

WILD ABOUT HARRY

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Internationally known magician, illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini died on Oct. 31, 1926 — a century ago.

'MY BRAIN IS THE KEY THAT SETS ME FREE'

Ehrich Weiss was born in 1874 to Jewish parents in Budapest, Hungary. When he was 4 years old, his parents immigrated to the United States to escape the rampant antisemitism there and settled in Appleton, Wisconsin.

By age 9, he and his friends had begun a backyard circus, charging neighbors five cents for admission. Ehrich performed a trapeze act, as "Ehrich, the Prince of the Air."

When he was 13, his family relocated to New York City. By 1891, Ehrich had begun calling himself Ehrie and was working to help support his family when he teamed up with a friend to begin performing a magic act they called the "Brothers Houdini." The inspiration for the name was famed French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. It was about this time that Ehrie began calling himself Harry.

In 1893, the Brothers Houdini performed at World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Later that year, Harry replaced his friend with his new wife, Bess, and changed the name of his act to "the Houdinis."

Within two years, Harry had gravitated into escape stunts. He opened up a school of magic in New York in 1898 and, by 1890, had become known as the "King of Handcuffs."

By 1913, he was touring the U.S. and Europe. That year, he formally changed his name from Ehrich Weiss to Harry Houdini.

By 1920, his fame had grown so much that Funk & Wagnall's dictionary added the verb "hou-di-nize," meaning "to release or extricate oneself from (confinement, bonds, or the like), as by wriggling out."

SOME OF HOUDINI'S MOST NOTABLE TRICKS

The Water Torture Cell



On Sept. 21, 1912, Houdini first performed this stunt at the Circus Busch in Berlin. His feet were locked into a bracket and then he was hung in a box with windows filled with 250 gallons of water and locked inside.

Houdini spent more than $10,000 on the apparatus, wishing to build a stunt that no other escape artist could afford to duplicate. He even had the device copyrighted in England and offered $1,000 to anyone who could prove it was possible to breathe in the cell.

Audiences were never told Houdini had an emergency drain built in, just in case.

The Suspended Straitjacket



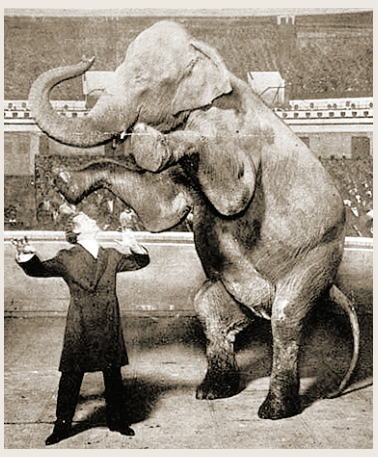
Houdini was constantly hunting for new ways to perform escapes — in ways that would astonish audiences and would suggest he was capable of superhuman feats.

One of those stunts was for Houdini to be strapped into a straitjacket and then suspended by a crane over a city street. Sometimes, he'd perform the stunt at a local newspaper office building.

Then — in full view of onlookers — he'd then wiggle his way out. Which would usually take him a little more than 2½ minutes.

Houdini first performed his suspended straitjacket escape in Kansas City on Sept. 8, 1915.

The Vanishing Elephant



On Jan. 7, 1918, Houdini performed one of his most jaw-dropping illusions at the Hippodrome in Manhattan.

He led a 5-ton elephant named Jenny around the arena floor, drew her into a large, brightly-painted cabinet on wheels and, with the flourish of curtains, caused Jenny to disappear.

Trap doors were not involved: Beneath the stage was a large water tank in which others would perform. No one ever proved just how Houdini did the trick.

The audience was stunned. Houdini had purchased the trick from a fellow magician, Charles Morritt, who had performed it with a donkey.

HOUDINI, THE SPIRITUALIST DENIER

While vacationing with Arthur Conan Doyle and his family in Atlantic City in 1922, Houdini was invited to séance with a medium who claimed to have a connection with Houdini's mother, who had died nine years before.

Convinced the medium's work was simply an act of slight-of-hand — an art of which he was one of the world's greatest experts — Houdini embarked on a side career as a professional skeptic and debunker of psychics, mind readers, mediums and spiritualists who claim to be able to communicate with the dead.

Houdini attended séances in disguise, offered a $10,000 reward to any psychic who could present "physical phenomena" that could not be explained rationally and testified before Congress in 1926 in support of a bill that would outlaw "pretending to tell fortunes for reward or compensation."

Houdini's activities attracted lawsuits and a large number of death threats from members of the spiritualist community and their supporters.

THE DEATH OF A LEGEND

As Houdini entered his 50s, the wear and tear he had put on his body with his feats began to take a toll. He was occasionally sidelined with broken bones, muscle strains and simple exhaustion.

While performing the Water Torture escape in Albany, N.Y., on October 11, 1926, a cable came loose and struck him on the leg, fracturing his ankle.

His doctor suggested he take a break, but Houdini ignored the advice and traveled to Montreal, Canada, where he lectured at a college.

On Oct. 22, before a performance at Montreal's Princess Theater, a group of students from McGill University visited Houdini in his dressing room. His ankle was still bothering him, so he reclined on a couch while they talked.

One student, J. Gordon Whitehead, asked Houdini if it was true he could withstand hard punches to his abdomen. Houdini said it was true but left out the part where he had to first prepare himself for a moment or two. Whitehead then erupted with "four or five terribly forcible, deliberate, well-directed blows" to Houdini's stomach.

This left Houdini complaining of severe stomach cramps. Still, he performed that night and traveled by train the next day to Detroit for a series of performances. His abdominal pain increased and his temperature soared to 104 degrees.

His doctor suspected appendicitis and ordered Houdini to a hospital, but again, he insisted on performing that night. He struggled with his routine and finally collapsed after the final curtain.

Houdini was rushed to a hospital, where doctors found his appendix had ruptured several days before. They removed it, but Houdini's insides had been poisoned.

Houdini finally died on Oct. 31, 1926, with his wife and two brothers at his bedside. He was 52.

Still, some suspected foul play. Kalush and Sloman wrote that spiritualists had a history of poisoning their enemies, and they noted that no autopsy was ever performed to confirm that Houdini's death was actually caused by appendicitis.

Sources: "The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero" by William Kalush and Larry Sloman, Library of Congress, PBS' "American Experience," Smithsonian magazine, ThoughtCo., Yale University Press, WildAboutHoudini.com, History.com

PHOTOS FROM WILDABOUTHOUDINI.COM AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS