

If you ask a guy in construction what his top five dream projects would be, chances are renovation of the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles, CA would be one of them.

For **Rick Watson**, president of **Surmac, Inc.**, his dream project came true. Not only did Watson and his team do restoration work at the Playboy Mansion, they also got a glimpse into a legend. Watson said he cemented great relationships, including one with a very curious feathered friend.

"It wasn't what I expected," Watson said. "It was a very tightly controlled business. Everyone hopes to get a peak at the girls lying around the pool. The girls were there, but it's not what you think. Not a bunch of people running around naked all the time. They had a couple of photo shoots while we were there, but they were out rollerblading and all the girls had their dogs out there parading around – just those types of photos. All their photos for the magazine are taken down in Los Angeles at another facility."

Watson said he met Hugh Hefner in person, and yes, he does wear a bathrobe every day. Watson made a number of other discoveries while at the Playboy Mansion, and it all started with a phone call from **John Snowden** with **Foxfire Enterprises**, a supplier in California, who had an inquiry from Playboy about waterproofing the mansion.

Surmac, a specialty contractor of building restoration, waterproofing, specialty coatings, masonry and concrete repair, is known nationally for its waterproofing systems.

"We did a survey of the building and gave them a scenario of what needed to

Playboy or bust



Work begins at the Playboy Mansion.

be done," Watson said. "We identified, I think, 65 leaks in the building, with one of the most predominant leaks being in Mr. Hefner's bedroom.

"We loaded up our vehicles and went out there around the first of December. They were trying to get ready for Christmas and some parties they were having, so it was very tight schedule. There were five of us.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and we met a lot of really wonderful people. They treated us like kings out there. It was one of the nicest places we have ever worked."

One perk Watson did not expect was the food prepared by chefs in the mansion's 24-hour kitchen for Watson and his team.

"The place has a staff of 32 people, working there full time, and most of the people that work there are third-generation people that have worked for Mr. Hefner."

Watson said aircraft flew over the

mansion each day, from helicopters to the Goodyear Blimp. "It's a constant barrage all day long – sightseeing buses, all kinds of stuff. We would leave the job at night and go out the back gate. We would walk through the gate and all the sightseeing buses would be taking pictures of us."

The 21,000-sf Playboy Mansion is located on 5.2 acres. "It looks like a giant place, but it backs up to the Los Angeles Country Club. Mr. Hefner bought the house in 1971 and his girlfriend at the time was Barbie Benton. One of the decks we redid was the one she used to sunbathe on all the time. She had to finally stop because there were so many airplanes flying over bothering her."

Watson said most people do not know that the Playboy Mansion has a zoo license. "They have a very extensive collection of zoo primates and very exotic and rare birds."

One bird named Spot, took a liking to Watson. "The girls hate them. They at-

tack the girls and bite them all the time. But when I got there, Spot for some reason, took up with me and would not leave my side. Every place I walked, he walked with me. If the other birds came around he put out his wings. He had about an 8ft. wingspan and it was a very, very scary sight.

"Even when I would go outside the gate to get something, he would figure how to get the gate open. I would look back and he was running behind me. Hank Fawcett is in charge of all the facilities there, and said, 'I have never seen anything like this. He has never acted like this with anybody.' They told me when they have the eggs, they are sending me one down here to hatch. We will probably have Spot Junior here this spring.

"Another interesting thing is the grotto. It's like a cave. They built it by piling up a bunch of sand and putting rocks on top of the sand. Then they cemented all the rocks together and vacuumed out the sand. It has three or four hot tubs and some other very private areas around the back of it, and you would swim from the pool to inside the grotto – and I will leave it at that."

Watson said some of the mansion's original décor from the '70s was still intact, including the rotary-dial telephones. "Technology is not in the cards at that place. They have an old heater in the basement for heating water from 1932.

"On Friday nights they have movie night there. A lot of his old friends would come over and they would show movies in the living room. They would set up a bar on the back porch and have music playing on loudspeakers that was like Rudy Vallee from like old, old Hollywood. It was so neat being in that setting and hearing that music."

Watson did not leave the Playboy Mansion empty-handed. For a job well done, he received a package from Playboy, which included some special books. Watson also has an invitation to one of the Playboy parties this year.

"Unless you know me it sounds like a very tall tale," Watson said. "But we work all over the United States. We've worked on the Titanic and we worked on the Saturn Five Rocket. The processes we developed for stopping water intrusion are getting to be well known."

Watson said the problems the Playboy Mansion had were the result of earthquakes over the years that created leaks. In addition to the waterproofing, Surmac installed five roofs and worked on the swimming pool and grotto, in conjunction with Nick Bowman Construction and Acme Flood from California. –kf



Rick Watson is not sure if Spot (the bird) was attracted by a similar hair cut, or Watson's love of animals.

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The staff at **J C Industries** in Selma, TX received their new company hats and shirts just in time for a photo for *Construction News*. L-R: **Diana De Santiago, Steve Jackson, Michael Bauman, David Jackson** and **Mirta Jackson**. –kf