

HOW FLASH LED TO CASH

Cactus Jack has made a fortune promoting his 1-Shot cleaners on the QVC network, and he does it all from his home base in Ames.

By JANE BURNS
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

Ames, Ia. — Anyone who thinks succeeding in business requires the right suit and the right degree should meet Cactus Jack.

He's got the expensive suits, all right — but somehow, flashy cowboy outfits made by Elvis Presley's tailor aren't the kind of thing that generally gets somebody in *Business Week* magazine.

And the degree? A diploma from Atlantic High School is the only one Cactus Jack earned, and even then his main occupation was day-dreaming.

Yet this guy, whose name on that diploma is Jack Barringer, has seen those dreams come true. The Ames entrepreneur/spokesman/goodball has parlayed his product and marketing ideas into star status on cable's QVC shopping network.

"I tell people my No. 1 claim to fame is that I'm 55 years old and I've never had a job in my life," Barringer said. "The main reason is, I'm fully aware that on the first day of any job, I'd be fired."

On his own, Barringer made a few million peddling arm-wrestling machines, then lost millions when the machines broke a few arms. His latest fortune was built from the ashes of past failures, which is almost as rewarding to Barringer as what that fortune can buy.

Cactus Jack's line of 1-Shot cleaners, all hawked on television, have been hugely popular. His all-purpose cleaner has sold 5 million units since he first showed up on QVC in 1996.

"I really haven't had a job — it's been one entrepreneurial project after another," Barringer said. "You win some, you lose some."

As a boy, Barringer always wanted to make money. He sold garden seeds door to door and did whatever it took to make a few bucks. He wanted

success, but he didn't have a clue how to make it happen. And it didn't occur to him that school would offer any answers.

"I'd stare out the windows and see an airplane fly by, and I'd be totally fascinated, thinking, 'Man, some day I'm going to have me one of them,'" Barringer said. "The teacher was up there rattling about something that wasn't important, and I was wondering how to get that airplane. They don't teach you those things at school."

After graduating in 1961 ("second in my class — from the bottom," he brags), Barringer worked a variety of jobs until realizing that he wasn't succeeding because there were things he just didn't know. He went on a quest to educate himself, reading books on successful entrepreneurs, businessmen and powerful thinkers.

"I call them my friends in higher places — Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Hill, Andrew Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale," he said. "Those are the books that just obsessed me."

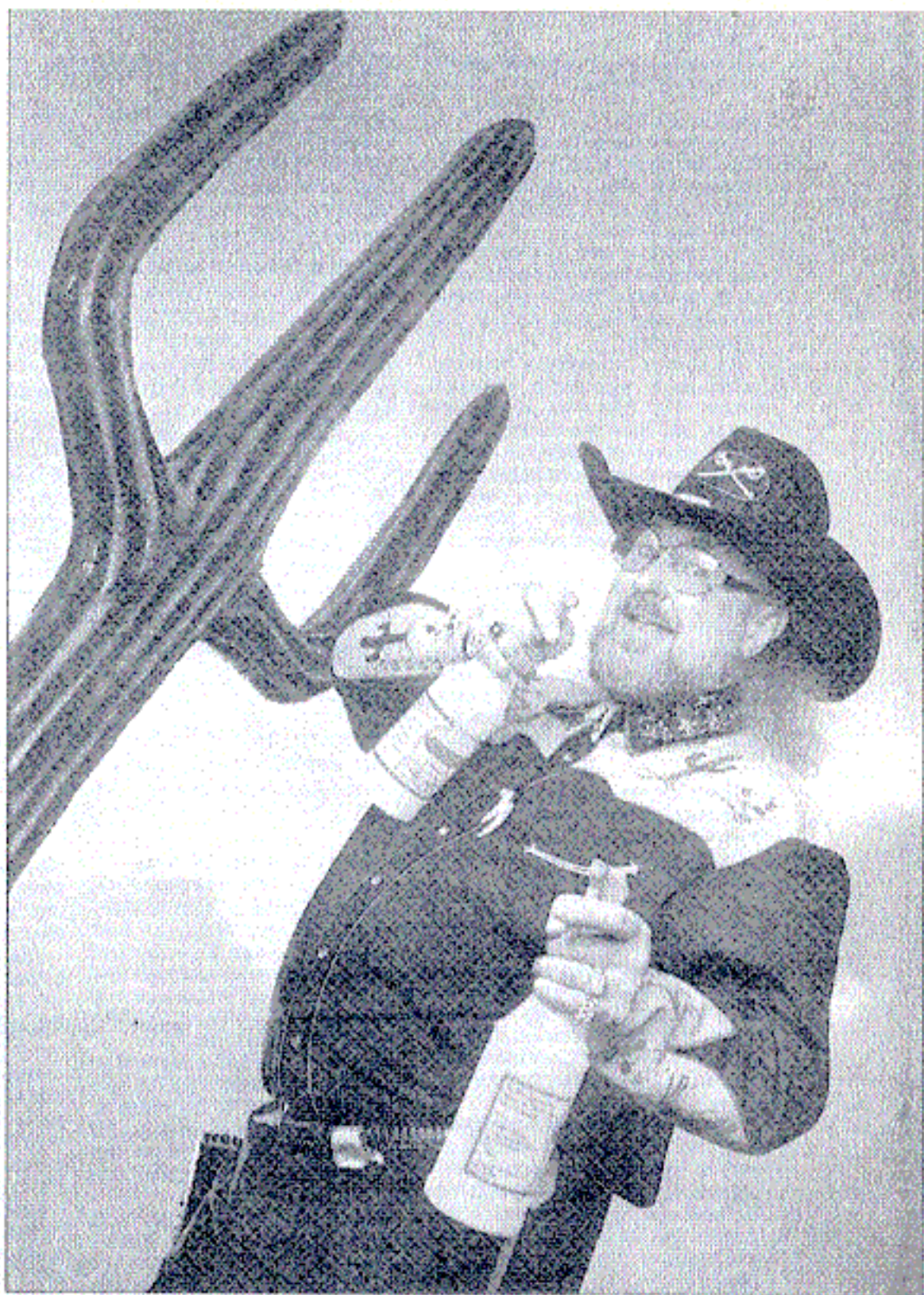
Barringer read and absorbed. Realizing success could mean nothing more than commitment to a good idea, he searched for the idea. While struggling with a friend over a wiggly bar in a pseudo-arm-wrestling match in a tavern, Barringer came up with the idea:

