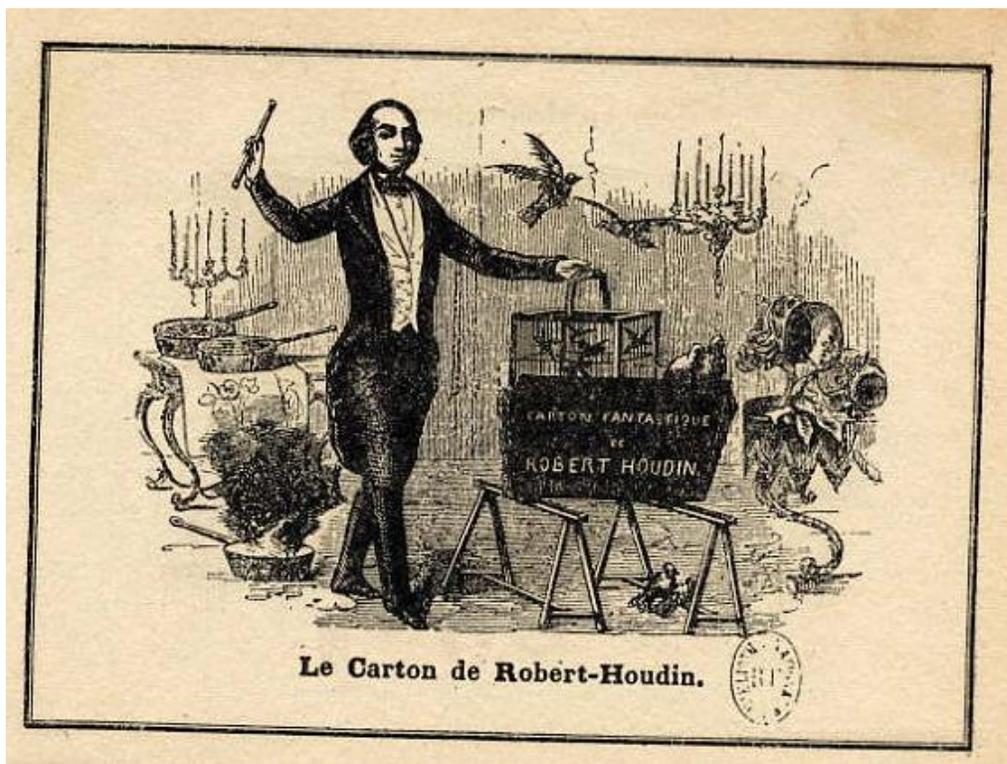


Magic Moments

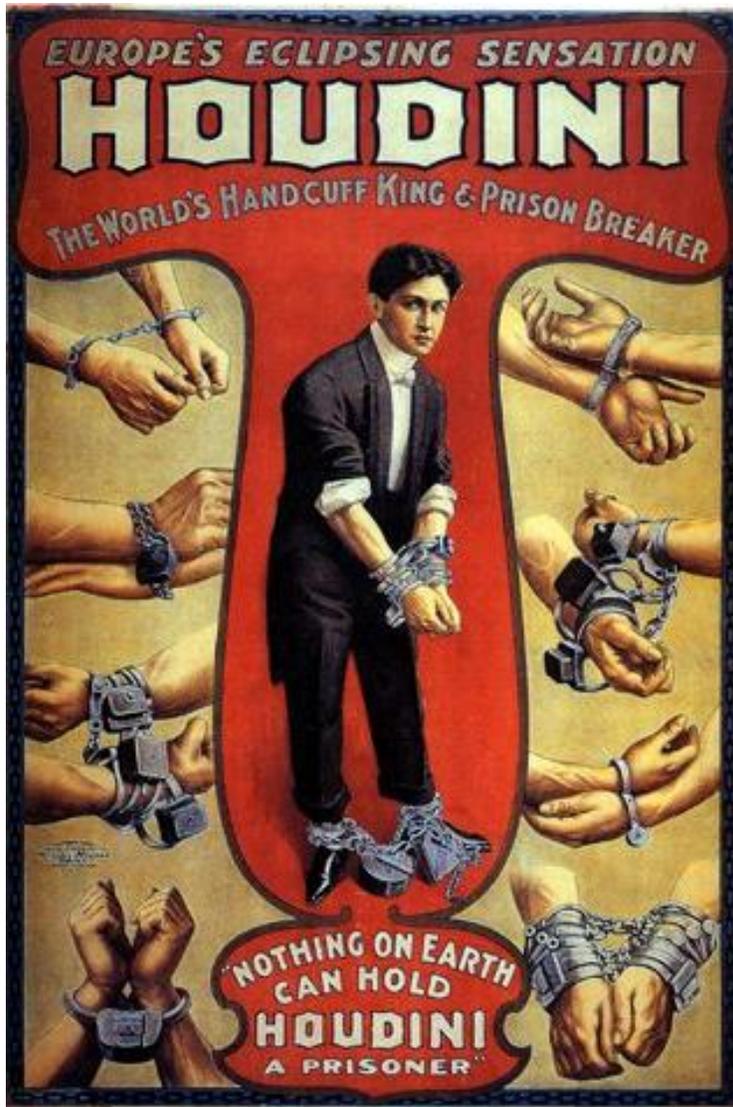
Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) was the most famous of all French magicians, for he is considered the world over as the father of modern conjuring. Jean's père sent his eleven-year-old son up the Loire to the University of Orléans (not to be confused with UNO) to prepare for a career as a lawyer. But his son wanted to become a watchmaker like his dad, and these skills trained him in all things mechanical.



The first magician to use electricity, Houdin was sent to Algeria in 1856 by the French government to combat the influence of the dervishes by duplicating their feats - a real whirlwind tour. His books helped explain the art of magic to countless aficionados: his autobiography (1857), *Confidences d'un prestidigitateur* (1859), and *Les Secrets de la prestidigitation et de la magie* (1868).

One such devotee was arguably the most renowned illusionist and escape artist in history. Born in Hungary in 1874 as Erich Weiss, he adopted the name Harry Houdini as a teenager after having read Houdin's autobiography. Performing twenty shows a day, the young

wizard was soon taking home twelve dollars a week. Before long he was an international success, and he would bring this magic moxie to the Crescent City on more than one occasion.



It was pouring rain that day in downtown New Orleans, November 17, 1907, when a crowd of nearly 10,000 people gathered along the wharves near the Canal Street ferry landing to witness Houdini triple-manacled for a death-defying plunge into the Mississippi River. To lend an aura of difficulty, honest supervision and local flavor, the magician's shackles were locked in place by First Recorder's Court Judge Jon Fogarty.

Houdini (laden with padlocks, chains and manacles from Orleans Parish Prison) shouted out a cheerful, "Goodbye, boys!" before jumping into

the muddy depths from a steamer's gangplank. A short time later, he arose unchained to the surface and the roaring approval of the hoards above. The following day's issue of the *Picayune* quoted the great Houdini:

"That's an awful river. The worst I have ever been in."

It was all part of his mystique.

