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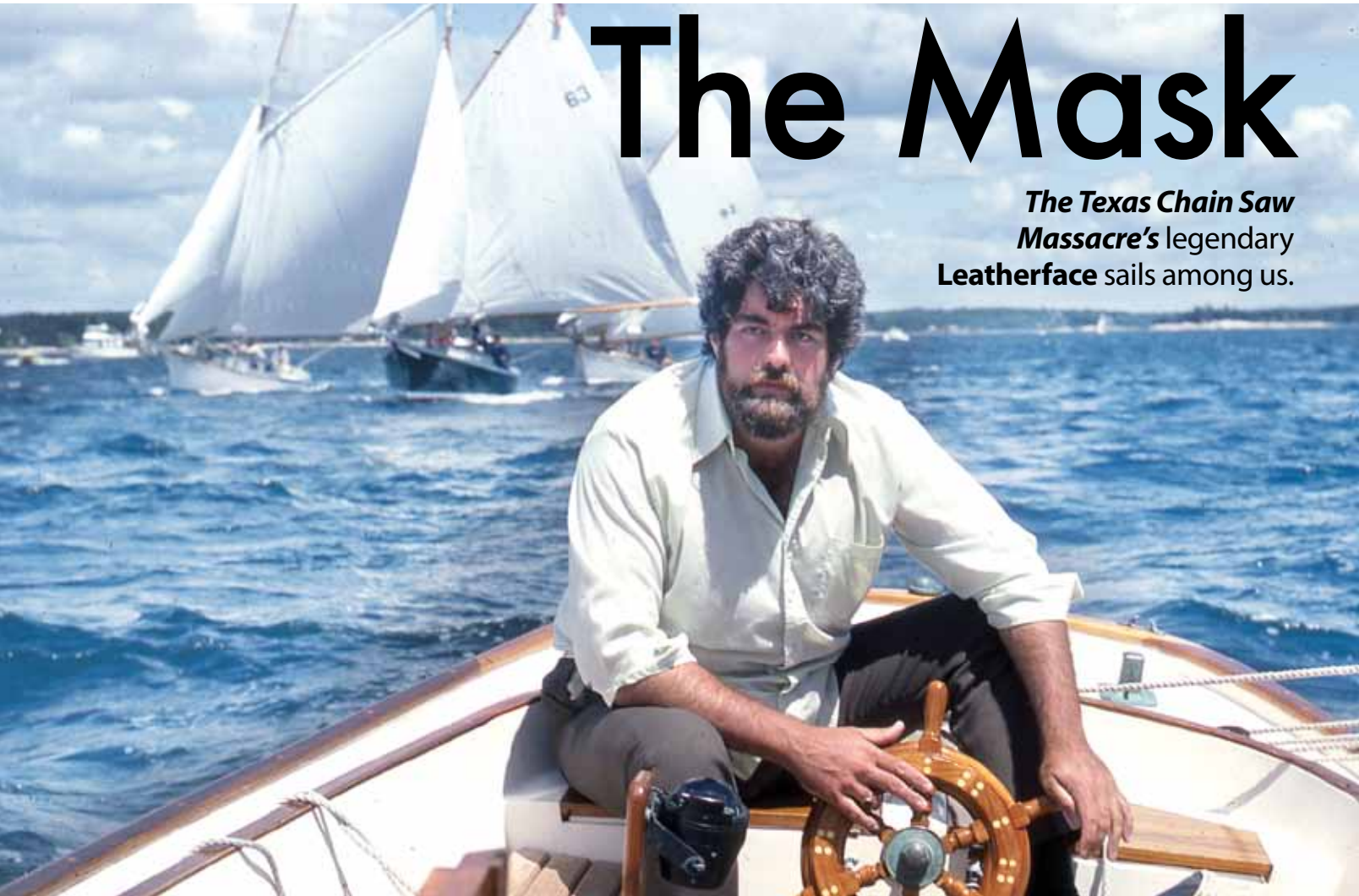
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ISN'T THAT...

The Man Behind The Mask

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's legendary
Leatherface sails among us.



BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Gunnar Hansen's life might have been forever changed in 1973 when, just out of graduate school at the University of Texas in Austin, he was signed to play the killer in a horror movie being filmed nearby. When it was released in 1974, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* became a runaway success, an instant cult classic, thoroughly controversial, critically decried for its terrifying horror, and of course box-office gold. Hansen's character Leatherface and *Chain Saw* pioneered what are now familiar and gruesome conventions of the horror genre: the use of power tools as murder weapons, skin masks, and what Hansen calls "friends in a van going somewhere with one annoying fifth-wheel guy who always gets killed first."

Instead of going Hollywood, though, Hansen moved to Mt. Desert Island to pursue his plan to be a writer. Although he grew up mostly in Texas, his family had lived in Maine when he was age 5 to 11, and he'd returned in the summers during college to work at restaurants and a boatyard. He'd learned to sail.

The island seemed a bit quiet in 1975 after college life in Austin and a hit movie. "I told myself I'd just make a trip to Boston every month or six weeks so I wouldn't feel so isolated."

Gunnar Hansen in action as Leatherface in the 1974 cult horror classic *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and wiping out the competition, above, racing Friendship sloops on Muscongus Bay in 1980.



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ISN'T THAT...

And? "I never did it," he laughs. "I didn't need to."

Initially, he wrote free-lance for periodicals, among them the *Maine Times*, *WoodenBoat*, *Maine Sunday Telegram*, *Yankee*, and *Texas Monthly*. In 1986, he moved south to fill in as a temporary managing editor at *The Yacht*, a now-defunct magazine in Newport, Rhode Island. "After five or six months, I told them 'I'm done,' and I left and came back here. My interest was free-lance writing."

The free-lancing has included documentary and feature film scripts and books.

Hansen's latest book, *Chain Saw Confidential: How We Made America's Most Notorious Horror Movie*, will be published this year by Chronicle Books. "It's not just for *Chain Saw* fans or horror fans—it's about the history and place of horror in film."

In the decades since *Chain Saw*, Hansen has regularly made appearances with fellow stars at horror conventions all over the country, conventions called things like Monster Mania Reunion and The Days of the Dead. He is featured in a cameo role in the new 3D *Texas Chainsaw*, which was released nationwide in January. But in the beginning, he

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MARGARET HAMILTON, Southport
Wicked Witch of the West
Wizard of Oz, 1935



KURT RUSSELL, Rangeley
Stuntman Mike
Grindhouse/Death Proof, 2007



BETTE DAVIS, Cape Elizabeth
Jane Hudson
Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?
1962



JUDD NELSON, Portland
Arthur 'Buck' Taylor
Relentless, 1989



PATRICK DEMPSEY, Harpswell
Dylan
Transformers: Dark of the Moon
2011



WILLEM DAFOE, Otisfield
Green Goblin / Norman Osborn
Spiderman, 2002
Bobby Peru
Wild at Heart, 1990
Raven Shaddock
Streets of Fire, 1984



JOHN TRAVOLTA, Islesboro
Ryder
The Taking of Pelham 123, 2009
Gabriel Shear
Swordfish, 2001
Terl
Battlefield Earth, 2000



GLENN CLOSE, Scarborough
Alex Forrest
Fatal Attraction, 1987
Marquise Isabelle de Merteuil
Dangerous Liaisons, 1988
Cruella DeVil
101 Dalmations, 1996

Most of the documentary work was done in Maine. "Some were travel/tourism-type films. *Chummy Rich: Maine Boatbuilder* was one of the films I've done with Jeff Dobbs. *Portrait of an Island* was about Little Cranberry, which I'd visited a lot already so I knew people there. *Invisible* was about the history of the native tribes in Maine. It's shown in public schools. The most recent documentary (2011) was another project with Jeff Dobbs, sponsored by the Mt. Desert Historical Society for the 250th anniversary of the colonial settlement of the island, called *Dancing at the Mill*. The historical society is an amazing resource. Tim [Garrity, the society's executive director] was great—he gave me a desk and left me to research."

was a reluctant horror star.

"After *Chain Saw*, I was involved in one more horror movie in 1975. It was shot in Michigan, a terrible thing called *Demon Lover*. After that experience, I just said I quit."

Why?

"Hollywood film people! I knew if I started doing this I'd become one of them."

Eventually, though, he found his way back.

