

The American Museum of Magic/Lund Memorial Library and Other Resources on Magic and Conjuring

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That is the gift the magician brings us. He reawakens a sense of wonder in us when we are no longer children.

—Robert Lund,¹ founder of the American Museum of Magic

How did he do that? This question has been on the lips of audience members since magicians first began delighting and amazing viewers with skills of dexterity and legerdemain. The first-known recorded, secular magic performance² dates back to 2500 B.C. when the conjuror Dedi presented a series of tricks for the Egyptian king Cheops at the royal palace. The event was recorded in the Westcar papyrus, a document that was composed around 1700 B.C. but is thought by Egyptologists to have been copied from earlier sources.³ Yes, magic and conjuring have long been an integral part of popular entertainment, and from these very early beginnings, secular magicians have continued to provide entertainment for audiences of all ages right up through the present day. Magic shows are still some of the hottest tickets of the Las Vegas strip, and touring artists such as David Copperfield can still fill theatres. Magic is also popular on television once again thanks to the work of David Blaine and Criss Angel. Organizations such as the International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM) and the Society of American Magicians (SAM) also boast a strong membership.

Considering the length and ubiquity of the secular conjuring arts, some might suspect that materials on the history of magic and conjuring would be plentiful. But as most researchers know, trying to track down primary sources related to popular entertainments can be difficult: resources are often scarce or elusive due to the fact that the performances were not text-based and were considered so widespread and insignificant that they were only haphazardly documented. This is certainly the case with many magic performances and performers, especially those that were never well-known among the general public. Although there is a good deal of information about Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss), Harry Kellar, Howard Thurston, and other high-profile magicians from the days of vaudeville, there are thousands of lesser-known performers whose history has not been so well-documented or preserved. Information about these magicians is sporadic, often anecdotal, and is usually buried within “nonmagical” collections in the form of diary entries, random clippings, programs, or performance memorabilia that have been saved in a scrapbook. Also, because magicians have always fiercely guarded the secrets behind their methods, trying to find behind-the-scenes information on magic performances can be doubly difficult.

So where can a researcher turn when trying to uncover interesting details and information about one of the oldest yet most elusive art forms? Fortunately, there are a few invaluable resources and collections devoted to magic and conjuring that hold a wealth of information for

researchers who are willing to invest the time and energy to sort through them. There are, for example, some good, comprehensive histories of theatrical magic and conjuring that have drawn on a wide array of primary sources from both public and private collections. Most notable is *The Illustrated History of Magic* by Milbourne Christopher, first published in 1973 (New York: Crowell), which covers the history of secular magic from its earliest days up to the present. The book has been updated consistently since its initial publication, most recently in 2006 by Christopher's widow, Maurine Christopher, and magician David Copperfield. David Price's *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater* (New York: Cornwall, 1985) is also a significant volume that covers the breadth of historical magic performance; and James Randi's *Conjuring* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), although not as comprehensive as the books by Christopher and Price, provides an interesting compilation of highlights from a broad spectrum of magic history. Also, distinguished magic historians such as Edwin A. Dawes, Jim Steinmeyer, and Ricky Jay have written a number of thoroughly researched volumes devoted to individual time periods and performers.⁴ Magic periodicals are also a good source of information. Newsletters and magazines such as *Mahatma*, *Abracadabra*, *The Sphinx*, *The Linking Ring* (official publication of the IBM), *Genii*, and *M-U-M* (Magic, Unity, Might! the official publication of the Society of American Magicians) offer a wealth of material about performing magicians. Early issues of *The Billboard*, the trade paper for bill and posting industries such as circus, carnivals, vaudeville, and other live entertainments, also contain invaluable information on performers and touring schedules.⁵

Collections of artifacts and ephemera devoted specifically to magic and conjuring are widely scattered and are sometimes more difficult to track down. There are a few, however, that reside in libraries and institutions readily available to scholars. These would include collections such as the Harry Houdini and the McManus–Young holdings at the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center, the H. Adrian Smith Collection of Conjuring and Magicana at Brown University's John Hay Library, the Will Alma Conjuring Collection at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne, the Robbins Stage Magic Collection at the State Library of New South Wales, the Raymond Mander & Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection at London's Trinity College of Music, the George DeMott Papers of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the Curtiss Show Print Collection at the Ohio State University's Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, and the manuscripts collection at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center at the Baraboo, Wisconsin, Circus World Museum. The Donald C. Davidson Library at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Harvard Theatre Collection also have collections containing information on magic history, and the Library of Congress holds a wealth of material pertaining to this popular art form. This is by no means an exhaustive list, however, as other institutions may also have holdings that would be of value to magic historians.