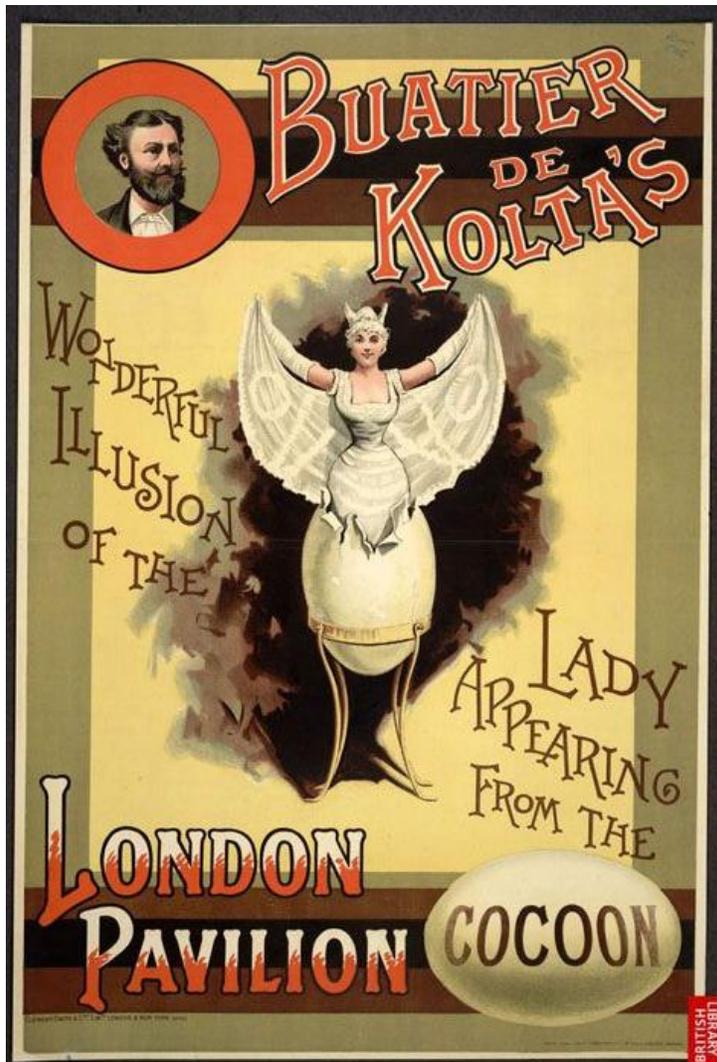


Houdini in New Orleans, 1907

A contemporary of Houdin's and another outstanding French magician was Buatier De Kolta (1845 - 1903). He is famous for the "Vanishing Bird Cage", the "Multiplying Billiard Balls" trick and his "Vanishing Lady Illusion" (or "De Kolta Chair"), all still performed by magicians today. This widely touring master of prestidigitation died in New Orleans in 1903 while performing at the St. Charles Theatre.

First erected in the 1830s by James Caldwell, this storied theatre burned to the ground in 1842. The second St. Charles Theatre hosted Jenny Lind and Edwin Booth, but it too burned to the ground (in 1899). George King Pratt designed the third theatre (built in 1902 and

razed in 1965), where Monsieur De Kolta performed his final feats of legerdemain, a word from the Middle French *léger de main* meaning, light (weight) of hand, or sleight of hand.



Houdini was an avid debunker of so-called spiritualists, most of whom found numerous ways to swindle many susceptible persons missing loved ones. From small back rooms in New Orleans to grand New York theatres, Houdini often visited these séances incognito and then exposed the trickery at the most inopportune moment - for the phony medium. He once offered a \$10,000 reward (way before Ernie K-Doe) to anyone who could produce a "psychical manifestation" which the great conjurer could not reproduce by natural means.

One bad character was Zanzic, an itinerant magician said to be from New Orleans, the offspring of a Jewish father and a Creole fortune-

telling mother. His actual name might have been Harry Robenstein, Brenner or perhaps Henry André. But his biggest con was enticing an old pal, Billy Robinson (a brilliant magic mechanist), to design a Spiritualist parlor in Chicago that would put the common everyday fraudulent mediums to shame.



Zanzic and The Hindoo Mystery "VOU DOO"

With a \$5,000 bankroll provided by Zanzic's New Orleans manager, Jack Curry, Robinson rigged a trapdoor beneath the séance table to an area where Robinson and Sam Bailey (a Boston-based magician) could open sealed letters, read the contents and seal them back without detection. But everything backfired when they conned Mr. Schiller.

