

Michigan Time Traveler

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KIDS' History

Escape with Houdini

This month's Time Traveler meets magician Harry Houdini, who could escape from handcuffs, strait jackets, ropes, chains, jail cells, and trunks submerged in water.

Who was Houdini?

Harry Houdini was born Ehrich Weiss in Budapest, Hungary, in 1874. He immigrated to America with his family when he was four years old. They came to Appleton, Wisconsin, where his father was the community's first rabbi.

Houdini made his stage debut when he was nine years old. He performed as a contortionist—someone who can twist his or her body in unusual positions—and as a trapeze artist at a friend's 5-cent circus. As a teenager Houdini began performing illusions and escapes.

When Houdini was 14 years old, his family moved to New York. He loved card tricks, but he gained fame by performing physically demanding escapes from handcuffs, straitjackets and boxes of all kinds.

Houdini loved performing magic tricks. But it upset him when people used tricks to convince others that they could talk to the spirits of dead people. These people were known as "mediums." Houdini devoted a great deal of his time to exposing these frauds. He figured out how they performed their tricks and told the public about it.

Houdini in Michigan

As a young performer struggling to make a name, Houdini visited Grand Rapids in 1897.

His impressive, well-publicized handcuff escape at the police station brought large crowds to the evening theater show. A Grand Rapids newspaper reporter wrote that he was cuffed "until the blood stopped circulating and the veins stood out in knots on his arms." He also did his "Metamorphosis" trick in which he locked his wife in a trunk, then traded places with her.

Between 1898 and 1926, Houdini performed at Smith's Opera House and the Empress Theatre in Grand Rapids and at the Temple Theatre, Grand Theater and Garrick Theatre in Detroit. To get publicity for these shows, he performed special escapes.

On November 27, 1906, wearing two pairs of handcuffs, he jumped 25 feet from the Belle Isle Bridge into the icy cold Detroit River.

He staged a dramatic escape in Grand Rapids during a 1916 appearance at the Empress Theater. This is how the *Grand Rapids Herald* described it on November 20:

Houdini, Hanging by Feet High Above Ground, Wiggles Out of Strait Jacket

Several thousands of gasping Grand Rapids citizens watched Harry Houdini, the escape king, writhe free from a police strait-jacket and hand cuffs while suspended by his feet from the new Grand Rapids Savings Bank building yesterday.

Monroe and Ionia avenues were jammed for two blocks by an audience that watched nervously every move of the Empress star. With his feet securely bound, wrists handcuffed and his



Big History Lesson students from Woodworth Elementary School from Leslie learn magic tricks from Michigan Historical Museum gallery attendant Kim Courtland and Docent Jack DeFord.

Magic in Michigan

Michigan has had a special relationship to magic.

Known as the King of Magicians, Harry Blackstone was born Henry Boughten in 1885. After beginning his career in his teens with a short vaudeville act, Blackstone developed a full-length show that made him one of America's best-known magicians in the 1920s.

His son, Harry Blackstone Jr., began appearing and disappearing in his father's magic show when he was only six months old. He grew up to become a famous magician, too.

When Harry Blackstone bought a summer home in Colon, Michigan, the city took its first step toward becoming "The Magic Capital of the World." Percy Abbott, an Australian magician, also moved there and started the Abbott Magic Company. He and his partner hosted "Get-Togethers for Magicians"—a combination social event, magic show and business promotion.

Today a thousand or more magicians from around the world attend "Abbott's Get-Together" each August. They attend lectures, workshops and demonstrations to improve their skills. Evening performances are open to the public.



Harry Blackstone finds a whole clothesline of baby garments in a boy's coat. (State Archives of Michigan)



This letterhead from the early 1920s reminded correspondents of Houdini's famous escapes, as well as the fact that he had been immortalized in the 1920 edition of Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)



Houdini found ways to vary his handcuff escape routine and keep it interesting. He added more locks and challenged local police—whether in Grand Rapids or Berlin, Germany—to keep him in jail cells and handcuffs. (Sidney H. Radner Collection, Houdini Historical Center, Appleton, Wisconsin.)

arms and abdomen cased in a strait-jacket Houdini was pulled from the pavement up to the fifth floor, and there held stationary, a cross arm on the rigging preventing tangling of the rope.

Writhing backwards and forwards, lifting his head and abdomen by sheer strength up to his feet, twisting and turning and all the time whirling about in the air, Houdini first removed the handcuffs from his wrists. Then he writhed without great effort from the straitjacket, and in one minute and fifty-five seconds after leaving the pavement the straitjacket dropped to the sidewalk, and his arms swung free. A simultaneous cheer arose from the crowd as he was lowered back to the ground.

It was one of the largest crowds that ever has gathered in the downtown section for any sort of an attraction, and as a thriller, Houdini's feat has never been excelled in this city.

Houdini's final performance was in Detroit. He died there on Halloween, 1926, from peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix. He was buried in Queens, New York.

At the Michigan Historical Museum

Visit the new exhibit *Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits* now through January 11, 2003. It explores Houdini's work to expose phony mediums as well as Michigan's connection to magic. The exhibit is produced by Outagamie County Historical Society/Houdini Historical Center, Appleton, Wisconsin.

Watch for the special magic shows and workshops on October 27, November 2, December 28 and January 11.

The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m.—4:30 a.m.; Saturday: 10 a. m. — 4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1—5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web Site: <http://www.michiganhistory.org>

A Houdini Time Line

- 1874** Ehrich Weiss is born in Budapest, Hungary.
- 1878** Ehrich and the rest of his family join Rabbi Weiss in Appleton, Wisconsin.
- 1887** Rabbi Weiss and son Ehrich go to New York. The rest of the family comes later.
- 1891** Ehrich and Jacob Hyman team up in a magic act called "The Brothers Houdini." Ehrich begins calling himself Harry Houdini.
- 1894** Harry meets and marries Bess Rahner and begins touring with her.
- 1895** Houdini and his new wife introduce their signature trick, Metamorphosis, he locked his wife in a trunk, then traded places with her.
- 1900** The "King of Handcuffs" begins his first European tour. It is very successful.
- 1906** Houdini begins jumping handcuffed from well-known bridges.
- 1910** Houdini visits Australia.
- 1912** Houdini introduces his Chinese Water Torture Cell Escape at the Circus Busch in Berlin. He calls it "the climax of all my studies and labors."
- 1913** Ehrich Weiss legally changes his name to Harry Houdini.
- 1924** Houdini publishes *A Magician among the Spirits*, exposing the methods of fraudulent mediums.
- 1926** Harry Houdini dies at Grace Hospital in Detroit on Halloween from complications of a ruptured appendix.



Imagine yourself jammed head foremost in a Cell filled with water, your hands and feet unable to move and your shoulders tightly lodged in this imprisonment. (Sidney H. Radner Collection, Houdini Historical Center, Appleton, Wisconsin)

Things to Do:

In the newspaper: Find a description of a performance or show in the entertainment section. How does it compare to the 1926 article about Houdini's performance? What words would you use to describe your favorite performer?

Houdini exposed the frauds—or dishonest tricks—of mediums. Look through the newspaper to find articles on modern-day fraud. What is the role of newspapers in dealing with fraud?

On-line: Visit the United States Postal Service website to see the new Harry Houdini stamp issued in honor of the Society of American Magicians 100th anniversary. Learn more about Houdini's life: http://www.usps.com/news/2002/philatelic/sr02_035.htm



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