An arm-wrestling machine. He took a steel pipe and some handlebars to a welder to get a general idea of how a machine could help the sport.

"They say that if you want to make a lot of money, you've got to find a need and fill it, or find a problem and solve it," he said. "Well, I always remembered that."

"In arm-wrestling, there was always controversy about the arm lengths or the grip, so I built a machine that eliminated those."

In 1978, after 19 prototypes, Barringer had his Monster



Cactus Jack, at the cactus in front of his Ames business, is cleaning up as — he calls it — an "entremanure."

RODNEY WHITE/SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Arm-Wrestling Machine. Instead of selling the machine to bars or individuals, Barringer sold the machine along with a franchise to hold arm-wrestling tournaments. The first was staged at the Iowa State Fair; eventually tournaments were held world-wide.

By age 35, Barringer was a millionaire. He came up with other ideas, too. His Uncle Tug indoor tag-of-war machine debuted at the legendary Studio 54 in its heyday. He created a Celebrity Shower that worked like a dunk tank powered by darts.

Then, the joyride ended. "You know the expression, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it?' Well, I fixed it," Barringer said.

In 1984, a new, improved machine sold just as well. Left-handers could wrestle right-handers. Couples could

Cactus Jack Barringer

● **Hometown:** Atlantic, but has lived in Ames for more than 20 years.

● **Age:** 55.

● **Occupation:** Entrepreneur and company spokesman for Cactus Jack's Marketing Corp. "I tell people I'm from Iowa," he said. "I'm not an entrepreneur, I'm an *entremanure*."

● **Family:** Has been married to his wife, Eny, for 36 years. They were childhood sweethearts. "I can tell you what, that woman's been on a wild ride,"

he said.

Two daughters, Darcy and Kelly, and five grandchildren. "If they see me on TV, they'll run up to the screen and say, 'There's Grandpa Cactus.' They just love it when they play cowboys because every now and again I'll put on my gear and play with 'em. That's a big hit."

● **Hobbies:** Fishing, flying his plane, collecting Pez candy containers, reading entrepreneurial books.

● **Favorite book:** "Think & Grow Rich," by Napoleon

Hill. The book changed his life, Barringer said, by giving him all the principles he could follow toward success.

● **Formula for making it big:** The biggest things are marketing and funding, but first a would-be entrepreneur has to get past the people Barringer calls "dream thieves." Those are the people who hear the idea and say, "Yea, but..." and make you question your idea. "They just stole your dream, thinking they're doing you right."

● **Motto for the new millennium:**

"It ain't done 'til it's overdone."

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CACTUS

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wrestle couples.

"I sold a million dollar's worth of them in about 90 days," he said. "Then in the next 90 days, I had 36 broken arms and about \$7 million worth of lawsuits."

The machine had a design flaw, and Barringer didn't have product liability insurance. His company went bankrupt, and he went back to the drawing board.

He started a shoeshine business where each cart had a different theme. The first was a Western theme, and Barringer decided to go all-out to promote it. Cactus Jack, a name given to him by his father when he was a youngster playing cowboy, was born. He decided to grow his hair, grow a beard and wear the gaudiest outfits he could find.

As it turns out, it was the guy Barringer was meant to be all along.

"You very seldom see me when I'm not in character because in my heart, I'm a heck of a lot more Cactus Jack than the guy I used to be," he said. "The guy that's dressed normal is the fake. This is the real guy right here."

Given his new personality, Cactus Jack decided his motto for the 1980s was "Gaudy is Good."

In the 1990s, his motto was, "The More Flash, the More Cash."

It worked.

