

Gwen: Our next story investigates a mysterious chapter in the life of one of the world's greatest entertainers. Master of illusion and escape artist, celebrated worldwide, Harry Houdini captivated crowds with his death-defying stunts and unique brand of magic which seemed to defy the very laws of nature. Houdini was both master showman and brilliant innovator, a potent combination which granted him iconic status in the 1910s and '20s, long before television and the Internet. Today, Houdini is still a household name, synonymous with the craft he pioneered. No other magician has matched his stature or reputation. Eighty years after his death, a poster advertising a run of Houdini performances has been found lodged in the roof of an old house. A magician in Chicago wants to know whether this relic might be from the final years of Houdini's life, when he was embroiled in controversy over the possibility of communication with the dead.

Lee Luvin: I saw the poster, and I thought that it was something that I couldn't let somebody outside of magic have that, who didn't completely understand its importance. I grew up with magic, and whose name is more synonymous with magic than Houdini himself?

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and I've arranged to meet Lee Luvin in New York City to answer some of his questions about this poster. So how'd you find this?

Lee: The story is that a roofer was redoing a 1920s bungalow and removed the roof, and used as insulation were 50 to 100 of these posters.

Gwen: Lee tells me that almost all the posters were damaged beyond repair. Only two were rescued and sold to a Chicago poster shop, which contacted Lee about the find. Well, that's a great story. So, Lee, what exactly do you want me to find out?

Lee: First of all, is this authentic? What did he do in those performances? I know in the latter part of Houdini's life, he was interested in spiritualism. That would be an interesting aspect to see if that came into play.

Gwen: Twentieth-century spiritualism was rooted in a belief that the living could speak to the dead. It's always been a controversial topic, but I don't know if Houdini was connected to this movement, and there's nothing about spiritualism on the poster. It doesn't say the city or the year. Do you have anything else for me to go on?

Lee: There's an unusual mark here that might help, and I can't quite read it. Something about Billers and Posters Association.

Gwen: There isn't much to get me started but I'm excited about the challenge. I'm looking forward to this. Can I take it with me? I'll be very careful.

Lee: I'm sure you will.

Gwen: I know Houdini is one of history's most celebrated illusionists, but how did he become a legend? Born Ehrich Weiss in Hungary in 1874, he emigrated to the United States as a boy. As a teenager, he worked odd jobs to help his struggling family, all the while teaching himself magic tricks. His obsession with magician Robert Houdin inspired young Ehrich to change his name to Harry Houdini. The young Houdini gets work in sideshows, vaudeville, and the circus, but he is frustrated by the lack of recognition he receives in the States. So Houdini and his wife, Beatrice, take his act to Europe. Word about the so-called "King of Handcuffs" travels fast, and Houdini quickly draws large crowds. By 1904, when 30-year-old Houdini returns home, he's at the top of his game. He accepts all challenges to break free of any bonds, handcuffs, straitjackets, even locked jail cells. It's an amazing story. I wonder where in his career our poster might fit. But my first job is to check out whether Lee has a genuine artifact from Houdini's past. I'm meeting my colleague, Elyse Luray at the History Detectives office. She's an expert on detecting fakes and authenticating Houdini collectibles. I've got a beautiful poster to show you.

Elyse: Okay.

Gwen: So what do you think?

Elyse: Okay, what you have is a window card, and I can tell that by its size: it's 14 x 22. It was used in a window, and it's on the right stock. Elyse explains that these types of posters were in the windows of places like theaters, barbershops, and candy stores...

Gwen: And the layout of the window card gives her a clue about its authenticity.

Elyse: It's important that the lower part of the lithography is on the card and that the information of where he's going to perform is on the top of the card.

As Houdini moved from town to town, he could use the same image but print different dates and venues on the top.

Gwen: I point out the stamp in the upper left-hand corner.

Elyse: This, if you look closely, you'll see it says "union label," and it's really just a stamp of approval from a union that actually hung the posters, and when you see this, it really adds to the authenticity of the piece. I would date this piece about late 1920s.

Gwen: Elyse's date for the poster is a good sign. Houdini was still performing in the 1920s.

Elyse: Houdini is so collectible. Any magician right now that's studying magic always goes back to the theories of Houdini. So from a collectible standpoint and from a historical standpoint, Houdini's probably the most important person in the history of magic.

Gwen: Great. Thanks a lot. If magicians today study Houdini, maybe one of them can help with the investigation. I'm heading to Las Vegas, the magic capital of the world. Lance Burton is a leading entertainer who has applied some of Houdini's innovations to modern magic.

Lance Burton: How are you, Gwen?

Gwen: Lance has invited me to be part of his Vegas stage show.

Lance: We're going to do a little magic trick with you.

Lance on stage: That's it and recline back. [applause] I want you to pull that tight onto my wrist, really tight.

Gwen: After the show, backstage, Lance illustrates a classic Houdini rope trick.

Gwen: Whoa! [laughs]

Lance: You are a wonderful magician's assistant.

Gwen: It was so exciting, and I haven't got a clue how you did it. You have a new career if you ever get out of the detective business. You're a fan of Houdini. Most magicians must be. Do you draw upon him in terms of your magic act or your notion of what it is to be a magician?

