

There goes the sun: Saying goodbye to Dick Bacon

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Dick Bacon would have loved his memorial service, except for the fact that it was indoors and everyone was clothed.

More than 150 people who loved and admired and got naked with this true American original filled the Max A. Sass & Sons Greenridge Chapel on S. 60th St. Wednesday.

They urged each other not to be sad for the man who lived life on his own terms for 67 years, was gentle and generous, played a million games of volleyball, lobbied for nude beaches, had Milwaukee's best suntan when -- and after -- it was fashionable, and, as they say, left a beautiful corpse when a heart attack took him last week.

And it was a heart attack, an autopsy found. Skin cancer? No sign of it.

Our lakefront will never be the same. The "Love Rock" is long gone, and now beach emperor Dick Bacon has passed on. Please tell me the Polar Bears haven't called it quits and headed for the hot showers.

I talked to Bacon on the telephone a few days before he died. We agreed to meet on Bradford Beach on a sunny subzero day next January and hang out in his toasty tent of foil reflectors.

Long before I learned his real name, my friends and I used to call him Mr. Bradford. I always thought he looked like Charles Atlas, the muscle man in the comic books who urged 98-pound weaklings like me to send in for his secrets of thwarting sand-kicking bullies.

Bacon was telling me he's been tan every day since the 1960s. And he laughed when he said his phone number was easy to remember: DEW DICK.

At the memorial service, his sister-in-law, Marlene Bacon, unfolded a paper and read something Bacon had written about how he found spirituality at the beach rather than at church. Once he woke after sleeping on the edge of the Pacific Ocean and found a seal dozing next to him.

"There's nothing else for me but the sun, the sand and the sea," he wrote.

For nine years in the 1960s there was also a wife, Connie, but she told the gathering that she lost him to the beach, his jealous lover. But they remained friends.

She still remembers that when she first wanted to know his name, he said, "Bacon, wanna strip?"

"I came from a Catholic school where I never saw a body like his," she said.

Countless people saw his body in art classes where Bacon, a retired brewery worker, bared his beach bum. Art instructors at his memorial said they will have to scramble now to find someone to model nude for their students.

Kristine Gunther, who has been drawing Bacon for years and taught art at Carroll College, walked to the microphone and said, "Dick was beautiful and strong and resolute in his poses. I thought he brought the sun into a dark room."

Bacon's body was cremated this week. There was talk at the memorial about scattering his ashes at Bradford Beach. There also was a call to erect a statue of Bacon on the beach, not as a hero of war like so many statues in Milwaukee, but as a symbol of individuality and a free spirit.

A bust of Bacon was on a table at the funeral home, along with photos and sketches of the man; a license plate D BACON; a volleyball; trophies won by Bacon as Mr. Nude America in 1973, Mr. Nude Apollo in 1976 and 1981 and Mr. Nude Galaxy in 1977, among others; and a homemade floral arrangement from friends Sally Kolf and Jimmy Von Milwaukee with a little beach and two naked dolls, one male and one female.

Paul Kekoa played a farewell song to Bacon on a ukulele, and a professor friend said it's ironic that such a decent guy would ever have been busted for indecent exposure.

Bacon once said he got hate mail from people who resented his life of fun and sun.

"Well, what can I say? I was born without a lot of ambition. Instead, I've always had a need to feel completely free -- to be responsible to no one, to do only those things that make me free and happy."

Dick Bacon. The name said it all.

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