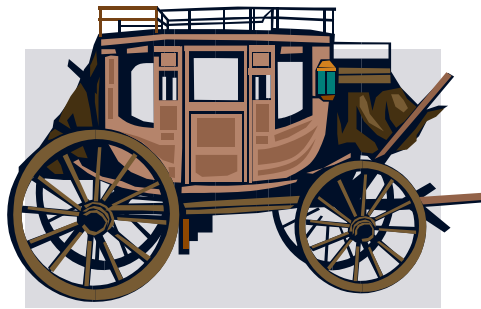


RECOLLECTIONS



JACK D. RITTENHOUSE

Boy Scout
Magician
Hobo
Oil Industry Publicist
Publisher (Stage Coach Press)
UNM Press Editor
Rare Book Dealer
Historian of New Mexico

By
**JACK DEVERIE
RITTENHOUSE**
(1912 –1991)
Albuquerque, New Mexico

From his unpublished hand-typed chapters
Original Copyright ©1981-1989

Composited, Illustrated, and Edited By Harry Briley

Revised 1/23/2014

Copyright © 2010-2014, Harry Briley Living Trust
PO Box 2913, Livermore, California 94551-2913
brileyh@comcast.net

Contents

CHAPTER 4. Magician..... 4

 Tricky Salesman..... 4

 College Magic..... 4

 Harlan Tarbell Lessons 5

 Magic Tricks 6

 Escape Artist..... 7

 International Brotherhood of Magicians 8

 Tricks versus True Magic..... 8

 Kings of Magic 9

 Harry Blackstone 10

 Buried Alive!..... 11

 A Road Show 13

 End of Magic Career..... 14

Figures

Figure 1 - Magic Show Announcement Card - 4/1931..... 7

Figure 2 - I.B.M. Membership Card – 9/1931 8

Figure 3 - Kings of Magic Letterhead 9

Figure 4 - News Article - Blackstone (Terre Haute Independent 9/21/1933)..... 10

Figure 5 - News Article - Pageant (Terre Haute Independent 9/28/1933) 12

Figure 6 – Jack’s Magic Changing Bag (H. Briley 2014) 14

CHAPTER 4. Magician

Tricky Salesman

The first magician I saw was as a nine-year-old living with my grandparents at their Hotel Harvey in the small town of Constantine, Michigan. Sometimes a street vendor came to town and set up on the street corner across from the hotel.

One of these sold various toilet articles for shaving, etc., and he made his sales pitch from the flat bed of a small truck. While a crude example, he performed a couple of tricks to draw a crowd and then started his sales talk, followed by more tricks and more sales talk.

In one trick, he used a large roll of absorbent cotton, a sort of cotton batting. He stuffed a large, fluffy wad of it into his mouth, and started chewing. He did this with handful after handful, ending by showing his mouth empty.

He stayed at our hotel and demonstrated the trick. When inserting the cotton, he held the roll of cotton in his left hand and pulled off a wad, making sure it was quite large and fluffed out. He held this wad between the first and third fingers of his right hand when inserting it into his mouth. The wad looked so big in his hand but dwindled to pea size after chewing it a bit. He repeated this with another wad of cotton, still holding it in the first and third fingers of his right hand, but as it entered his mouth, the fresh fluffy wad obscured that with his thumb and little finger he removed the pellet left from the previous chew. Thus, he kept "eating" more and each time removed the previous bite. The last pellet was so small that his mouth appeared empty. It introduced to me how to do tricks.

College Magic

Early in 1931, while a freshman at the Indiana State Teachers College in Terre Haute, Indiana, I decided to earn some needed money as an amateur magician. I suppose, it was being a professional magician, as I performed for pay. I did some of this off and on until the end of September 1933, and have done nothing since in magic.

I never had any expectations of becoming a professional, touring magician. Still, I gained a stage presence that has always made me quite comfortable in speaking before a crowd. Some of the principles that a top magician uses in creating new illusions can be applied to creations in other fields, such as advertising.

While at college, I worked at a restaurant for my meals but still needed cash for room rent, clothes, and other expenses. I looked around for something to bring in money. I built some ship models, but that reached a dead end with no customers. I studied the ads in magazines such as Popular Science.