Lance: Sure, I think every magician draws upon Houdini. Houdini was the first modern entertainer. He was the Evel Knievel of his day. He would gather a huge crowd doing these outdoor stunts. He was a magician and an escape artist. He wrote books. He started his own film company. So he was a man who was

involved in every aspect of his world. Nowadays, you see people doing that all the time. In Houdini's day, that wasn't done and he made magic become big-time, going from being vaudeville show to being something in a big theater. He started out working in a dime museum and took it into the legitimate theater.

Gwen: Lance tells me that Houdini also set a new standard for the professionalism of magicians.

Lance: Houdini was sort of the turning point in magic. Houdini was, you know, very clear saying, "No, I don't have any special powers. This is all tricks. It's all illusion. It's just for fun," and I think every magician since Houdini has taken that approach.

Gwen: Lance also tells me that Houdini's grief over his mother's death propelled him on a quest to see if maybe, just maybe, there was some truth to the claims of spiritualists.

Lance: He was really close to his mother. He was a typical mama's boy, like I have always been. And when Houdini's mother passed away, it just devastated him, and he was really in grief, and he turned to the spirit mediums to find some consolation.

Gwen: Houdini wasn't the only person looking to get in touch with the dead. World War I had sparked a national passion for spiritualism, but Houdini quickly realized that most so-called clairvoyants were charlatans taking advantage of personal grief like his own.

Lance: And he went around to all these people, and as a magician, he saw right through them. He was just outraged that they were taking advantage of grieving people.

Gwen: Seems that Lee was on the right track with his questions about spiritualism, but does this poster have anything to do with Houdini's anger at spiritualists? The poster doesn't mention a city, but it was found in Chicago, and as an architectural historian, I recognize the name of the theater. I know there was a Shubert Princess in Chicago built in the early 20th century, a very understated, elegant theater. In fact, one of the best-known legitimate theatres in the country. Let me see what I can do going through reviews in the Chicago press. I search online through some old newspapers to see if there is any information about a Houdini show at the Shubert Princess and whether the performance had anything to do with spiritualism....And here it is. The Chicago Daily Tribune, March 17, 1926: An enthusiastic review of Houdini's show at the Princess Theater. "He's drawing large audiences, and he deserves it. His entertainment is varied, exciting, and gratifying. He starts where the others quit and gives a better bill of mystification, sleight of hand, and illusion than I recall getting from any other magician." It's a great review, but there's nothing about talking with the dead or debunking clairvoyance.

Gwen: I'm meeting with Houdini biographer Kenneth Silverman. I tell Ken that I'm trying to figure out what was going on during Houdini's performances in Chicago in 1926. What do you think?

Kenneth Silverman: Terrific poster. Very good, yes. This is from the last year of Houdini's career.

Gwen: He tells me that in the last years of Houdini's career, he devoted a great deal of time to exposing spiritualists, testifying before Congress, and even clashing with some leading public figures. The author of the Sherlock Holmes books, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was a friend of Houdini's. He believed spiritualists had let him speak to a son killed in World War I.

Ken: Conan Doyle was convinced a spiritualist could put Houdini in touch with his mother. Then Doyle took him to a

séance, where he brought back Houdini's mother, whom Houdini had been very close to. When the message came through in English, Houdini knew the medium was a fraud. His mother only spoke Yiddish. Houdini left the séance completely disillusioned with Doyle. Their friendship came apart.

Gwen: Ken also gives me a fascinating bit of information.

Ken: Toward the end of his career, Houdini turned his crusade against spiritualism into an entire act of his show. These spiritualist exposes were selling out theatres nationwide.

Gwen: What were some of the spiritualist tricks that he would expose during that portion of the show?

Ken: He would explain things like how a mysterious bell could ring. A medium might put a blank slate on the table with a piece of chalk, and the spirit of some loved one would write a message on it. That kind of thing. Houdini exposed all of these methods.

Gwen: Was our poster from such a show? What Ken had discovered gave me my answer for Lee.

Gwen: I think I have something I can show you. This has been a lot of fun. You had several questions. I tell Lee that his poster is authentic. It advertises a Chicago performance from Houdini's final tour in 1926, a time when he was deeply involved in his crusade against fraudulent spiritualists, and I tell Lee about my visit with Kenneth Silverman. This is a program from the Chicago run. "Houdini, acclaimed by press and public. The Schubert Princess Theater." Here it is: "Magic, illusions, escapes, and fraud mediums exposed." The program outlines exactly what was going on during the Chicago performances. And here we have Act Three. "Do the dead come back?"

Lee: It's unbelievable.

Gwen: This program shows Houdini's determination to establish the difference between magic and so-called magical powers.

Lee: It's been a great discovery, and I'm just—I'm just grateful to be a little bit a part of that history. Thanks so much for bringing this all together.

Gwen: Houdini's quest to expose spiritualists lived well beyond the grave. In October of 1926, just seven months after his run in Chicago, the great entertainer's life is suddenly cut short. Always passionate about his quests to expose frauds, Houdini had made secret arrangements to test his theories after his death. He instructs his wife to hold séances to try to reach him on the other side, but they agree on only one phrase that he will say if it is truly him communicating. Beatrice Houdini tries to contact her husband on Halloween, 10 years following his death, but never hears the secret phrase "Rose-a-bell believe," which was the name of the song she was performing when she met the young Harry Houdini in 1893.

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