Before a hefty fee was extracted from the old gentleman, he was promised a sexual reuniting with his late wife. The trio had secured a prostitute who detectives had determined looked a great deal like the deceased spouse, especially in the misty and dark staging area. They told the eager old German that he could spend only an hour with his wife or she would dematerialize (and if he was too near to her at that time, his health could be at risk). Turns out that advice was right, for fifteen minutes later a bloodcurdling scream came forth from the "bridal chamber".

A nude "Mrs. Schiller" emerged wearing only a sheet and cried out, "He croaked. He's dead."

Seems like both Mr. Schiller's heart and eyes were not working that great that evening. The con artists leaned his body up against a building outside (hoping for the best), but Mr. Schiller's driver saw what happened and called the police. Some sweet-talking and some cash probably convinced the cops to let them leave town. These kinds of "spiritualists" were the types Houdini was trying to stop.

Amusement at the West End.

— —

By special request, Prof. MARIN, the World-Renowned Magician, will give

THREE EXHIBITIONS IN MAGIC,

— ON —

Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Even'gs,
July 13, 15 and 17, at 8 o'clock.

Free to all. Fare for the round trip, 15 cents.

J. M. DEMAREST,
jy11 td Sec. pro tem. N. O. C. R. R. Co.

Magic Show at West End, featuring world-renowned Professor Marin, ad in New Orleans Daily City Item, July 12, 1880

The elusive Houdini, advertised as "the justly world-famous self-liberator," was back in the Crescent City in February 1916. Fresh off a world tour, he had a daring mid-air escape planned to wow the crowds on Canal Street 4 o'clock in the afternoon on February 23rd. After an invitation from *The New Orleans Daily States*, Houdini was to be suspended encased in a police straitjacket by a rope from the fifth story of the *Daily States* building. With head hanging downward, he was to free himself or suffer the consequences.

Preparations, as well as the implementation of Houdini's immobilization, were undertaken by two New Orleans police officers (one of whom was my great uncle), whose task was to secure the famous escape artist in a straitjacket and bind his ankles together with

a rope. He was then hung upside down from the *States'* fifth story.

STRAIGHT-JACKET TESTED;
HOUDINI WILL THRILL
THRONGS AT THE STATES



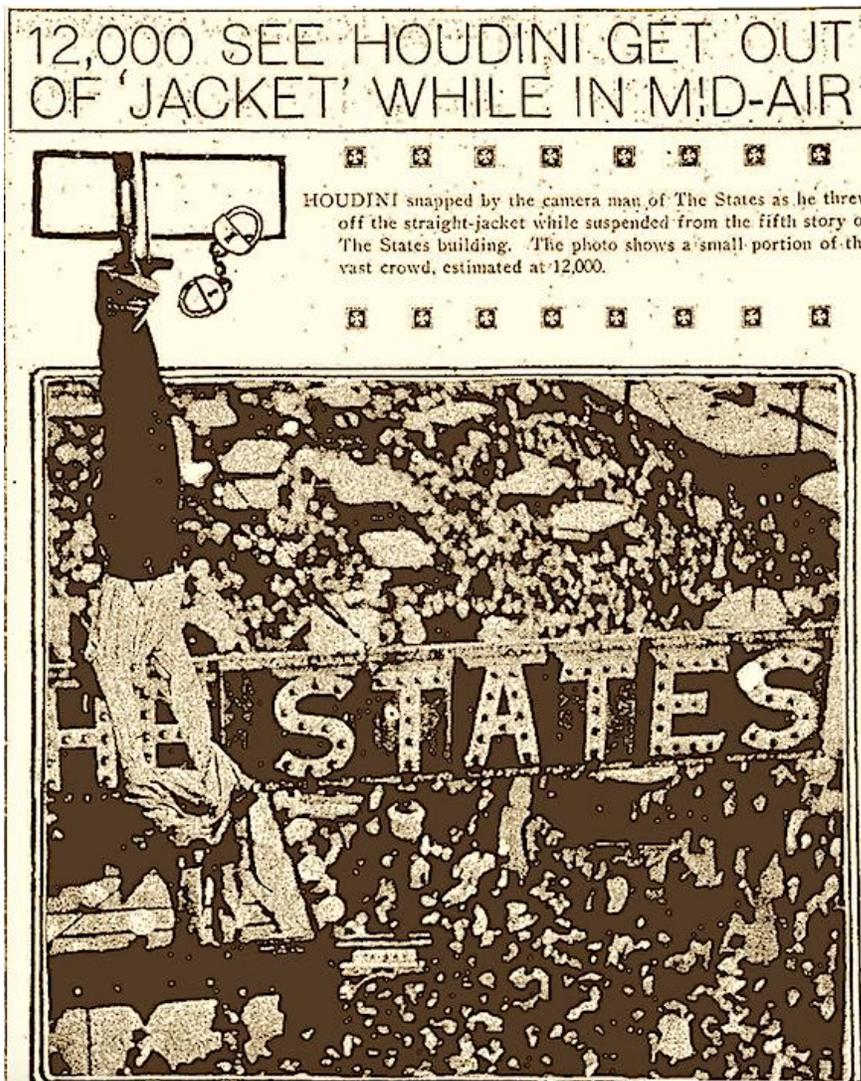
PATROLMAN HEMARD, HOUDINI and DETECTIVE SCHEFFLER testing the straight-jacket, preparatory to Houdini's daring feat of getting out while swinging head downward, in mid-air from The States Building.