I toyed with buying a xylophone to play it with a band. "Make big money!" the ads said. I was never good at music, except perhaps the bugle, so I abandoned that dream. In contrast, my son David took up the guitar as a side occupation and did well with it.

Harlan Tarbell Lessons

A 1931 ad offered a correspondence course in magic by Harlan Tarbell, a well-known national professional magician in Chicago. This course cost five dollars to sign up, with similar monthly payments, totaling \$100.

I signed up and soon received my first loose-leaf sheets of Lesson One, along with a locked steel box about the size of a cash box, with a kit of a dozen gadgets and gimmicks standard with magicians. One can buy such a "magician's kit" in any toy shop, but in 1932 they were available only in the few largest cities or by mail from a few dealers.

The correspondence course was excellent and available in book form. The instructions described the manipulations in detail, often with small close-up drawings, and Tarbell even gave the lines for the spoken "patter" for each step.

According to Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlan_Tarbell (edited):

In 1911, Harlan Tarbell moved to Chicago in a professional career in illustration. He attracted the attention of the magic company Read and Covert, which hired Tarbell to work on their *Illustrated Catalogue of Superior Magical Apparatus*.

Publishers Cooke and Jordan produced a correspondence course in magic in the mid-1920s. A few months before his death, Harry Houdini was approached to author the course. Houdini declined but recommended Tarbell. The publishers agreed, allotting Tarbell \$50,000 for the course. Tarbell finished the course in 1928, producing 60 **correspondence lessons** with 3,100 illustrations.

Tarbell said: "There is a big difference between a magician and a man who does tricks. One must be trained in the mechanics, the alternate methods and be skilled in the presentation to meet any conditions which may arise." Unlike other magic courses, which emphasize self-working illusions, Tarbell began with practice drills involving body position, movement, and sleight-of-hand for future lessons.

After selling 10,000 complete courses, Cooke and Jordan **discontinued the Tarbell Course in Magic in 1931**, blaming the Great Depression for slumping sales. In 1941, magician Louis Tannen purchased the rights, working with Tarbell himself (and Read and Covert) to convert the lessons into book form.

I once met Harlan Tarbell in a performance at St. Mary's of the Woods, a fashionable Catholic girls' college across the Wabash River from Terre Haute. It was open to the public, so I bought a ticket and sat down front. When Tarbell asked for a volunteer, I hurried up. I forget the trick, but I was briefly part of the Tarbell show.

It was not possible to do a great deal with magic. While studying to become a teacher; magic was only side money. During my entire "career" as a magician, I doubt that I did over twenty performances. In the Great Depression years, if I made only ten or twenty dollars per show, this was not bad. The girls who clerked in Woolworth stores made only four to six dollars a week. My dad made only twenty dollars a week as a machinist.

I did a short performance as our college fraternity's act in a combined entertainment night. We had four fraternities on the campus, and each furnished one or more acts. I did magic; a fraternity brother played classical violin; and a third played a piano concerto. One performer was Burl Ives, who became famous as a folksinger and actor. His fraternity connection was unclear to me; one of the fraternities may have sponsored him.

Magic Tricks

Magicians affect an air of mystery and the supernatural, without really claiming any truly magic powers. This is part of the ambience of the performance. It is all in fun. Everyone knows it is only a trick and leave asking "How did he do it?" The better magicians worked hard to invent new tricks. They enjoyed mystifying other magicians in the short period before their colleagues figured it out.

Magicians never called their acts "tricks" and never said, "Now for my next trick ..."

They thus define tricks as manipulations, effects, or illusions.

- "Manipulations" were hand or finger movements with coins, cards, or similar objects, starting with ordinary objects found around a home.
- "Effects" were tricks that involved an apparatus such as a box, vase, tube, bag, pan, or other container built with [an internal] trick device.
- "Illusions" involved persons or large objects, usually with special construction.

Manipulations required years of practice and skill. An "effect" or an "illusion" required less practice but involved costly apparatus. I never had the long training needed for manipulations, so I relied upon the apparatus. That is why I seldom said that I was once a magician, for people then asked me to "do a trick," and I needed an apparatus to perform.

Escape Artist

The first money I earned from magic was a thirty-five cent lunch bet. I lived in a student rooming house, with six or seven other students. I wagered a student that he could not tie me up with a rope such that I could not escape; the winner to buy lunch.

