

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*.