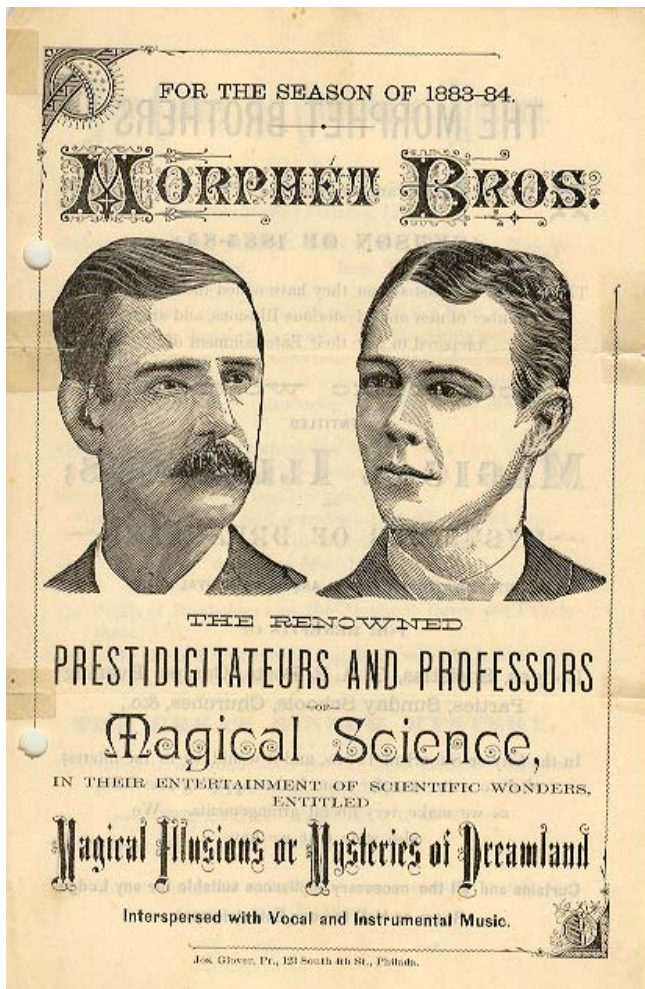


## The Morphet's of Philadelphia

*By Tom Ewing*

One of the early magic families in Philadelphia were The Morphets. Fred Morphet, whose real name was D.J. Sheahan, was born in Quebec, Canada in 1866. He came with his parents to the United States, first to Rochester, New York and eventually to Philadelphia in 1875.



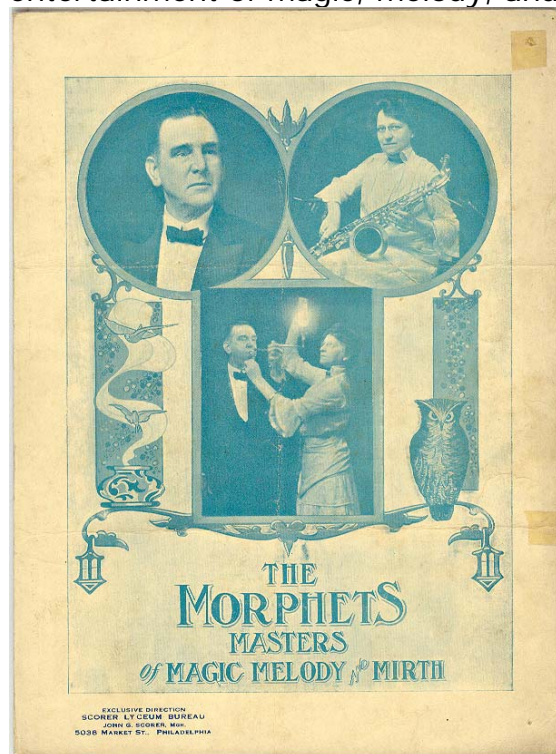
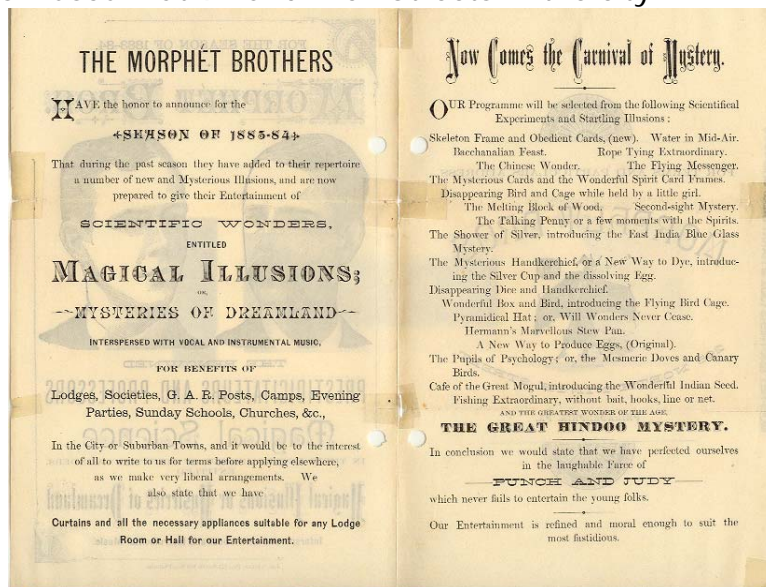
He formed a partnership with his brother Harry in 1880 and began appearing as "The Morphet Brothers." Their professional debut was at Forepaugh's Theater in Philadelphia. They were only hired for a week but their appearance was extended based upon their skill and ability. Forepaugh's Theater was managed by John A. Forepaugh, who was born in the city on August 9, 1852. From his early childhood he was associated with his uncle Adam Forepaugh in the circus business.

The Morphet Brothers played all the leading vaudeville houses in the country and also appeared at Kellar's Egyptian Hall with the Mrs. Tom Thumb Company. This was after Kellar had left Philadelphia to go on to fame and fortune as America's favorite magician. In my book, "Kellar's Egyptian Hall: America's Temple of Illusion," I conducted a newspaper search covering Kellar's entire run at the theater and never confirmed that the Morphet's and Kellar appeared at the same time.

He also performed at Bradenburgh's Museum at 9<sup>th</sup> and Arch Streets in the city.

A four-page flyer for The Morphet Brothers for the 1883-84 season from Price's Egyptian Hall Museum, shows them offering card tricks, disappearing bird cage, Miser's Dream, vanishing die and handkerchief, Herrmann's Marvelous Stew Pan, Second Sight, Ariel Fishing, The Great Hindoo Mystery, which is a trunk transposition and many other effects.

By 1903 The Morphet's were offering Kellar's "Oh!" illusion, a "Double Rapid Transit" trunk transposition, shadowgraphs, animal acts, and again, numerous small magic effects. Following the death of his brother Fred, Harry organized the Morphet & Smith Company presenting, "an evening's entertainment of magic, melody, and mirth."

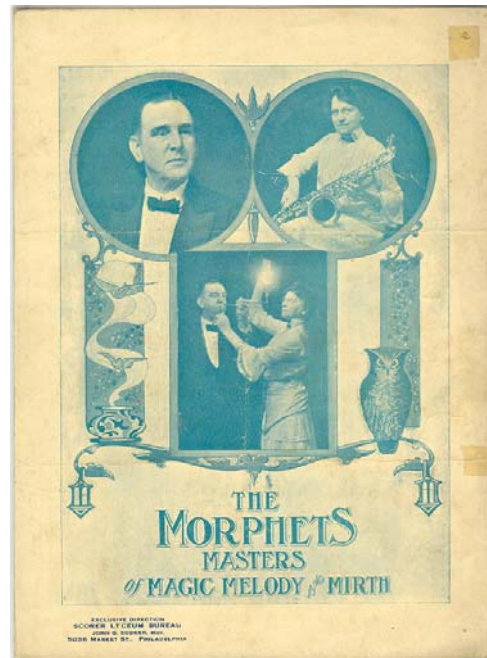


Harry Morphet was also popular on the Lyceum Circuit and according to publications like *The Magical World*, *The Sphinx* and *Mahatma*, was constantly booked. He and his wife billed their act as "Entertainment of Scientific Wonders" and called it "Magical Illusions or Mysteries of Dreamland."

Magician and writer Ray Muse recalled one of The Morphet's programs from March 1917, and it included 25 large and small effects. The act opened with the production from tissue paper, of hundreds of small paper flags which were handed out to the audience, additional flags and ending with a flag staff with a large American flag. Other effects included billiard ball manipulations, silk dyeing, rice bowls, rising cards from the top of a bottle, "Wintertime in China," juggling a glass of water on a swinging hoop, a musical interlude on saxophone, trumpet, musical coins, handballs, and more.

One of their more exotic feats was the "Human Gas Well" in which Morphet filled his mouth with gasoline while the end of a rubber hose was attached to a three-burner chandelier. Placing the other end of the tube in his mouth, Morphet kept the chandelier lit sometimes for over an hour only by the power of his breath. Soap bubbles blown from his gasoline-filled mouth exploded nicely when touched with a flame. The act concluded with the Miser's Dream ending with productions of collapsible spring objects, hat coils and from these, his ventriloquial figure.

In 1903 Fred Morphet advertised a small booklet "Wonder's of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" for sale from his New School of Magic at 837 North 12<sup>th</sup> Street. The booklet cost twenty-five cents. It was a combination magic catalog and book of tricks that included revelation of Kellar's Growth of Flowers and Ching Ling Foo's production of a boy and dog from a shawl. A Morphet poster is also illustrated along with an advertisement for their shadowgraph act.



A humorous incident involving Fred Morphet was related by John W. Frye in Loring Campbell's monthly column in *Tops Magazine*. In the July 1944 issue, Frye described Morphet as "A great showman with a real Lyceum show." He further wrote:

I still remember pretty much of his show. The production of hundreds of paper flags that he threw out to the audience. The Candle and Handkerchief trick using a drawer box to vanish the handkerchief. This trick caused a good laugh on Morphet, the candle he first showed was pretty well burned down and when he reproduced it, it was a brand new one that had never been lighted. The audience had a good laugh on this slip-up. It was a fine show, nothing big and startling but very good small magic and a lot of comedy.

Fred Morphet died on March 25, 1904 of locomotors-ataxia, a debilitating disease that effects the nervous system resulting in the sufferer losing control of his muscles, ability and walk and balance. His wife Ida carried on their mail order business immediately following his death.