Some high-profile, private collectors also have collections that are available to interested researchers. Magician David Copperfield, for example, has amassed one of the largest collections of magic history memorabilia, artifacts, books, and ephemera ever assembled, which he houses in a Las Vegas warehouse that he has refashioned into the International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts. Although the research collection is not open to the general public, scholars interested in the history of magic and conjuring can gain access by submitting an application to the collection archivist. There are, of course, also some collections that are only available to magicians. The library at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, for example, is open only to magicians who are members of the organization, and the same is true for the DVD library of the Society of American Magicians. At present, however, the Society of American Magicians is currently raising money to establish a Magic Center in Austin, Texas, that will include a museum

of magic, a research library, and a performing-arts theatre. It has not yet been determined whether only members will have access to the research library on the site, which is approximately five years from completion. Perhaps the most valuable yet little-known collection of materials related to the history of magic and conjuring, however, is that of the American Museum of Magic/Lund Memorial Library in Marshall, Michigan. The museum was founded by magic aficionados Robert and Elaine Lund, and it holds one of the largest collections of its kind in the world.

Robert Lund was born in Saginaw, Michigan, in 1925, and he worked as a writer and editor for the magazine division of the Hearst Corporation for thirty-three years. Although an accomplished writer, Lund's first love was magic and conjuring, and in the mid-1930s he began collecting memorabilia of both famous and lesser-known magicians. Lund spread the word of his interest in collecting among his magician friends, and soon they began helping him to procure items. They also began donating some of their own artifacts, programs, posters, fliers, and so forth. Lund's collection continued to grow, and by the mid-1970s, it was so large that it had outgrown the available space in his home. It was at this time that he and his wife, Elaine, began to look for another space in which to house the myriad of items, books, and papers that they had amassed. They finally purchased a building in the historic district of Marshall, Michigan, a small town just east of Battle Creek, and decided, rather than just using the space as a warehouse, they would create a museum devoted to the history of magic and conjuring. This would allow them to store the ever growing collection and to also share their love of the art form with the public.

The Lunds and a few dedicated friends spent several years renovating the building and setting up displays, and on 1 April 1978 they finally held the grand opening of the American Museum of Magic. Robert and Elaine Lund ran the museum with the help of some friends until Robert's passing in 1995. After that, Elaine established a board of directors to help her with the museum's operations. She also purchased the vacated former Marshall Public Library building in 1999 in order to establish the Lund Memorial Library. Elaine Lund continued to help run the museum and library until her death in 2006. The organization is now a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation that is governed by a board of directors and operated by an on-site director and a very small staff of devoted volunteers.

The museum's mission remains today what it has always been, "To educate the public, to preserve historic artifacts of the craft, to inspire magic lovers, to establish a resource for scholars and to celebrate the men and women who have been purveyors of wonder throughout the ages, the magician-entertainer[s]." Although the rate of acquisition has slowed considerably since Robert Lund's death, the American Museum of Magic still accepts donations of books and materials from amateur and professional magicians throughout the world. The museum building itself is rather small, with one large open room on each of two floors. Each story contains a myriad of artifacts from a broad range of magic history. Posters representing well-known and obscure performers line the walls of both floors of the museum. Visitors will also discover numerous displays and exhibits, including a life-sized guillotine illusion, a magic wand used by Jean Euge`ne Robert-Houdin (1805–71, the magician from whom Houdini took his name), original issues of the *Mandrake the Magician* comic book, a wardrobe trunk used by the magician Okito (Theo Bamburg, 1875–1963), and original programs from Maskelyne and Cooke's Egyptian Hall, London (1873–1904; Figure 1).

