

## HOUDINI LIVES ON -- IN SPIRIT

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Friday, October 31, 1986

Author: NEAL RUBIN Free Press Staff Writer

It was not a dark and stormy night.

By all that is eerie, it should have been. Thunder crashing in the background. Flashes of lightning illuminating the drawn face of the thickly muscled man in Room 401 **at** old **Grace Hospital** .

But it was on a peaceful, slightly overcast Detroit afternoon that Harry **Houdini** made his final escape. "Death," said the headline in the next day's Free Press, "Rings Down Curtain on **Houdini**."

That was Oct. 31, 1926, 60 Halloweens ago. Some fans are still waiting for an encore.

They will gather tonight in Appleton, Wis., for what is called the Official **Houdini** Seance, yet another attempt to summon the ghost of the man no lock could hold. With two mediums presiding, assorted **Houdini** relatives and historians helping, and about 100 invited guests watching, **Houdini** will be asked to honor an enduring promise.

Much of his career was spent denouncing and discrediting psychics who claimed they could speak with the dead. Were there a way to communicate from beyond, **Houdini** vowed, he would find it.

To this point, he hasn't, though friends held seances in Detroit on the first 25 anniversaries of his death and practically everyone to ever own a Ouija board has attempted to raise his spirit.

"WE'VE GOT a number of things going for us," said Thomas Boldt of Appleton, whose construction company is underwriting the seance. Those include magic experts, a pair of **Houdini**'s handcuffs and Marie Blood of Pinehurst, N.C., **Houdini**'s niece, a child star in several productions of the little-known and little-missed **Houdini** Film Co.

"This is also the first seance we know of in Appleton, the town where we think he was born," Boldt said.

Ehrich Weiss was born on March 24, 1874, in either Budapest, Hungary, or Appleton; biographers differ. He eventually adopted a new name and birthday -- Harry **Houdini**, in honor of the French magician Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin, and April 6, for reasons unexplained.

He grew up in Appleton, the son of a poor rabbi who moved his family to Milwaukee when **Houdini** was nine and to New York City a few years later. In New York, the 14-year-old **Houdini** found work cutting necktie linings, and presto! he found magic.

The co-worker who introduced him to magic became his partner as their hobby became passion and then profession. The partner soon fell short of **Houdini's** immense expectations and was replaced -- which is why a pair of **Houdini's** handcuffs will be part of the bait in Appleton tonight.

THE NEW PARTNER was Theo Weiss, **Houdini's** younger brother. **Houdini** left much of his papers and equipment to Theo, who performed solo under the name Hardeen after **Houdini** married and brought his wife into the act. Hardeen, in turn, left much of the legacy to an eager young magician named Sidney Radner.

Radner, 67, of Holyoke, Mass., claims to have the world's largest collection of Houdiniana. "I was a **Houdini** buff when no one else was. Hardeen took a liking to me, I guess because I haunted him **at** conventions and magic shows and stuff."

Largely retired from magic, Radner now gives lectures about crooked gambling and carries on **Houdini's** crusade against phony psychics. **At** one seance, he said, a medium who claimed to have contacted **Houdini** misspelled the magician's given name, Ehrich.

"I think (mediums) really, in their minds, believe what they are doing," Radner said. He doesn't, but like **Houdini**, Radner would love to be persuaded.

**Houdini's** lifelong interest in the occult grew to an obsession after his mother died in 1913. Frustrated in attempts to contact her spirit, he campaigned against those he considered charlatans, reviling them publicly and revealing their secrets in his act.

THOUGH WELL received by audiences, the diatribe -- like his illusions and sleight-of-hand -- is scarcely remembered. The name **Houdini** conjures only images of daring stunts and incredible escapes.

In Detroit, on Nov. 27, 1906, he began a two-decade-long series of jumps, leaping handcuffed from the Belle Isle bridge and surfacing unfettered.

In London, he freed himself from a set of handcuffs with six sets of locks and nine tumblers on each side. In Liverpool, laden with chains, he plunged into the river Mersey. In New York, manacled, he escaped from a packing crate nailed shut, wrapped in steel bands, and thrown into the East River. In Salt Lake City, he slipped from a coffin sealed in a steel tomb. **At** New York's Shelton Hotel, he stayed submerged in a coffin-sized box for 90 minutes.

His life depended on skill, trickery and conditioning so flawless he would often invite men from the audience to punch him in the stomach. Backstage before a show in Montreal on October 22, 1926, a visitor asked to take a few trial swings.

THE VISITOR, McGill University student J. Gordon Whitehead, had been acting strangely, asking what **Houdini** thought of the miracles in the Bible. **Houdini**, sorting mail as he sat on a couch, was paying little attention.

As **Houdini** began to rise, Whitehead belted him with all his might. He threw three more punches **at** his unprepared target before onlookers tore him away.

Stomach aflame, **Houdini** completed that night's 2 1/2-hour performance and two more the next day. Afterward, the company boarded a train for Detroit, where a two-week run was to begin on Sunday the 25th.

**Houdini** got through opening night **at** the Garrick Theater with a temperature of 104. **At** 3 a.m. on the 26th, he entered **Grace Hospital**. Three days after it had ruptured, his appendix was removed.

Peritonitis was so advanced he was given 12 hours to live. Instead, he battled for six days. "I'll get out of this," he told brother Theo, "like I get out of other things."

**Houdini** finally surrendered on Halloween morning. "I guess I'm all through fighting," he said, and three hours later, **at** 1:26 p.m., he died.

THE **HOSPITAL** became a shrine of sorts for **Houdini** devotees. Visitors were commonplace this time of year until the building was torn down in 1980 to make way for the Harper Professional Building.

Despite their pleas, **Houdini** never returned to the place of his death. Tonight, Boldt hopes to draw him to the place of his youth.

The seance site is just off **Houdini** Plaza, near **Houdini's** Great Escape Cafe and a modern sculpture named after **Houdini's** first great trick, the Metamorphosis. Lights will dim and hands will join just after credits roll on a Wisconsin Public Television special titled "**Houdini!**"

"People here are real excited about it," Boldt said. But do they really expect **Houdini** to open his old handcuffs? Do they expect some presence in the room to field the barrage of identifying questions only **Houdini** could answer?

Not really. In fact, a friend of Boldt sent a warning with her RSVP card last week.

"If Harry does come back," it said, "there are going to be two dead bodies in the room."

\*\*\*\*

Memo: PAGE ONE

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A;

Index Terms: HISTORY ; HARRY HOUDINI; BIOGRAPHY ; DEATH ; ANNIVERSARY

Record Number: 8602190167

Copyright (c) 1986 Detroit Free Press