

I WANT TO BE LIKE HOUDINI!

By Kent Cummins

“I want to be like HOUDINI!”

That’s what I told my Grampa when I wanted to buy a set of Strauss leg irons that were used by the US Navy during World War II. Grampa was Manager of the Buckhorn, a popular museum in downtown San Antonio, and I was visiting him with another junior magician. The leg irons were for sale in the gift shop, which also had a small magic counter. (It was Grampa who had given me my very first magic trick, a magic coin box, when I was just six years old.)

Grampa didn’t want to sell me the leg irons. “They are not a toy!” But I persisted, and I had been saving my money. Grampa eventually relented (now that I am a Grampa, I understand!), and I proudly took them back to my other grandparents’ house to practice my escape.

Leg irons were used to keep prisoners from running away. I locked them onto my ankles. But although I had already been doing magic shows for several years, I didn’t really know very much about how Houdini did his escapes. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t figure out how to escape from the leg irons.

Finally, it was time for bed, and I still hadn’t made any progress. I took the one key that came with them and put it into the lock on my right ankle. I turned the key, the lock opened, and the ratchet let the iron slip off my ankle.

I then put the key into the other lock, turned it.....and the key broke! The leg iron did not open. I tried using a paper clip, then a bobby pin, but nothing worked. I finally

had to go to bed with one leg iron still securely attached to my left leg. I remember finally putting the open one also on my left leg, so I didn't have to drag it around.

The next morning, my Uncle Vernon took me to J. Ross Boles, a well-known San Antonio locksmith, to get me out of my predicament. Uncle Vernon pointed to me and said, "My nephew is a magician. He wants to be like Houdini!" They both laughed, but the locksmith got me out.

Maybe Grampa was right. Leg irons are not a toy.

Who was HOUDINI?

The legendary magician known to the world as Harry Houdini was born Erik Weisz, in Budapest, Hungary, on March 24, 1874. His father, a rabbi, brought his family to America when Erik was just four years old. Later, hoping to be seen as an American, Houdini claimed that his birthplace was Appleton, Wisconsin. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Houdini Historical Center in Appleton offered memberships, and I proudly hold membership card #CM:103.

I knew that some magicians disliked the exhibits. For example, there were activities for kids in which they could apparently replicate some of Houdini's famous escapes. (How dare the museum suggest that a trunk might have a trap door in it!)

A mischievous child, Erik loved to play tricks on people...which eventually led to an interest in magic. With his younger brother, Theo, he began performing magic shows. But Erik felt that he needed a more dramatic stage name, and he had read a book about Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, a famous French magician who is known as "The Father of Modern Magic." Erik had heard that adding an "i" to a French name meant "like that name," so he added an i and became "Houdini." His mother often called him "Ehrie," which sounded sort of like "Harry,"

which was also the first name chosen by Kellar and Blackstone, two of the most famous magicians in America, and that's apparently how the now famous name came into existence.

Metamorphosis

Eventually, Harry fell in love with and married Bess Rahner, who was performing in a song and dance act at Coney Island, and his brother had to create his own solo act. Theo called himself "Hardeen," and performed escape feats much like his more famous brother.

It was hard for Harry and Bess to make it in vaudeville, but little by little, Harry gained fame. The trick that got them recognized for their first big break was called "Metamorphosis," which means "change."

Houdini would be locked in handcuffs, strapped into a canvas bag, and stuffed into a trunk which was locked up with chains. Bess would hold a curtain while standing on top of the trunk and count, "ONE...TWO...THREE!" When the curtain dropped, Houdini himself was standing on top of the trunk! He jumped off, unlocked the chains, opened the bag, and there was Bess...now locked in the handcuffs.

Today, almost every major stage illusionist has performed what magicians now call "The Substitution Trunk." I performed it only once, in 1991, with my magician friend "Peter the Adequate." I was almost fifty years old, and he asked me if I was "spry enough" to do the trick.

I was.

I still tease him about that, since we are both much older now. But I juggled three clubs on a rolla bolla at my 80th birthday party. I think I could still perform the Sub Trunk if I really wanted to.

How did Houdini Really Die?

Many people think that Houdini died as a result of performing the Chinese Water Torture Cell, but the truth is more mundane: he died in the hospital of appendicitis.

The culprit is the 1953 *Houdini* movie starring Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh. The director of the movie apparently decided that it would be more dramatic to show a problem with the Water Torture Cell than a burst appendix. My personal opinion is that the man's real-life story is so fascinating that it was ridiculous to embellish it.

Houdini really did die on October 31, Halloween, in 1926, at the age of 52. Yes, 52 is the number of cards in a deck of playing cards, not counting the jokers. In a bit of irony, I have a poster of Houdini which calls him "The King of Cards."

I was just ten years old, living in New Orleans, when the movie came out, but I had already been a magician for four years. *Houdini* was playing at the Saenger Theatre, and there was a publicity stunt where a magician escaped from a strait jacket while suspended from the letter "N" in the old-fashioned electric sign. Once I went inside, I stayed and watched the movie three times in a row. (In those days, movie theaters only had one screen, and people would go in and out at any time during the movie. A common phrase was, "This is where I came in.")

I loved the action, the story, and the magic. Even at age ten, I knew that Janet Leigh was a sexy, beautiful assistant. Now, I wanted to be like Tony Curtis!

One of my favorite posters is a blue poster advertising the Houdini movie. Apparently, this poster was sent to magic dealers by Paramount to encourage them to promote the movie. I bought one shortly after the movie for maybe \$5.00. Today I have seen one advertised for more than \$1,000!

I have the poster proudly displayed in a room of my Fantastic Magic Center in Georgetown, Texas. Below the poster is an Abbott's Dragon Table with a top hat on it, just like the poster. But I don't have Janet Leigh to sit in the top hat.