One particularly endearing display is devoted to John C. Green (1866–1950), an itinerant magician who toured for seventy-three years and who is described as a "crusty old coot" in the accompanying information placard. The display consists of a few photos of Green and also features his diary, which is opened to a page containing the following entry, "Ended 1937 with

not one cent in my pocket—started 1938 the same way. How about next year. What will it bring.” The centerpieces of the museum’s collection are props used by Houdini himself. There is, for example, one of the cans used by Houdini for his famous milk can escapes (Figure 2) and the trunk into which Houdini was locked for his celebrated underwater escape at New York’s East River in 1912. The museum also holds a 500-pound bronze sculpture group of Le Grand David’s magic troupe, one of only three in existence.



Figure 1. Programs from the Egyptian Hall (London, 1873–1904). Photo courtesy of the author. Used with permission of the American Museum of Magic.

Although the museum building contains wonderful displays of posters, magic books, circulars, magic kits, apparatus, illusions, and a variety of props and costumes, the real treasure for researchers resides two blocks away in the Lund Memorial Library. This building houses all of the overflow materials that are not currently on display at the museum. It is here that researchers will find a wealth of books, scrapbooks, letters, clippings files, typescripts, and manuscripts. The library building also houses additional posters, magic apparatus, unprocessed collections, and recent acquisitions. The library has more than 15,000 books and thousands of periodical issues that are all devoted to magic and conjuring, including many that are from the nineteenth century. It also contains numerous files devoted to individual magicians and touring companies. These files feature clippings, letters, programs, photographs, and other advertising memorabilia such as magic tokens and throw-out cards.⁷ Although many famous magicians such as Doug Henning or Harry Blackstone are represented here, there are also many more lesser-known artists who are chronicled in the library’s files. Some of these artists, although very well-known among magicians, have remained virtually unexamined in the world of theatrical research. There is, for example, an extensive file on Dell O’Dell (Nell Newton), one of the most

successful female magicians of the twentieth century. In 1951 she hosted her own television show for an ABC affiliate in California and became known as the “Queen of Magic.” The show featured O’Dell performing magic tricks with the help of audience members and special guests and was the first regularly scheduled television show devoted primarily to magic performance. Magician-entrepreneur Bob Nelson (aka Dr. Korda RaMayne, Alla Rageh) is also thoroughly represented. Nelson was a Columbus, Ohio, magician and mentalist who performed extensively during the 1930s and 1940s. A multifaceted performer who worked in various guises throughout his long career, Nelson most frequently performed as a psychic and mindreader. He made several television appearances, including one in which he appeared as Dr. Robert A. Nelson on The Gary Moore Show (1 February 1955) where he gave a demonstration of phrenology and talked about facial analysis.⁸ He became noted for the “Talking Teakettle” that he featured at carnivals and fairs throughout the Midwest. He also was proprietor of one of the premier magic shops of the time. Nelson Enterprises supplied magic paraphernalia and supplies to magicians and theatres all across the world from 1921 to 1970. In addition to the clippings file on Nelson, the library also holds a scrapbook given to Robert Lund by Nelson’s widow, Betty, that contains letters and clippings put together by Nelson himself. In fact, the library holds numerous boxes of scrapbooks put together by magicians to document their own careers, and some diaries that date back to the turn of the twentieth century. The Lund Memorial Library is also home to the Irving Desfor collection, a photograph collection containing over 20,000 items. Desfor was a professional photographer for the Associated Press from 1929 to 1952 who also spent five decades personally documenting the history of magic in photographs. In 1983 Desfor collected the best of these in *Great Magicians in Great Moments* (Pomeroy, OH: Lee Jacobs Productions), a book that is now considered a collector’s item.

