

Spa owner was eager youth — with an idea

Fifth in a series

By SUSAN THOMAS and FRANK GIBSON
Gannett News Service



David Simpson

The story of the "Tennessee Connection" is complex, but how it all began is simple.

It started with David Simpson, a young man with ambition. "When I go after a goal, I know what to do," he says.

In 1974, Simpson was only 24, eager for adventure and restless for success, and he already had a head start. While many of his friends were directionless and disillusioned after an era of war, Watergate and acid rock, Simpson was opening his first business, a health spa.

Since Simpson conceived a unique, low-priced membership formula to open that first health club in Huntsville, Ala., he has hopscotched the country using that formula to open or sell memberships in 29 spas in 21 cities and 16 states. Eleven of the spas have since closed. Eight never opened for business, although he made refunds. He is no longer connected with any of the clubs.

Simpson's wife, Sheryl — a tall, curvaceous blonde and mother of their two young daughters — has helped her husband establish the spas. While she has worked as an instructor in some of them, her most visible role has been modeling skimpy bathing suits for photographs in newspaper advertisements.

Earlier articles in this series have described a "network" of entrepreneurs who worked independently and in small groups to open at least 98 spas in 26 states, 72 of which have closed since 1977. In 21 other locations, membership contracts were sold but the spas never opened. In seven of those, refunds were never made.

More than 150,000 women paid \$5 million to the clubs that closed or never opened.

Simpson maintains strongly that he is not responsible for the spa closings.

Simpson happened into the fitness industry naturally: As a well-built teen-ager, he designed his own physical regimen and competed in a number of weight-lifting competitions.

In high school, Simpson's muscles

were already well-toned, and he had developed into a good-looking, dark-haired man with an engaging personality. He dressed neatly. He laughed easily. And he spoke well, winning listeners with his smooth, even voice.

After graduation from high school in Niagra Falls, N.Y., Simpson sought a college where he could further his favorite interests, body-building and religion. He found what he was looking for in the Evangel College of Springfield, Mo., a liberal arts school owned by the Assemblies of God church.

It was then, about 1969, that he entered the world of health spas, taking a part-time job at a club in Springfield. He took the job to earn extra

spending money, but he soon discovered he liked the work.

His boss, August Mansker, had owned spas in California. The two soon became fast friends, with Mansker teaching and Simpson quickly grasping business techniques.

It was then that Simpson developed the theory that most women who join health clubs lose interest after a few months and do not return. He concluded that it made sense to offer long-term memberships at a lower price and get a higher volume of sales.

After two and a half years of college, Simpson grew impatient for the "real" world. He decided to quit school and go to work, easily finding jobs in several health clubs.

About 1970, he and his new wife, Sheryl, moved south to Nashville to be near Simpson's parents, now living in Huntsville.

With over two years of experience in the business, Simpson quickly found a job at one an expensive club in nearby Nashville, Tenn. He was named manager and soon began making friends and getting to know the city.

While the position at the spa would have been a dream job for another young man, Simpson wanted more. After working in other people's clubs and taking other people's orders, he decided by June 1974 that it was time to open a spa of his own.

It was then that Simpson and his young wife decided to move to Huntsville and open their first club.