Houdini's straitjacket tested by my great uncle, Charles Hemard, left

Through the courtesy of Chief Pujol, a "life-saving" net was stretched out below in case the stunt went wrong, as an estimated 12,000 men,

women and children gazed upward to watch the dangling illusionist. A "dusky" ragtime band played for the anxious throngs, but in just three minutes, Houdini had "squirmed and wiggled his way out," according to the *States*. All of Canal Street broke out in thunderous applause.

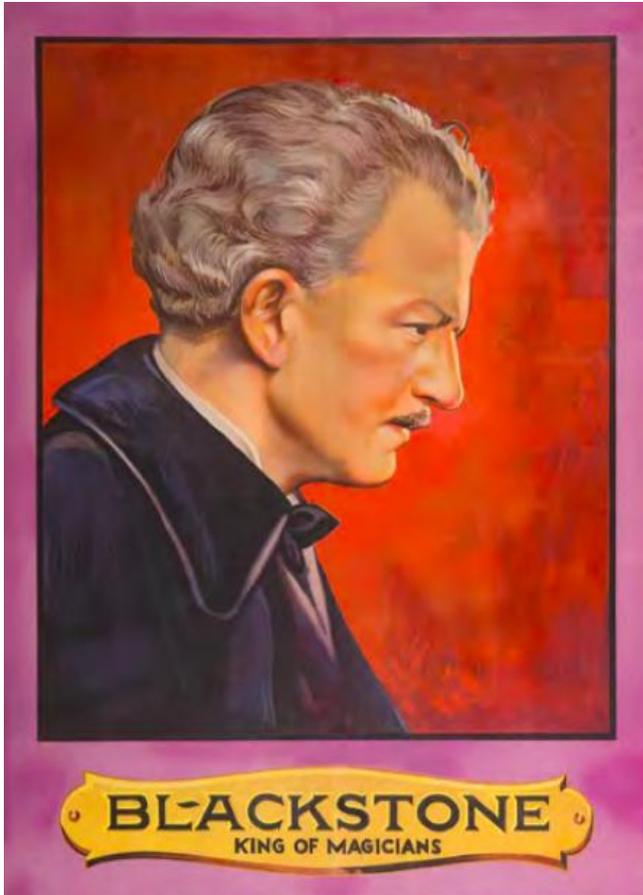
"It was the biggest crowd I ever saw," Houdini told the paper on Thursday. And for lagniappe, he announced he had accepted the Maison Blanche employees' challenge to escape from a strong packing box on stage at the Orpheum Theater on the 25th.