Paper Leg Irons

I eventually did learn how to escape from the Strauss leg irons, although I never put that trick into my regular act. But I also experimented with other kinds of escapes, again in an attempt to "be like Houdini."

While still in junior high school, I devised an escape from paper leg irons! The trick, of course, was to escape without tearing them. I had a lot of old adding machine tape from when my dad owned an office supply store, so I used the paper tape to restrain my ankles.

I have a set of them in my scrapbook, with this statement from my best friend, also a magician:

"I, John Schexnaydre, hereby declare that "MYSTO the Magician," under test conditions, escaped from these paper cuffs and other restraints in no less than 2 ½ minutes. They were absolutely not torn, taken apart, or switched. I am completely baffled. It took me over twenty minutes to tie him up."

Signed: John Schexnaydre

In the same scrapbook, I have typed testimonials from other friends regarding other escapes. I was on the way to being like Houdini! (At the time, I called myself "Mysto" in honor of the A.C. Gilbert Mysto Magic set that convinced me to become a magician.)

A Daring Underwater Escape

One day at a high school pool party, I decided to perform an underwater escape. I got people to lock me up in handcuffs and leg irons, with a chain and more locks strung between them. By then I had developed a special way to get out of the leg irons, and I always carried a handcuff key with me. I triumphantly escaped!

But my mom was not happy when she heard about it. She knew that I couldn't swim!

The Key to Opening Locks

While in high school, I collected locks and keys. I couldn't afford to take the locksmith course advertised in *Popular Mechanics*, but I wanted to learn as much as I could. After all, I still wanted to be like Houdini.

At school, I would sometimes pick the locks on my friends' lockers and trade them around. Childish? Yes. But I was a teenager. I also began to play piano in a rock and roll band. This was before electronic keyboards, so I had to play whatever piano was at the venue. Typically, it was an old upright piano, and often it was padlocked to keep kids from playing with it. But I could usually pick the lock.

One time, a friend and I—coming back from a Boy Scout meeting—decided to put a pirate flag up the school flagpole. The flagpole chain was locked, but that didn't stop us. And I put a different lock back on the chain, making it harder for them to remove the flag.

The next morning, I got called into the principal's office. They knew I was a magician. But a good magician never reveals his secrets.

The Houdini Chain Escape

The first escape trick that I ever learned was an escape from a small chain, locked around my wrists. Magicians call it "The Siberian Chain Escape," but of course I called it "The Houdini Chain Escape." (Right? I wanted to be like Houdini.)

The trick is not as impressive as Houdini's incredible escapes, but when performed correctly, it is amazing. And I have never had to go to a locksmith to get out!

While in college, I played piano in "The Sattalites," a small rock and roll band in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We had a Sunday gig at a club called Anchor Inn, on False River, and during the intermission I would do a short magic act. One Sunday, I performed the Houdini Chain Escape. It worked perfectly, but a local sheriff in the audience called out, "I'll bet you can't escape from handcuffs!"

I replied, "I could if I had a set of handcuffs!" The sheriff called my bluff. "I have some right here." He brought them up onto the stage and locked them around my wrists. Memories of those leg irons flashed through my brain.

I had him cover my wrists with his jacket, and the audience watched, amused at my predicament. But by now I had been studying Houdini's methods and had quite a bit more experience with magic and escapes. I can't tell you how (you know, The Magician's Code), but I did escape. The crowd was delighted. And the Sherriff, a good sport, complimented my ability:

"You're just like Houdini!"

The Stocks of Zanzibar

My good friends "The Great Scott and Judy" built and performed an original routine with a set of stocks that was inspired by Houdini's Metamorphosis. But instead of a trunk, "The Great Scott" would lock Judy into a set of pillory stocks. He would pull up a curtain, count to three, and when he dropped it Judy had escaped...but Scott was now locked in the stocks!

I loved their routine. When they retired from performing, I bought both the stocks and the rights to their routine. I have performed it with numerous assistants at various times, but especially enjoy performing it with my daughter, Carolyn Kim.

Perhaps our most memorable performance was in the Driskill Hotel in Austin, at a press conference showcasing some Houdini memorabilia from Jim Baldauf, a local magician and collector...including the actual stage coat made and worn by Bess Houdini. Carolyn wore Bess's costume (by a stroke of good fortune, they must have been about the same size), and we performed "Houdini's Stocks of Zanzibar" for the media.

We were sort of like the Houdinis!

The stage coat was later purchased at auction by none other than David Copperfield, who now has it on display in his Las Vegas magic museum.

Conclusion

I did an independent research project on the Psychology of Deception while I was an undergraduate at Louisiana State University in the early sixties. Part of my project was a survey which asked people, among other things, to "name a magician." The vast majority said "Houdini."

Will there ever be a magician as famous as Houdini?

Mark Wilson, a Texas magician whose book, *Mark Wilson's Complete Course in Magic*, is one of the best reference books for performing magic, made a case for it in the 1970s. His promotional material claimed that more people saw Mark Wilson on one of his television shows than saw Houdini in his entire lifetime.

Doug Henning got famous, but he died fairly young, at age 52. Come to think of it, that was also Houdini's age when he died. The number of playing cards in a deck is the same number

of weeks in a year...and the same number of years that each of these two famous magicians were alive.

David Copperfield, through a combination of talent and hard work, has become the most famous magician of today. I first met David when he was just a 17-year-old junior magician, doing shows in the basement theatre of a Chicago bank building...and he was even then one of the best magicians I had ever seen.

But when you ask someone to name a magician, the name most often mentioned is not Mark Wilson, Doug Henning, or even David Copperfield. (And, no, it isn't the author...unless you are asking someone in my family.)

It's Houdini.