I had a piece of clothesline about 75 feet long. There were a few rules: I was to be tied standing on my feet. He was to start with one end of the rope but not pass the rope around my neck, to avoid risk of strangulation. Otherwise, he could tie me up any way he wished. They could watch me escape. I had never tried this, although I had read the instructions. I was free within five minutes.

The key factor lay in the length of rope. With such a long rope, a slack of only one inch in each turn around my body added up to a lot of slack. I drew in my breath to expand my chest at each turn of the rope around me. I held my muscles tense, with my arms just a bit away from my body. When the student finished, I simply relaxed my body and exhaled. The rope immediately became slack and almost fell from my body. This left only my hands tied, and those loops soon became slack. However, the first loop around my wrist had extra knots, and that took work. I finally pulled my hand through it.

My first professional show was on April 9, 1931, at the First Baptist Church in Terre Haute and sponsored by Boy Scout Troop 31.



Figure 1 - Magic Show Announcement Card - 4/1931

The performance took an hour and a half. Most of my equipment fit on a card table. My share of receipts was ten dollars. I did eleven tricks including:

- making my wand appear and vanish
- tearing paper napkins and restoring them
- changing wine to water
- getting out of a "Siberian" handcuff chain
- cutting and restoring a piece of rope
- escaping from a thumb tie
- doing a Hindu paper trick
- answering questions written and sealed in envelopes

International Brotherhood of Magicians

I met two semi-amateur magicians in Terre Haute. Fred Rapson was a bank teller by vocation, had performed for several years, and had several older apparatus for sale. I knew Rapson well during the next two years as a good friend. Another magician was Jimmy Trimble. I saw his act but never knew him well.

The International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM) held its national convention in Three Rivers, Michigan that summer. This was only nine miles from Constantine, and I could stay with my grandparents while I attended the convention. Hundreds of professional and amateur magicians attended. The performances ran almost non-stop for nearly a week. In the fall, I joined this guild as member 4292.

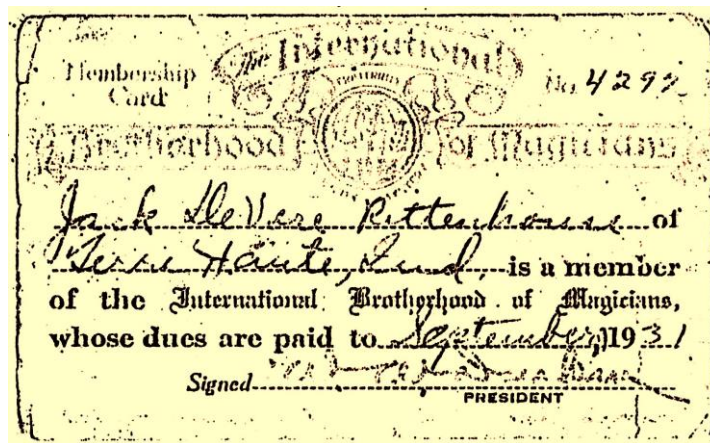


Figure 2 - I.B.M. Membership Card – 9/1931

Tricks versus True Magic

I read many books on magic from the public library. Some of these dealt with myths of natural mysteries. I fell to wondering if there could be such a thing as true magic, not performers' tricks. I read accounts of such, as in the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini and elsewhere. I went to the college library and read parts of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, presumably the forerunner of all such writings.

I emerged from this study with no belief in true magic. One great magician of the era was a man named Dunninger, who said that no medium, no spiritualist, no psychic, could do anything that he, Dunninger, could not duplicate as a professional magician.

There are things we do not yet understand. Fifty years ago, anyone would have scoffed at the idea of weightlessness in space, yet that was proven. Many things, like extra-sensory perception, remain puzzling. Lacking an explanation, I remain skeptical. A French scientist wrote that what we call an accident is merely an event with causes too complex to understand immediately.

Kings of Magic

Sometime late in 1932 or early 1933, I met a new student on campus, Thurl Rhodes, who was doing magic. We decided to team up so we could present a larger show. I had been using my first and middle names, Jack DeVere, as a stage name. Rhodes had been using the name of Paul Omar. Therefore, we became DeVere and Omar.