"For a while I didn't. I turned down a role in Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* in '76. But years went by and then in 1987 someone I knew called me from L.A. and asked if I wanted to come shoot a horror movie, and I thought it would be silly not to. I didn't realize *Chain Saw* was big until I

(Continued on page 74)

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(l to r): David Mitchell, Christopher Rogers, Lauren Schaefer-Bove, Zara Machatine, Steve Guthrie, Dana Ricker

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ISN'T THAT...

The Man Behind the Mask (continued from page 61)

got out to L.A. at that point. I really didn't. The clincher was, I was watching an episode of *Cheers* on TV, and Kirstie Alley was lording it over the others that she was going to house-sit some bigshot's house in the woods for the weekend. Then when she's out there all alone she starts getting nervous—hearing funny noises and locking the doors and windows. Then she says—and I couldn't believe I was hearing this—'Oh, *Leatherface*, I hope that's not you'—and then I realized everyone knew *Leatherface*."

Hollywood in 1987 was a better filmmaking experience. "It turned out to be a really fun movie called *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*. I played a gentleman of undetermined Middle Eastern origin who employed chainsaw prostitutes." Other films followed, including *Campfire Tales* (1990), *Mosquito* (1993), *Freakshow* (1994), *Hellblock 13* (1994), *Swarm of the Snake Head* (2003), and *Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre* (2009).

Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre? "It was filmed in Iceland. I'm Icelandic on my father's side. My cousins are all there. The movie was about people from various countries aboard a boat. I played the captain, so when I used the boat's radio I spoke Icelandic, but with the passengers we all spoke English."

The new 3D *Texas Chainsaw* was not filmed in Texas. "It was Shreveport, which is actually a lot like central Texas. Same 104-degree humid heat. For the flashback scene at the beginning that I'm in, they built a replica of the original house to look like 1973. Or the front of the original house. In back, there was no house. We called it 'digital city' back there, where they had all the 3D cameras set up. The real original house was picked up and moved years ago—the last time I was back it was a restaurant in Kingsland, Texas—I've eaten there.

"I spent six days on the set for the new *Chainsaw*. I didn't shave for 6 months beforehand—I play Boss Sawyer [who perishes in the conflagration at the end of the original film], not *Leatherface*. When I got there, the first thing they said to the makeup people was, 'OK, make him a lot dirtier.'"

Hansen himself does not own a chain saw. "When I moved here in '75 I did. The place I lived had a wood stove so I was always cutting wood. That's when I finally understood that Thoreau line about 'when you heat with

wood you heat yourself twice,' because of all the work. I also learned how really dangerous chain saws are. If I'd've known, I'd never have done some of the things I had to do with the chain saw in the film. I have an oil furnace now—I just flick the switch."

Hansen seems never to have wavered from his devotion to the writer's life, and his life in Maine is a disciplined one of research and writing. "I used to always think a writer's life was a few hours in the morning at the desk, then long walks in the woods. But mostly, I'm just in my office working. Things have changed over the years, though. Thirty years ago, it was a big deal for people around here to drive 20 miles to Ellsworth. Now it's nothing. And now I get away to the conventions three or four times a year. I try to get to Iceland every year or two. The scale has changed."

What are horror conventions like? "They're fun. Most people just want to talk about *Chain Saw*. You have to get up and talk to the audience for a few minutes at these things. After doing the first few, I asked the promoters if I could talk about something besides *Chain Saw*, and they said, you can talk about anything you want. So at the next one, I started talking about what I was working on then. In less than three minutes, I lost 800 people. So I said, '...and that reminds me of something in *Chain Saw*...' and I heard 800 heads snap back."

Where do a horror film star and his sweetheart go to see a movie on Mt. Desert? "Bar Harbor has a movie house where you can have pizza for dinner while you watch, but the selection is limited with just two screens. We see most movies and horror films on Netflix. We've got *The Devil's Rejects* tomorrow night—the sequel to *House of 1,000 Corpses*. I have to watch some of this stuff just to keep up! Horror almost never reaches Bar Harbor."

The 3D *Texas Chainsaw* had yet to come to town, so Hansen hadn't seen it. "I may go up to Bangor, at some point, if it's there, if I have time...Right now, I'm working on a rewrite of a script I already sold. They're talking about maybe shooting in the spring. It's called *Death House*."

Do people there know you are a horror movie legend—say, when they bump into you in the meat section at the local IGA?

"Oh, yeah, everybody's known for years." He lets the silence tickle the air. "Nobody's impressed." ■

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