Cactus Jack had the look, now he needed the product. His research showed there was money to be made in the chemical industry, particularly with cleaners. The notion that dozens of bottles were needed to clean dozens of different things made Barringer think perhaps all that was unnecessary.

Cactus Jack worked with chemists, and they found a solution of various chemicals that could work together to clean just about anything. He sold the liquid version of the cleaner and did OK, until a commercial inspired him to improve the product.

"It said, 'Plop plop, fizz fizz, oh what a relief it is' and I looked at my wife and I said, 'I just thought of the big one,'" Barringer said.

The cleaners are mostly water, Barringer surmised, so why not concentrate the mixture into tablet form like Alka-Seltzer and let people mix the cleaner themselves?

That clever idea and his gift for marketing madness merged, and the result was Cactus Jack's 1-Shot All-Purpose Cleaner. Fifty pellets shaped like .45-caliber bullets were

Cactus Jack's products

■ **1-Shot All-in-One Multipurpose Cleaner** — Drop one bullet into a spray bottle of hot water; it dissolves to create an all-purpose cleaner. \$59.99 for 50 bullets that make 50 quarts of cleaner.

■ **1-Shot Catch A-Lo! Fishing System** — "The lure that thinks it's a tackle box, powered by the bait that bleeds." The pellet slips into a colored fishing lure. When it is cast, the pellet dissolves a trail of various fish bait. \$29.95 for one lure, 25 pellets and interchangeable parts that can make 144 different lures.

■ **1-Shot Ultra Concentrated Laundry Vitamins** — One bullet for each load of laundry dissolves and serves as detergent, bleach, fabric softener and water softener. \$19.95 for 50 pellets.

■ **1-Shot User Friendly Wash Wax**

Shine — The bullet goes into the nozzle of the hose; once the water is turned on, the bullet dissolves into a foamy wash. The kit also includes bullets for waxing; they also go into the nozzle of the hose. \$19.95 for 20 washes and five waxes.

■ **1-Shot Super Concentrated Air Freshener** — Drop one bullet into a spray bottle, let it dissolve into a bottle of air freshener. Comes in scents of forest, rain, vanilla and citrus. \$19.95 for 50 of them.

■ **1-Shot Grow-A-Lo! Implants** — \$19.95 for 50 of them. The pellets can either go straight into the ground by the plant to feed it, or go in the hose nozzle to create a spray for several plants. Cactus Jack will launch the product on QVC on Memorial Day in a broadcast from Ocean City, N.J.

QVC

TCI carries QVC on 32 stations in Iowa, mostly in eastern and western Iowa. Among the towns that carry it are Fort Dodge, Waterloo/Cedar Falls, Storm Lake, Denison, Burlington, Cascade and LeMars.

packaged into a cartridge box.

That was in 1994. The timing was perfect for Barringer, since the QVC network was soon coming to Iowa for a product search. Three hundred entrepreneurs would chat with QVC buyers, who then would select 20 products for a broadcast from the Field of Dreams in Dyersville.

Each person had 10 minutes to go on TV and sell. When it was his turn, Cactus Jack sold \$100,000 worth of cleaning bullets in 10 minutes. He was named Best of Show and thought he had taken things as far as they would go.

"On Monday morning, I got a call from the company saying they wanted to bring me to their studios," he said. "They gave me another purchase order for \$175,000 of merchandise. They put me on the air six weeks later and I had a sellout."

Since then, Cactus Jack has become a QVC fixture. He appears about once a month for two or three shows and has traveled to QVC studios in London and Dusseldorf. The 1-Shot Cleaner has sold 5 million boxes, and he's helped develop bullet-shaped tablets that turn into car washes, laundry detergents, air fresheners, fish bait and plant food.

His favorite product appeals to the fisherman in him. Chemists came up with a dissolvable fish bait — a delicious mix of minnow, blood, worms, toads and blue cheese. Barringer drilled some holes in a Vicks inhaler,

slipped in the bait pellet and caught three bass in 20 minutes. The first one is mounted with the inhaler in his Ames office.

The end result was Cactus Jack's 1-Shot Catch A-Lo!, "the lure that thinks it's a tackle box, powered by the bait that bleeds."

For a guy who never cared about school, Barringer appears at plenty these days. He talks to students and says they listen with interest. "The reason I can relate to them is I don't try to portray myself as a real smart person who went to some fancy school and got this fancy education," he said. "I tell them — and schools just have a heart attack when I say this — 'You know what? You don't have to be highly educated, but you have to be highly motivated.'"

Barringer may be highly motivated and successful, but it hasn't stopped him from having fun. He likes his toys including a warehouse full of antiques and collectibles he bought from a dealer, a Mercedes and a Jaguar, a custom-made suit that sets off fireworks and his beloved Pez collection.

Better yet, he has that plane he always dreamed of when he should have been studying back in Atlantic. It's a turbo-charged Cessna Skylane that can carry four passengers.

"It's fun to fly back to my hometown in my own plane," said Barringer, who has flown for 20 years. "I think it's going to be even more fun walking in to my class reunion looking like I do."