

Seventy-five years of magical activity and support of the Society of American Magicians is no mean feat! That is what has been happening in Omaha, Nebraska. I actually write this introduction on January 27, 1996, exactly 75 years to the day after the organizational meeting of Assembly No. 7. Consider the company back then. New York City was the Parent Assembly, No. 1, of course, established in 1902. For many years it was our society; the concept of assemblies did not exist. However, Most Illustrious Harry Houdini recognized the importance of nation-wide involvement in our society, and through his influence the society changed its by-laws to allow for the formation of local assemblies around the country; San Francisco accepted his invitation and formed Assembly No. 2. In a relatively short time assemblies were formed in Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and Baltimore. All of these cities were major metropolitan areas. Why, then, did Omaha become number seven? The answer is very simple. Omaha, Nebraska was on the main line for vaudeville, and many Lyceum and Chautauqua magicians played Omaha. Look at a map of the United States and you will see that Omaha was a natural stopping point between east and west. The citizens of this relatively small city were exposed to magic far out of proportion to what the size of the population would ordinarily indicate. It is not surprising that a fair number of these citizens became magic enthusiasts and, indeed, magicians in their own right.

# THE OMAHA MAGICAL SOCIETY

## Assembly No. 7

An Historical Perspective: 1921-1996

by Walter B. Graham

The Omaha Magical Society held its first organizational meeting on January 27, 1921, at the Omaha YMCA. The following August, the S.A.M. charter was issued for Omaha Assembly No. 7, with 17 names listed as charter members and Harry Houdini's signature on the parchment. Early meetings were held in a local clubroom for a few years and subsequently in members' homes until the early 1970s when an expanded membership required larger facilities. The club currently meets at a local church most of the time. A few profiles of some past members will offer interesting highlights regarding the history of Assembly No. 7.

John Keenan became secretary of the society in August of 1935. He was to hold this office for 20 years. His meticulous and detailed records and meeting minutes provide us with a detailed club history. John willed \$500 to the society to establish a magic club library; and in 1993 the library of John Ilson was added, making our library nearly 1,000 books.

David P. Abbott (1864-1934) was a well known author, inventor, and researcher into psychic phenomena. All of the notables in magic who came to Omaha made it a point to visit Abbott in his home where he performed exclusively. His performances consisted of the Talking Teakettle, Talking Skull, Linking Rings, Spirit Slate Writing, 30-Card Trick, the Floating Ball, and several other variations from show to show. Okito gives credit to Abbott for teaching him his routine for the Floating Ball at the time he appeared with the Thurston show in the 1920s. Abbott was the author of several books and numerous articles, notably *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*, first published in 1906. Abbott left an unpublished manuscript, *David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries*, which was published in 1977 by Walter B. Graham, a member of No. 7.

Floyd E. Brown (b. 1902) was the first organizational

secretary of the Omaha Magical Society and very active as a performer, often appearing under the stage name of "Mirza." In the 1920s, Floyd took the photographs that appeared in *David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries*. His photo appeared on the cover of the April 1974 issue of *M-U-M*.

Herbert W. Fischer (1904-1948) was a prominent Omaha attorney who held the assembly presidency for 12 consecutive years from 1932-1944. The magic rec room in his home was decorated in Egyptian decor and was a frequent meeting place for the society. A highlight of his show was his presentation of cards-to-pocket, an amusing and startling exhibition of misdirection and entertaining magic. His tragic death in an auto accident lost a faithful member of the community and the society.

Howard Westgate (b. 1921) invented, improved, and constructed magical effects in his basement workshop. He built a rabbit vanish box and for a finale showed both sides of every piece of the box. I never knew how he did it. His tricks appeared in the *Sphinx* from time to time. In 1939, Howard was a high school student when he invented the Westgate Bowl Production. Over the years, this effect has been manufactured and sold by many dealers.

Howard Huntington's (1905-1991) father, Will, worked for an auto dealership and was an active magician in Omaha, as a club show performer. Thus, Howard's exposure to magic came at an early age, and he became a professional magician performing for school assemblies, county fairs, and farm implement dealer entertainments in the Midwest. His routines were precise, with every move rehearsed to the most infinite detail. I never saw the Thayer Rice, Orange, and Checker Mystery performed any better. He used 12-inch linking rings and was famous for his presentation of the Hydrostatic Glass as mentioned by John Booth in *Forging Ahead in Magic* (1939). Howard's photos have appeared on the covers of *Sphinx* and *M-U-M*.





*Back Row:* Richard Koch, Jerry Golmanavich, Dick Sanders, Bob Buczkowski, Bob Sabin, Jammin Ben, Jeff Sikora, Casey Seidler, Dick Johnson, George Huffaker, Jim Stockton. *Middle:* Dave Weber, Father John Kelly, Donald Morton, Diane Hayes, Pete Petrashek, Rita Fulton, Dan Cast, Father Ted Richling. *Front:* Pat Warsocki, Scott Koch, Norm Morton, Walter Graham, Gene Berrigan, Letha Pitlor, Bob Pitlor, Jan Snyder.