Figure 3 - Kings of Magic Letterhead

Omar specialized in the strait jacket. This heavy canvas jacket has straps and buckles in the back, but not in the front. The long sleeves are sewn closed and have a strap extending from each end. The person wrapped his arms about himself, and these sleeve straps buckle behind his back. Omar used a regulation police strait jacket with no gimmicks. I never learned how he got out of it. He escaped in full view rolling and writhing on the floor.

About this time, I acquired back my old Model T Ford touring car, which I had sold to a chum back in Fort Wayne when I left for college. It had no top, and we removed the back seat for more room to carry our apparatus. We did shows in Indiana at Rockville, Hymera High School, Shelburn, and West Terre Haute.

I toyed with the idea of weaving various tricks together with a simple story line, to make the show more like a play and not just a series of disconnected tricks. I reasoned that in dancing, the ballet has a story line involving a series of dance steps. I wrote up an outline, but it called for more people and more expensive equipment than I could obtain.

One summer during college, I was at home and booked a performance at the little town of Avilla north of Fort Wayne. My mother made Chinese costumes of cretonne for my younger brother and sister, so they could act as my assistants. One trick involved the traditional rabbit trick, but I could not obtain a fluffy bunny. I got a big, brown, muscular buck rabbit, which was ornery and hard to handle, but somehow I made it through.

Harry Blackstone

In September 1933, the great Harry Blackstone (senior) brought his show to town, and one evening we all met at Rapson's for an equivalent to a musicians' jam session. There were about six or seven men present, and much talk about magicians. Nearly all present did some sort of trick; I abstained. Harry Blackstone was a warm and pleasant person, not at all haughty. I never met an arrogant magician. Blackstone "closed the show" by doing a simple "pick-a-card" trick that baffled all of us. .

An older magician named "Argus" attended that evening affair. He was at least sixty and traveled alone in a small panel-body truck that carried his apparatus. I looked at this quiet, lonely but contented man and decided that his gypsy life was not for me. He made one side remark that has remained with me all my life: "Son, always remember you're never over the hill and starting down until you begin believing your own publicity."

All performers' publicity proclaims them as great and marvelous. Many business executives get the same adulation from sycophants. Once they start believing this flattery, they lose any modesty, become arrogant and over-confident. They are like a knight in heavy armor, fighting on foot atop a pile of loose sand.

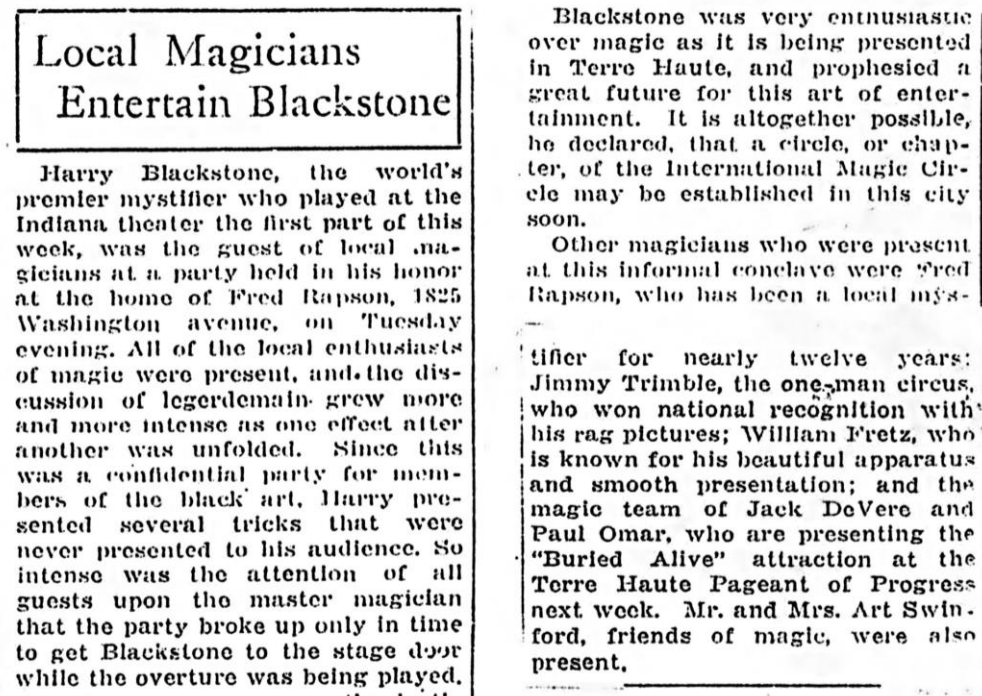


Figure 4 - News Article - Blackstone (Terre Haute Independent 9/21/1933)

Buried Alive!

