

UNDERWATER EDUCATORS

Lee Somers

by Eric Hanauer photos courtesy of Lee Somers

GROWING UP ON A FARM in the flatlands of Illinois is hardly conducive to becoming a diving pioneer. Yet Lee Somers found a way to get underwater and make an impression in the worlds of Florida cave diving and university research. A college dropout and self-confessed diving bum, Lee eventually earned a Ph.D. and organized the nationally recognized program at the University of Michigan. He was the first president of the American Academy of Underwater Sciences, and is godfather of the Michigan Mafia, a group of young turks who have changed the way we look at diving.



Brett Gilliam coined the term Michigan Mafia. It describes a group of instructors who came out of Lee Somers' intensive summer training courses at the University of Michigan. They include Paul Heinmiller, Bruce Wienke, Karl Huggins, Dan Orr and Phil Sharkey. All of them are running scientific diving programs at universities, or are on the cutting edge of today's decompression theory. Somers states, "One thing came out of that group; nobody ever told them what to do. It's a collection of people who are very independent minded, who truly love diving. Although all of us are affiliated with NAUI, we don't go around beating the bush for them; it's diving... Diving came first, not beating the drum for an agency."



DIVING

IVING HAS COME FIRST for Lee Somers all his life. It began in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois where his father was a tenant farmer, and there never was much money in the family. His mother made him join the Boy Scouts to learn swimming. Eventually he became a lifeguard and counselor at the scout camp in the area. One of Lee's fondest memories is of the day his mother brought him a pair of Owen Churchill fins for his birthday. The camp was in central Illinois strip mine country, and Lee did his first free diving in those flooded holes in the ground. "I didn't want anything in the world but those damn fins, and she saved up to buy them for me. In the early 50's I (had seen) *Silent World*. Two people made an impression on me in those days: Jacques Cousteau, and Richard Widmark in the movie *Frogman*."

At 16, he got a job lifeguarding in the town pool, a concrete oval about the size of a football field and 18 feet deep. Part of his duty was cleaning the bottom, using an old Jack Browne full-face mask, and air supplied from the surface by an

OPPOSITE PAGE: Lee in the mid 50's diving the Illinois strip mine. ABOVE LEFT: After a dive, from left to right; Tom Mount, Jim Sibthrop, (left rear), Lee Somers and Jim Nums (right rear), 1992. ABOVE: Lee suiting up for a commercial dive in Tampa Bay, early 1960s.

decompression stops." There were no organized groups yet, but cave divers made it their business to read the diving literature of the time: the Navy manual, the manual supplied with the Aqualung, and E.R. Cross' **Underwater Safety**.

Somers recalls one of his favorite dive sites of the early days. "We would go to one little spring...with a good, swift current. We would tie a line, drop into the cave, and ride the line until it whipped us out to the end, then pull ourselves back. At 60 feet underwater, it was just like a carnival ride. Once I got out to the maximum extent of the line, started looking around, and got into an alcove where the current wasn't as strong. When I turned around, the other two guys had gone and the line was nowhere in sight. I had a light, but was a couple of hundred feet back in (not a lot by today's standard), had no pressure gauge, no buddies, and no line. Fortunately I just stayed close to the wall and worked my way out. The light went out about 75 feet from the

entrance. I wasn't even upset with my buddies, but today I'd have killed them.

"The good divers of those days didn't just say, 'I'm a diver,' and jump off into 300 feet of water. You understood your environment. Everything was done in increments. People ask, 'What did diving in that swimming pool do for you?' I learned complete absolute relaxation, being at one with the water and with the apparatus. It was hours and hours of repetitive experience.

Lee's regular buddy of the time was Don Leadbeater, another pioneer cave diver. "In the early 60's, Don found a pond in a swamp area near Weeki Watchee Springs, with an opening that went straight down into a cave. We called it **Leadbeater's Sink**; today the name is **Eagle's Nest**. It is probably one of the most famous cave diving locations in Florida. I went with Don and another diver, so I count myself as the third person in there. We went to a depth of about 230 feet. You swim through a 60-foot shaft that opens into a large room. When shin-

ing our lights down there, it was just like dropping through the ceiling of a big auditorium. As far as we could see, it was just beautiful."

During the summers, Lee would return to Illinois. It was there he finally received his first certification, as an instructor with the Illinois Council of Skin and Scuba Divers in 1960. A year later he was part of the first YMCA instructor course run in Chicago, the second in the nation. "The people who certified me had just certified themselves that morning." They included the gurus of local diving: Dan Wagner, Skeet La Chance, Vern Pedersen, Joe Strykowski, and Ray Hoglund.