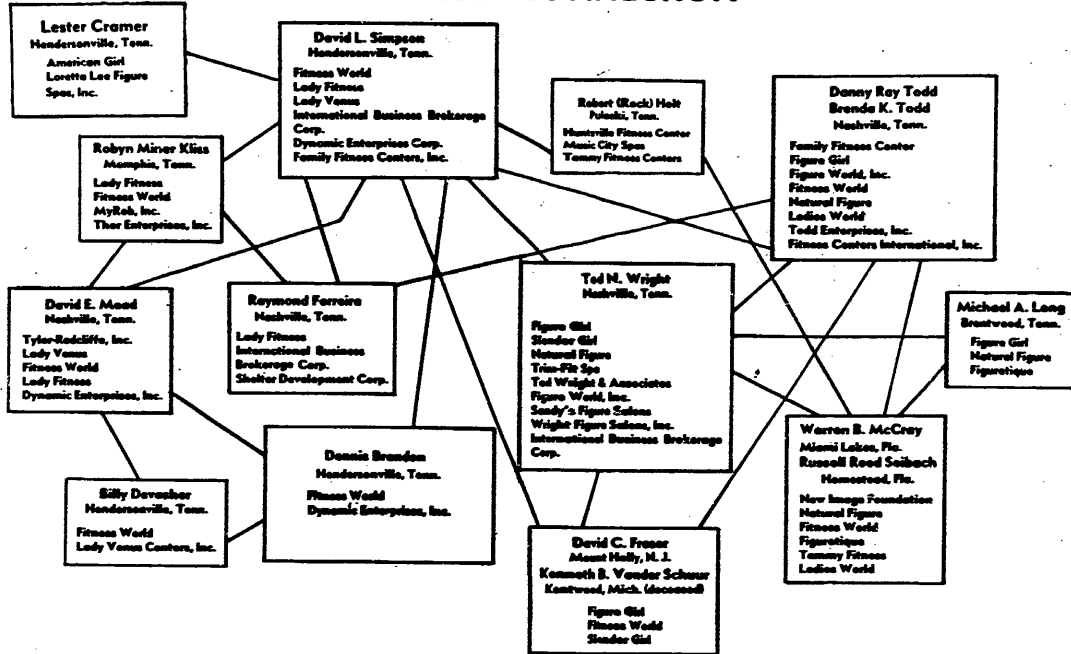
Before opening the spa's doors, Simpson carefully formulated his strategy, combining his own experience with the concept he had developed while working for Mansker.

He expanded the concept one step: After selling the club and becoming a "consultant," he would find another location and begin all over again.

"I figured that after I had developed five or six successful clubs, I could be a consultant for each one," Simpson explained. "That way, I wouldn't have to put in 12-hour days, but I'd still have the benefit of being in the clubs."

"I figured I would have a good income and have an income that spread over several cities. That way, if one city had a good month, a bad month or whatever, I wouldn't have to

'THE TENNESSEE CONNECTION'



depend on one club. It was a sound concept."

For Simpson, the concept was indeed sound. In the years to come, he would draw "consultant" salaries from clubs in San Antonio, Texas, Indianapolis and Cleveland, among others.

That first club, the Huntsville Fitness Center, opened in June 1974.

"Special" advertisements were splashed on the pages of the local newspaper, while others blared on radios, promising the chance of "Health Club Memberships; Gift Certificates; 1,000 Top Value stamps; an AM/FM radio; Steak Dinners; or 15 gallons of gasoline."

When the club opened, the Huntsville Better Business Bureau received complaints from consumers who said they had been lured into the spa by written notices informing them that they had won "free" two-year mem-

berships, only to discover that they had to pay \$78 in "maintenance fees."

Despite the complaints, the health club prospered through the summer, and Simpson decided to sell half his interest so that he could act mostly as a "consultant."

Robert Holt appeared to be the perfect partner. He had grown up nearby and shared Simpson's interest in weight-lifting.

They joined together and initially the partnership flourished. By January 1975, Simpson and Holt decided to open a second club on the other side of town.

The second spa, like the first, did well during the first few months. But by the middle of the year, problems arose between the partners, Simpson said.

By the fall of 1975, Simpson had decided to dissolve the partnership and sell the clubs. But plans were stalled.

"Rock went and abandoned the club, completely abandoned it and left town," Simpson said.

Holt became the first of many to take Simpson's health spa concept and open a club of his own. His sudden departure and the subsequent closing of one of the two clubs led to the first in a long chain of problems with Simpson's spas. The second club closed shortly thereafter.

Members who paid for memberships, suddenly had nowhere to go.

Holt could not be located for comment, but the lawsuit blames Simpson. Latham says it was Simpson's name on the lease when the clubs closed, and that Simpson still owes \$1,700 in back rent.

While Simpson's first health spa endeavor ended in disaster, he was not ready to give up on his plan.

NEXT: The concept catches on.

Illinois news

Judge's role changes; sues wife for divorce

CHICAGO (AP) — A judge who met his wife-to-be when he heard her divorce case is approaching the bench from the other side — this time to sue the unemployed woman for divorce and support.