In September 1933, Omar suggested we try something big. The 1933 World's Fair was running in Chicago, and area towns tried smaller imitations. Someone organized a "Pageant of Progress" for Terre Haute and advertised for acts and shows.

Omar proposed that we do a "buried alive" act. This meant that one person would be put in a coffin, underground, under hypnotic spell for a week. People would pay admission to look down a narrow peephole into the coffin. I was to be in the coffin.

We signed up to do the act. First, we got a coffin from a local casket factory. In the back of their warehouse, we found decades old coffin in the nineteenth-century style: wide at the shoulders and tapering to the head and foot. It cost ten dollars. I could lie stretched out and could roll over after the lid was on. It had an opening about twenty inches by fifteen above the face and shoulders, and during the first part of a funeral, the face of the deceased was visible through this opening. At twenty years old, I was twenty-two inches wide in the shoulders, five feet ten inches tall, and weighed 135 pounds.

We put comfortable padding in the casket and cut a four-inch diameter hole at the foot, so air could be pumped down for breathing. We rented a tent to put over the "grave," much like a tent used by an undertaker at the cemetery. We contracted with a sign man to paint a canvas banner held up on two poles as in any carnival show. For the ticket booth, we used a "rough box" of the type in which caskets are shipped

We arranged with a firm that lowered caskets into graves. This man sold concrete grave vaults and he challenged us to let him use a vault. Omar and I huddled and accepted his challenge, provided he cut two holes in the top of the vault: a small one at the foot equal to our air hole, and a viewing-hole at the head, equal to the hole already in the lid of the casket. He agreed to do this alteration, to dig the grave, lower the casket, and to handle the "resurrection" at the end of the week.

We arranged for a hearse and cortege to take the hypnotized "body" to the cemetery. There was much publicity locally about all this.

The grave was dug six feet deep, and after being filled in, the extra earth would be heaped in a mound atop it. We began a bit at "fudging." The hole was actually six feet deep from the bottom of the grave to the top of the mound. Timbers four inches thick were laid crosswise in the bottom of the grave. The concrete vault, whose floor was about four inches thick, rested atop these timbers. With the thickness of the coffin floor and pad, I lay closer to the level ground surface than six feet.

The interior of the concrete vault was thirty inches high. After the casket was lowered and the concrete lid placed on the vault, a square wooden box of the size of the viewing hole was placed atop the coffin. This box was open at top and bottom. Atop this box, an upper tapered box extended about four feet above the surface. It was down this shaft that people could view the "body." To guard against jokesters dropping cigarettes or pebbles

we installed a pane of glass in that upper tapered viewing box. Wires for electric lights ran down into the casket, one for a pale blue light (ghostly) and one for a reading light. We used a narrow stovepipe for the air hole, with a small electric fan to blow air down.

All was ready. At the publicized hour, Omar and I went to the door of the old city hall in Terre Haute. He did the hand waving mumbo jumbo to make me appear hypnotized. I stiffened up and they placed me in the coffin. Pallbearers carried it down to the hearse, which drove slowly down the main street to the stadium grounds. We were preceded by a motorcycle policeman, and followed by the truck of the concrete vault firm and as many cars of "mourners" as we could arrange.

At the show grounds, the casket was lowered and the concrete vault placed in position, and the grave filled. Our tent was full of paying spectators. Omar's girlfriend was nearby wearing a white uniform to look like a nurse, but with no cap insignia.

