with the ducks?'" explained Withrow. "He [Pembroke] thought he could, and in 1940, the Peabody Duck March began."

Like the original duck master, Withrow was destined to work with ducks—specifically, the Peabody ducks. After being a self-employed contractor, a Sergeant in the Berlin Brigade ("back in the day" he said), and part of a Christian ministry for six years, Withrow settled his family of four in Hot Springs Village and came to Little Rock looking for permanent work with a reputable company. "Believe it or not, because I had my life and health insurance license, I wanted to get on with AFLAC," Withrow said, with a straight face.

Withrow didn't get on with AFLAC, but he did get closer to the ducks. "The Excelsior was hiring in the engineering department, so I started here doing painting, repairs, wallpaper—you name it," said Withrow.

After four years in engineering, Withrow began having allergic reactions to the chemicals he worked with. Hotel managers (of what was by then The Peabody) transferred him to guest services, from which his role evolved. "After awhile, I asked, 'can I help with the ducks?' They said 'sure.' I started working with the ducks in September of 2004. I assisted with them for about six months, until the gentleman before me went into retirement."

Three months later, Withrow, one of 1200 applicants for his position, became the official duck master for The Peabody Little Rock. Now, every day, he relishes sharing the legend of the ducks with an audience that changes like the Arkansas weather. His audience—ranging from single



to triple digits and compiled of spectators and honorary duck masters alike—is one of the most intriguing parts of his job.

"Every person has a story, and every story is a part of history," said Withrow, a self-professed history lover. He hears every duck story imaginable—from the likes of past presidents, Arkansas first ladies, kings and queens, and many, many celebrities such as Robin Williams, Jermaine Taylor, Jose Feliciano, Lou Dobbs, and many more.

Occasionally, someone comes in that Withrow is unsure how to deal with.

When it's an issue of protocol, he calls his wife, Deborah, a former assistant to Congressman Hammerschmidt who also worked for the Republican National Committee. "Deborah is good with protocol. When Vicente Fox was here, I called her and said 'shouldn't we do something?' She said, 'yes, protocol is that when a dignitary comes, you're supposed to give them something. So I gave him a cane.'"

Withrow's family helps him during holidays, too, when they become part of

the show. During Santa and the Ducks, wife Deborah is Mrs. Claus, while his two sons Joseph, 22, and John Wesley, 17, are the elves. "My daughter, an elementary education major, dresses like Cindy Lou Who and reads to the children. That's a good thing about the hotel. They let my family work with me."

Getting to put on a show—often for famous—is a treat for Withrow, of course, but he insists he's equally enamored with the unexpected stories that come from "ordinary" folks.

"I enjoy the people who have been to the duck marches since 1940. For instance, one lady came to the fountain before the march, and before I could greet her, she said, 'Hello! My name is Flossy. I just want to let you know that in 1940, I had my honeymoon at The Peabody in Memphis.' She told me about getting to help the original duck master, and I said 'would you like to help me today?' You'd have thought I'd offered her a million dollars. She recalled everything from that [1940] day—what she ate, the duck march, Mr.

Pembroke, and, of course, her honeymoon. That's just one example that stands out from the stories that I get all the time."

Some stories bring a smile to Withrow's face—like the woman traveling with the Seniors Abroad Group who told him she had come all the way from Australia to see the ducks. Other stories make it hard for him to hold back his tears—the way he had to when the Peabody hosted the 39th Brigade, complete with children who had lost a parent in Iraq.

Then there was the day he went to his office and wept after a little Autistic girl, seemingly in her own silly world, stopped and looked him right in the eye and said, "You are blessed because of your loyalty." There have been humbling visits, too, from dying patients of the UAMS Myeloma Center. "These are people who have been given a poor prognosis," said Withrow, "and all they want to do is come and watch the ducks."

Stories like these lead Withrow to believe he's the luckiest duck at The Peabody. "Here's the thing about my job: all of the executives, the sales people, and the behind-the-scenes people—they don't get to see the people who come in and just watch the ducks because they're having a bad day. They just want to hear me tell the duck story because of the humorous things I say, and they just want a laugh. Talk about job satisfaction! It's when you find out these stories from people who relate good things with you. It's beyond compare to be able to take part in these stories, these lives."

So, regardless of the audience or the circumstance, Withrow rolls out the red carpet, and, to the tune of John Philip Sousa's King Cotton March, leads the Peabody Ducks to give the show of their career—not once, but twice a day. Withrow taps his duck-tipped cane and begins his spiel, which he tailors to his changing audience—which of late has included evacuees from Hurricane Gustav and Ike. For them, he might say, "You're about to see poultry in motion," he says. "Please bear in mind there will be no fowl language used here today—and no duck gumbo on the menu." **TBQ**



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