Judge John Kaufman, 56, a nine-year veteran of the Lake County family division, filed a pretrial petition last week asking for temporary support, attorney's fees and courtroom costs from his 51-year-old wife, Crystal.

The case is expected to come before Cook County's chief divorce division judge, Charles Fleck, whose own 1979 divorce was heard by Kaufman.

The "whole situation is highly unusual and somewhat embarrassing," said Fleck, who said he will assign the case to someone else.

Kaufman met his wife six years ago when she was in the middle of a divorce in Lake County Circuit Court. He "isolated himself midway through the case because, he said, he had become "emotionally involved with one of the litigants."

They were married a month after her divorce. According to the petition filed in Cook County, Kaufman is "without sufficient income to pay his

current obligations," despite a yearly salary of \$50,500.

The petition says the judge is entitled to support because he paid maintenance and taxes on his wife's property and increased its value by \$175,000 during their six-year marriage.

"That's rubbish. He's just being vindictive," said Mrs. Kaufman, who is countering for similar payments.

"John was never an easy man to live with. Now it seems that from the very start, he was more in love with my divorce settlement than me," she said.

Kaufman declined comment on the case. Estranged husbands are becoming increasingly likely to sue for support, according to former Judge Roy Guley, director of the Administrative Office of Illinois Courts, which regulates state courts.

"This is undoubtedly an unusual case," said Guley. "But just because a man's a judge doesn't mean you can deny him access to the courts. Judges are human beings. Faced with stressful personal situations, we hurt and cry and become temporarily irrational just like anybody else."

Recent shootings hike bulletproof-vest sales

CHICAGO (AP) — The railroad yard was dark and deserted at 3:45 a.m. as security guard Joseph Busse made his rounds. Suddenly, a gunshot echoed in the silence and Busse felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder.

He had been struck by a high-powered bullet, either a .38-caliber or .357-caliber magnum. But he went home Thursday morning with nothing more than a nasty bruise, thanks to his bulletproof vest.

"Nobody knew whether these vests worked or not," Busse said. "Now we know. I think I'll live in it."

A growing number of law enforcement officers, security guards, and even public figures such as President Reagan are heeding the lesson Busse learned and buying bulletproof vests costing as much as \$500.

The shootings of Reagan, former Beatle John Lennon and Pope John Paul II have done much to spark the current interest in such vests, according to Roger H. Comstock, vice president of Burns International Security Service.

"Rock stars, many top rock stars, especially since Lennon was shot," Comstock said. "Businessmen, from top executives down to the small businessman who runs a liquor store or gas station."

Illinois state police are outfitting officers with vests, as are Lake County sheriff's police. FBI agents wear vests during hostage situations and pursuits of fugitives, and one merchant who sells vests estimates 15 percent of Chicago policemen wear them.

Vests come in varying degrees of weapon resistance, from light models intended to stop .22-caliber bullets and knives to a 20-pound, heavy-duty

'Nobody knew whether these (bulletproof) vests worked or not. Now we know.'

Joseph Busse

SWAT team jacket with a steel breastplate designed to stop a rifle shot.

One Chicago policeman, Thomas Fallon, bought a vest after a bullet whizzed past him while he and his partner interrupted a home invasion.

"That was too close," Fallon recalled. "I decided it was time to buy a bulletproof vest. I did that the next day. It was the best investment I ever made."

A week after he bought the vest, he and his partner were trying to flush out a sniper when "I felt like I was hit with a brick in my back." The gunman escaped, and Fallon didn't know he had been struck by a bullet until a slug dropped to the floor as he removed the vest.

Fallon still has a pinched nerve from the incident. He also has a new vest, provided under the manufacturer's policy of replacing any vest which absorbs a bullet. And he wears it.

"Believe me, I went to mass the next morning, after having been shot square in the back and living to tell about it," Fallon said. "I hate to think where I'd be now if I hadn't been wearing that vest."