"During the years between colleges I would describe myself as a diving bum." Florida had been fun, but now it was time to go back to school. He enrolled in the University of Illinois, and in three years graduated with a degree in physical education. Lee earned part of his expenses by selling dive equipment out of his home, and teach-

ing classes on campus and at the local YMCA. Skeet La Chance had set him up as a dealer. "I didn't make a lot of money, but learned about the diving industry."

He earned a trip to California for the national spearfishing championships, as a member of the Illinois team. Tryouts were held in Lamont Quarry, but nobody hit a

fish. So they moved the operation to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where candidates were tested on their breath-hold diving ability. "One dive earned my trip back there. They had us diving down to these people in scuba on the bottom, and swim around for them. They kept moving progressively deeper, to 70 to 75 feet. I swam down and slapped

one of them in the head. Next thing I knew I was on an airplane to California, with my weight belt strapped around my waist.

"During my first experiences in California I never had a tank on. What a wonderful group of people. Folks like Jim Christensen and Del Wren welcomed us with open arms. I remember somehow my shoes got locked in the back of Gustav Dalla Valle's car and we had to chase him down in a restaurant to get them back. Jim helped me load six-packs of Coors into my airplane bag because it wasn't available on our side of the Mississippi. One of the reasons I'm in diving is that we're a family. We have our disputes, but when I go anyplace in the world, I have family there."

Back at the University of Illinois, Somers entered a master's program in geology. Then he received a call from his former advisor, Jack Hough, who had moved to the University of Michigan. They needed somebody to start a diving program. "Jack said I should work on my Ph.D. I said, 'I don't want a Ph.D.' He said, 'You'll need it and you're going to get it.'" Lee finished in 1969, and was hired at Michigan to teach physical education, oceanography, and work with Sea Grant, one of the first such programs in the nation. He has been there ever since.

During summers, Lee worked as a commercial diver any place he could find an assignment. He and Bob Anderson brought their experience with surface-supplied gear back to the university, where it was introduced to scientific divers. It was used in geological and biological studies throughout the Great Lakes. Ultimately they began doing saturation diving as well, in Hydrolab at Freeport and St. Croix.

"In the early 70's I went with Joe McInnis and was asked to participate on Arctic One. I crossed the border with a Zodiac boat and a station wagon packed solid with everything you could think of. We loaded it all on a Canadian Forces C-130 and headed for the high Arctic. This was the first of Joe's many ventures into the area. Four of us stayed two weeks in Resolute Bay, living in a tent part of the time and diving. It was science, it was adventure, testing whether a small expedition of this nature could be done."

Dissatisfied with the textbooks avail-

able for his classes, Somers wrote the first research diving manual, which was published by Sea Grant in 1972 and circulated throughout the country. Unlike Connie Limbaugh's Scripps manual which merely outlined rules and procedures, this was an instructional book in loose-leaf form, covering everything from diving theory to underwater transects. The reason for the loose-leaf format was to make it easy to update. Two years later that became obsolete when NOAA published its diving manual. Somers was on the editorial committee which produced that book.

The American Academy of Underwater Sciences was originally formed in California to combat OSHA's attempts to regulate scientific diving under commercial rules. When the battle was won, its founders realized that a need still existed to disseminate information on techniques, share knowledge, and present a united front in future battles with regulatory bureaucracies. To do that effectively, they would have to go national. And to attract members from other areas, the first president would have to be somebody outside California. They selected one of the founding members, Lee Somers. Today, AAUS is a leading worldwide organization for diving scientists.

Looking at the state of diving today, Somers voiced a few concerns. "People today go from beginner to instructor in (less) time than it took us to know what we were really doing at 30 feet underwater. In fact, I'm still learning how to be a diver.

"I don't classify most people coming into diving today as divers. They haven't paid their dues. Also, we experienced divers are losing our rights. We are treated the same as a person who just took a basic course. (You) go to a resort and... you are talked down to, you are treated like this incompetent moron who is there to kill himself, destroy the reef, and destroy their business.

"We need to bring back the diver's rights. That's the reason for my involvement with tri-mix and nitrox. Every diver shouldn't be diving deep, or diving gases. All of us thoroughly believe that. It's a matter of extending our capabilities. All diving is accepting a certain level of risk. My range will be whatever I deem proper for

the particular set of circumstances. That varies from day to day, environment to environment, and who I'm with. I've been at far greater risk with some people at 30 feet than with Tom Mount at 270."

Reminiscing on his life and career, Lee says, "I will be remembered for being a pain in the ass for a lot of people, and for

the positive influence I might have had on thousands of students... Diving gave me a life, diving gave me a family. Today I have my heroes, from all different ranks: George Bond, Ed Lanphier, Vern Pedersen, Glen Egstrom, Jim Corry, Karl Huggins, Mike Hughes, Larry Cushman, Tom Mount, to name a few. ●