<h2 style="text-align: center;">PAGEANT BUCKING HEAVY WEATHER</h2>	<p>The local post of Veterans of Foreign Wars is sponsoring the event. Outside of the stadium are three attractions.</p>
<h3 style="text-align: center;">Fall Carnival At the Stadium Gets Bad Break—Promoters Are Carrying On.</h3>	<p>First comes Frank Orr's fan dancers and another dancer, said to have been brought here from the Oriental village. Second is Devere, buried in the ground. The third is the usual carnival attractions under the heading of the Blue Ribbon shows with rides, ball throwing contests and what not.</p>
<p>Inclement weather has worked havoc on the Pageant of Progress, holding forth this week at the memorial stadium.</p>	<p>For 25 cents admission fee or 15 cents and a ticket from some of the merchants who are cooperating one is admitted to the stadium grounds for the main attractions.</p>
<p>The boxing contest was postponed both Monday and Tuesday nights and is to be held tonight. The opening of the entire pageant was postponed from Monday until Tuesday afternoon.</p>	<p>Features of the main show include music from the Warren Henderson Gayety Club orchestra, a local organization; Billy Schlensker, four-year-old dancing and singing prodigy; the Honolulu Trio, a group of local musicians; the "Bucking Ford" comedy act; an act by the pupils of the Reid Marlatt School of Dancing; a ski jump by the man who slides down a high incline and makes a leap as though he was sliding on snow, and several other acts of entertainment.</p>
<p>However, the pageant got under way Tuesday afternoon with the "hypnotizing" of Devere by "Omar the Great" on the court house steps. Devere was then buried underground and he can be seen in the casket for the admission price of 15 cents.</p>	

Figure 5 - News Article - Pageant (Terre Haute Independent 9/28/1933)

For the next seven days, 10am until 10pm, I slept and/or read all of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" using my reading lamp. I experienced no claustrophobia and, never have from being confined, although I have always had a fear of height (except in a plane), even if only twelve feet off the ground in a tree.

When a paying spectator arrived, Omar tapped the side of the viewing hole with his cane. I turned off the reading lamp and switched on the ghostly blue light. The signal alerted me to lie on my back and close my eyes. I could hear the exclamations from above.

Everything worked perfectly up through "resurrection day." As a favor to another showman on the midway, we arranged to have me brought out of hypnosis on the stage of a girly show nearby on the midway. The ground in front of his stage had a thick layer of sawdust, and the stage was only about three feet off the ground. So when Omar began his hand gestures and incantations to bring me out of my spell, I resisted for a while, arousing crowd anxiety and causing Omar apparently to sweat. Then as I came out of the trance, I went limp, dropped to the stage floor, and over the edge onto the sawdust. It was a gymnastic maneuver done many times in my boyhood. The spectators screamed.

Was I entombed the whole week? No more so than the lady in a magic act gets sawn in half. I got out every night, put on street clothes, and sat around in all-night restaurants. No one recognized me. How did I get out? I will reveal no secrets, but if you cannot figure it out from the data given, think it through again. It took some limber doing!

After the great hoax ended, there came a sad result. By contract with the promoter, all funds were "banked" daily with the head office. At the end of the show after settling claims from citizens, we got our income. However, the day I was "resurrected," the promoter ran off with the exposition proceeds. No midway show was paid. Many superstitious showmen blamed us; a "buried alive" act, they said, was a sure jinx.

A Road Show

At the exposition, we made a deal with an unemployed real estate salesman to act as our booking agent. He booked us for a single show in a tiny movie house in the village of Dana, Indiana. This shuttered theater reopened just for our one performance.

It had a tiny stage with those old-fashioned curtains painted with a landscape in the center, surrounded by ads of local merchants. We put on our best show, but it was obvious that DeVere and Omar was no longer a viable concern. We loaded the apparatus in the Model T, drove back to Fort Wayne. I left my equipment with my parents and took Omar to his parents' home in Mishawaka, Indiana.

As I left him, the Model T died on a street in South Bend, just across the river. The car was worth only twenty-five dollars when running, and the cracked cylinder block would cost more to replace, so I signed the title over to the towing company and hitchhiked home. We had made enough in Dana to pay a few bills.

End of Magic Career

I do not know what happened to my magic apparatus equipment. I have nothing but the few clippings shown and some of the Tarbell lessons.

I never did magic until twenty-five years later when I was a paid speaker at a Texas printer's convention in San Antonio. To enliven my talk, I purchased a piece of magic equipment called a "changing bag" and showed how the names of prospects could be changed into sales dollars. I gave this apparatus, a bit moth-eaten, to my daughter Anne.



Figure 6 – Jack's Magic Changing Bag (H. Briley 2014)