



the duke of hollywood costumes

Hitchhiking more than 1,800 miles from Ruleville, Mississippi to Los Angeles, opened a whole new world for Luster Bayless.

by sharon morris | photography by rory doyle



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: From Los Angeles, Ruleville native Luster Bayless runs one of the world's foremost costume shops for the television and movie industry. Housed in a former dry goods store in Ruleville, the museum allows visitors to connect with Hollywood history and experience Bayless' brushes with stardom without ever leaving Mississippi. In his museum, Bayless shares costumes, memorabilia, and other artifacts from his decades-long career. From all branches of the military, to western wear and more modern clothing, his collection boasts pieces that can outfit from head to toe any genre covering a 200-year period of American History. Bayless has worked with many celebrities, including Ronald Reagan.

Growing up as the son of a sharecropper in the small Delta town of Ruleville, Luster Bayless knew about hard work. While he didn't mind working, he dreamed of something different for his own future. Decades later, his perseverance paid off as he earned a solid gold reputation as Hollywood's go-to man for costumes and costume design.

Bayless' big break came after high school and after a two-year service in the U.S. Navy. "I went home to Mississippi and started playing football on scholarship at a junior college, but my mind was on something else," he says. "When my friend Jimmy George called and told me he had lined up an interview for me in Los Angeles, I left immediately, hitchhiking the entire way. There were so many people interviewing for the job, but I looked the man in the eye and told him to give me anything he had."

George, who grew up with Bayless and served in the Navy with him, had an uncle who worked in Hollywood. His uncle got George a job a few months before he called Bayless to join him. "That job was working in the same costume house where my uncle got me a job," George explains. "The costume house trained us well, about fabrics, costumes, every aspect of the job. I was approached by someone from Paramount to work on a Jerry Lewis film. Luster stayed at the shop and was later approached to work on a John Wayne movie, which he took, and the rest is history! That's how they met and became friends."

It was in 1963, on the set of "McLintock!" with John Wayne, lovingly called "The Duke," that Bayless made an impression. The Duke went on to hire Bayless for all of his future projects, and the two forged a friendship that lasted until Wayne's death. "He knew my story and appreciated anyone who worked hard. He was loyal to me, and I was loyal to him," Bayless recalls. "He was like a second father to me at many times, and knowing him made me a better man. I made sure I told him that, too."

After more than 20 years working first in a costume shop and then for several movie studios, Bayless decided to open his own shop. Bayless started his company, United American Costume Company, in his garage. His innovative approach to the movie "Tom Horn," starring Steve McQueen, sealed his reputation as an honest, talented costume provider and designer. "Tom Horn" was the first time that an independent company furnished the entire wardrobe crew and costumes, all while guaranteeing the wardrobe budget. "No one had ever done that before, but we did a great job," he shares. "It changed the way studios viewed the wardrobe and costume service."

Today, United American Costume Company is run by his daughter, Diana Foster, and includes 70,000 square feet of space with costume pieces covering a number of genres in American history from the 1770s to 1970s. Wanting his garments to reflect authentic American style, Bayless built

his collection by buying vintage garments and collections from studios as they shut down their wardrobe departments. He also fashioned articles of clothing and hats to fit the occasion and period. From western wear to military and civilian uniforms, Bayless' company can outfit men, women, and children from head to toe. The company also provides training to people working on sets, as well as to newcomers to the costume business, so they know how to properly use and protect the clothes.

The list of films and TV projects featuring Bayless' work is extensive. In addition to John Wayne, Bayless was responsible for outfitting cast members of "NCIS," "Apocalypse Now," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "Mary Poppins," and many more. "This has been a wonderful career, and I'm so proud to now have my daughter running the shop," he adds. "I gave people my word, and I kept it. That's really how I got started and how I built my reputation. Seeing the work continue through her means a lot to me."

Though he built a career in Hollywood and now splits his time between there and Mississippi, Bayless' heart has always been in Ruleville. Wanting to share stories from movies and other projects he has worked on with his hometown, Bayless bought an old dry goods clothing store in Ruleville that he converted into the Luster Bayless Hollywood Costume Museum. There, he displays memorabilia and clothing from many of his projects, including John Wayne

films, "Tom Horn," "Appaloosa," and "Django Unchained," among others. Outfits worn by Marilyn Monroe, Sam Elliott, and Brad Pitt are just a few of the nearly 1,000 articles on display. The museum also houses one of Bayless' most treasured possessions—the costume box left to him by Seth Banks, George's uncle who gave George and him their starts in Hollywood. All of the proceeds from the museum are donated to the John Wayne Cancer Institute.

"It is wonderful that the museum is in Ruleville, and people really should go see it," George adds. "Not only because I'm so proud of my friend, but because it showcases a part of American history that you really cannot see anywhere else."

"This life has allowed me to really take care of my family. I was able to give my parents a nice house and to provide for my own children. It has been wonderful," Bayless says. "I share it through the museum. It really is American history, and I'm so proud to have the museum here. I hope Mississippians will come see it and share a part of this extraordinary history. I hand picked what is here because I wanted to protect it for everyone to see." M