## KEEPER OF THE FLAMES

A Tribute to Tom Porter

Far back into the past, fire was discovered — a gift from the heavens, providing light in the midst of darkness, warmth in the dead of winter, and protection from one's worst enemies. Early peoples understood the importance of having a person dedicated to the preserving of this gift from the gods, someone of honor and loyalty. Someone who could be trusted, literally, with their lives. This person was designated "The Keeper of the Flames."

In the history of Assembly No. 7, the late Thomas R. Porter exemplifies this "Keeper of the Flames." Tom heard about the assembly while attending a magic show performed by the Great Thurston. After going to several meetings, what started out as a mere hobby soon transformed into a passion that guided him for the rest of his days. Tom Porter stayed with the club through good and bad times, through times of depression, and through times of war. There were many years when membership dwindled and the spark almost died. But those were the times when Tom fought hardest to keep the fire going. He continued performing, teaching, and promoting magic even through his own personal setbacks. He found that the best way to keep the flame alive was to share it with as many people as possible. The ember stayed alive. The spark glowed and the flame remained.

Today Assembly 7 has over 100 active members, beginners and professionals alike. All are following a path that was cleared for us by those who cared enough to keep the fire burning. Tom was one of those who cared. He was, indeed, a KEEPER OF THE FLAMES!



PAST PRESIDENTS *Back Row:* Charlie Gross (1988), Denny Rourke (1976), Walter Graham (1949, 1956, 1969). *Front Row:* Gene Berrigan (1990), Dave Arch (1987), Pete Petrashek (1970).

Rev. Charles K. Hayden, S.J. (1894-1954) was a Jesuit priest who taught physics at Omaha's Creighton University. His outstanding craftsmanship is apparent with a variety of equipment that remains in the hands of today's performers. He is credited in the Albo books as the inventor of the Fu-Manchu Hand Chopper.

Roy Tatroe (1902-1965) was a mechanical genius who could build most anything in wood, metal, or plastic. He built many mechanical Christmas window displays for local department stores. He built a floating light bulb dis-

play and a mechanical levitation. He made a variety of magical devices and tables. In 1956, he won the Bromfield trophy at the S.A.M. convention in Havana, Cuba, for his Shooting through a Woman. He won this trophy again in 1958 in Omaha for his levitation of a small auto with a boy sitting in the driver's seat.

Walter B. Graham (b. 1923) became an S.A.M. member in 1942. He has been an active performer in the capacity of a semi-professional magician. He won the Brunswick trophy

for the best stage effect (acrobatic cane) at the 1947 Chicago S.A.M./I.B.M. combined convention. In 1949, he won two prizes at the S.A.M. convention in Denver.

Johnny Carson (b. 1925), after World War II, attended the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. He then became a radio personality at radio station WOW in Omaha, where he hosted an early morning program called *Happy Ranch*, as well as appearing on the new medium of television. He was a semi-professional magician, ventriloquist, and M.C. for various club dates and county fairs in and



around Omaha. He was a member of No. 7 for several years prior to his departure to California in 1951 to begin his career leading to host of the *Tonight Show* on national television.

Pat Hazell (b. 1961), an Omahan who has moved into the national spotlight, billed himself as "Magic, Comedy, Wisecracks" at his farewell Omaha appearance in 1985. Since that time, he has become well known as a comedy show writer, actor, and warm-up act for comedian Jerry Seinfeld. He frequently appears as a guest on the late-night talk shows.

Members of the Assembly who have participated nationally are the Rev. John W. Kelly, who served as the national chaplain for several terms in the 1960s; and Pete Petrashek, who served many years as the national film librarian. His expertise as a film editor for a local TV station aided him when it came time to transfer the vast film library to video tape.

In addition to the accomplishments of its individual members, Assembly No. 7 has a rich history of providing organized magical activities for midwestern magicians. The first Omaha Magical Society Conclave was

## The MAGIC of OMAHA



A young Johnny Carson entertaining Royal Willis, Tom Porter, Dan Brown.



LIFE MEMBERS: Walter Graham, Charlie Gross, Pete Petrashek, Ernie Olson (*not shown*).

held in September, 1941, at the Paxton Hotel. More than 100 attended. Chicago's Joe Berg was the dealer, and

Dorny was M.C. for the Headliner Show. This established a tradition of Omaha conclaves, which continued off and on over the years; and at present we host a conclave every two years in October with an attendance of around 100. Shows, lectures, and dealers make for a fun weekend in Omaha.

In May, 1958, Omaha hosted the national S.A.M.

convention at the Fontenelle Hotel. Milbourne Christopher was the national president. Harry Farnham was the general chair. The appearance of John Shirley with his balloon act brought him national attention, and he later appeared on several occasions on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Today our club continues many of its traditions from the past. It is an active organization with talented people in magic and organizational skills. We meet every month at a local church with planned activities, lectures, and social events.