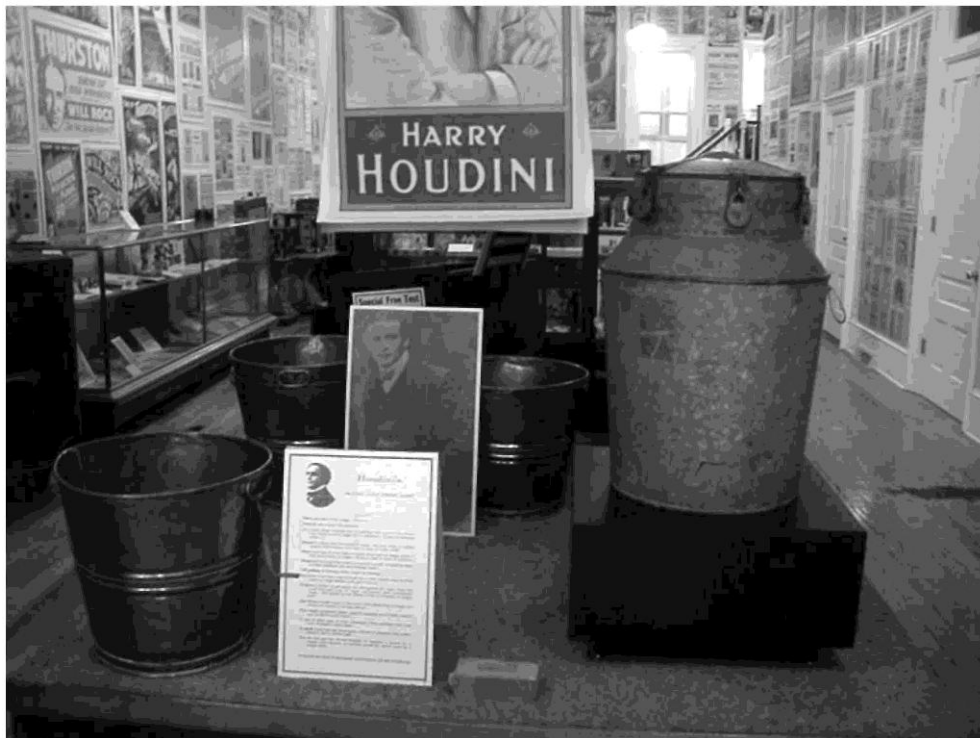


Figure 2. The display of original Houdini stage apparatus greets visitors as they enter the museum. Photo courtesy of the author. Used with permission of the American Museum of Magic.

The American Museum of Magic is not open during the winter and is open only sporadically during the other nine months of the year. Visits to both the museum and the library are by appointment only, and hours of access are limited, so anyone hoping to visit should contact the organization well in advance of their proposed trip to schedule specific dates and times. Once initial contact with the organization is made, the best way for a researcher to proceed is to provide a list of research topics to a library representative. This allows library personnel to do a preliminary search to see if the institution holds materials that pertain to the proposed area(s) of study. Since there are no online finding aids or detailed descriptions of the archives' holdings, researchers must rely on library staff to conduct a physical search of the space in order to locate pertinent materials. Also, there is a rather substantial hourly charge for using the library, so researchers should plan accordingly.

Uncovering the history of magic and conjuring will remain a challenge for scholars, but thanks to resources and collections such as those listed here, this most ephemeral of art forms is now being more consistently preserved and made available for study. Researchers willing to devote the time and energy will find a wealth of untapped information in these collections, information that will help to illuminate not only the world of popular entertainments but of theatre in general. Special collections devoted to performances of legerdemain are helping scholars to rediscover the importance of this fascinating art form and will ensure that the history of magic and conjuring remains available to future generations. And thanks to a few forward-looking individuals such as Robert and Elaine Lund, institutions such as the American Museum of Magic/Lund Memorial Library now stand as invaluable assets that will continue to awaken the sense of wonder in us all.

Endnotes

1. Robert Lund, *Abracadabra: Michigan and Magic* (Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1992), 20.
2. The designation "secular magic" is used here to distinguish magic accomplished through skill and dexterity that was acknowledged as performance from that of magic associated with religious rites or occultism that was said to occur as a result of otherworldly forces.
3. Milbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1973), 8.
4. See, for example, Ricky Jay, *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986); Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003); Edwin A. Dawes, *Charles Bertram: The Court Conjurer* (Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co., 1997).
5. The *Billboard* was established in 1894. In 1961 the publication started devoting its pages solely to the music industry and thus became the *Billboard Magazine* that is still in existence today. Information about the other entertainments was put into a new spin-off magazine called *Amusement Business*, a publication that folded in 2006.
6. The American Museum of Magic's Web site, <http://www.americanmuseumofmagic.org>, accessed 27 April 2007.
7. Magic tokens and throw-out cards (also known as "scaling cards") are coins and cards imprinted with a magician's name and/or image that are specifically manufactured to be used as advertising pieces. In the days of vaudeville, these items were often used in the show then thrown out into the audience as souvenirs.
8. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1 February 1955, Robert Nelson Scrapbook, Lund Memorial Library.