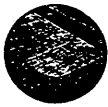
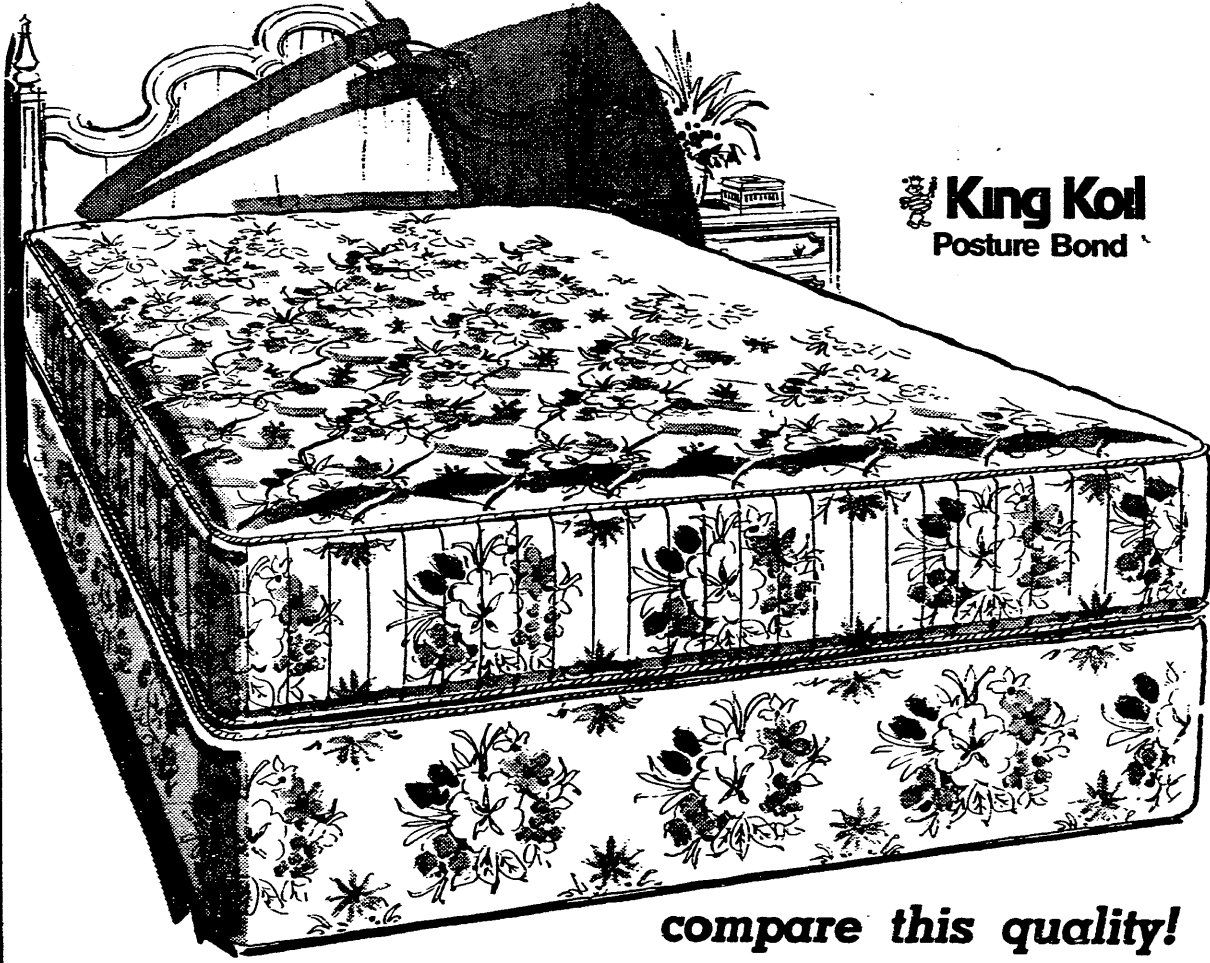
enforcing inspection regulations.

Those include regular reviews by federal inspectors and withdrawing inspection services entirely, he said.

"USDA will continue to undertake legal proceedings in those few instances where normal controls cannot achieve compliance with inspection regulations," he said.

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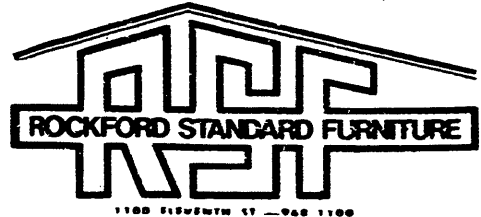
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