Houdini entertains a Canal Street crowd of 12,000

Home to the "black magic" of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, it is not unusual that New Orleans has always welcomed diverse and intriguing magic acts. The Blue Room in the Roosevelt Hotel was a frequent host

to some great shows in its day. Harry Blackstone (who performed the greatest "vanishing act" of his career in 1942 by orderly and calmly removing an entire Decatur, Illinois, audience row-by-row from a burning theatre) performed regularly in New Orleans. So did his son, Harry, Jr., who wed local girl Arla Gay Blevins. Harry, Jr., died in 1997, but Gay Blackstone is still an active force in the world of magic. Both Blackstones had been regularly invited to the Bards of Bohemia carnival activities in New Orleans.



Harry Bouton Blackstone, Sr.

Some magicians stay in the city for a while, like Harry Anderson (with his Sideshow Magic Shop and Oswald's Speakeasy), then vanish somewhere behind that illusive curtain. After having left New Orleans, Harry died in his sleep of a stroke complicated by influenza on April 16, 2018.

Other magicians end up here. Gladys Herrmann (1895 - 1966), nee Gladys Martinez, toured as "Madame Gladys and Her Company of Hindu Necromancers" before marrying another great magician, Felix Alfred Herrmann (real name Felix Kretchman). She performed with her husband as "Petite Gladys" dressed in a flamboyant costume

crowned with a huge signature headdress. Gladys is buried in the "Garden of Memories" Cemetery, Metairie, Louisiana.



Felix Alfred Herrmann, magician Actor/magician Harry Anderson

Felix's mother, Frances (nee Scarsez) was Adelaide Herrmann's sister, who was married to the famous Paris-born magician Alexander Herrmann, "Herrmann the Great." As a youth, Felix (born in London in 1881), came to the United States and briefly assisted his uncle in his act. Felix, who also billed himself as "Herrmann the Great," died November 10, 1938. Buried first in St. Vincent De Paul Cemetery in New Orleans, his remains were later moved to Chalmette National Cemetery.

Another New Orleans area magician with a wife named Gladys was Earle J. Christenberry, Jr. (1927 – 2016). According to his obit, Earle Jr. "was past International President and lifetime member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians and Ring 27, and a lifetime member of the Magic Circle and Society of American Magicians."

Harry Houdini ended up here, too, at least in book form, in a "Miss Danforth Mystery" by Marian J. A. Jackson entitled "*The Sunken Treasure*", where the famed magician is one of the guests on a millionaire's yacht sailing from Panama to New Orleans.

In February of 2009, Britney Spears was sawed in half by Ed "The Misfit of Magic" Alonzo when she opened her "Circus Tour" in New Orleans. The separation didn't last.



Dante the Magician (Sean Dawson)

Today at Lucky Pierre's, 735 Bourbon Street, one can enjoy the magical styling of Dante the Magician and his "*Flim Flam Revue*," which transports one back to the early days of Bourbon Street and 1920s burlesque. Dante has performed at the "House of Blues" and all around the Crescent City, and he has also emceed the scintillatingly camp "*Bustout Burlesque*".

New Orleans seems to have magic in every corner, from mystifying stage acts to French Quarter Voodoo shops. But one must never overlook the magic that is always in the air. If magic's main definition is "the power of apparently influencing the course of events by the use of mysterious or supernatural forces," New Orleans certainly fits that description nicely.

It can even be seen in the city's art, as displayed in a work by the late George Rodrigue:



"Now you see him - Now you don't." No, actually you'll see a lot of this iconic blue canine.

New Orleans is indeed a magical city to all who live here and most who visit, for as Roald Dahl wrote, "the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it."

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Magic Moments"
Ned Hémard
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