



Finding Princess Karnac

By Tom Ewing

As a student of conjuring history, opportunities occasionally present themselves almost magically. They allow you to encounter history in person. Such was the case with an e-mail from a woman named Judy Doyle asking if I could tell her anything about her mother, a magician, named Lucille Saxon.

Doyle's e-mail had been forwarded to me by Adele Friel Rhindress, formerly known as "Blackstone's Elusive Moth" (1940's – 1950's). As archivist for Philadelphia S.A.M. Assembly #4 I was familiar with Doyle's mother Lucille and thus started a lively exchange of e-mails.

Her mother had been married to Frank Luckner, Blackstone's prop master and stage assistant. They eventually divorced and Lucille ended up in Philadelphia where she ran the Holden's Magic shop, performed professionally, started a club for young magicians named "The Sorcerers Apprentices," and married another magician named Rudy Saxon.

I learned from Doyle that her step-mother, Bunny, was also an assistant with Blackstone in the 1930s and had married Luckner in 1938 after his divorce. Doyle and her husband Wally were traveling from their home in Virginia Beach to Corning, New York to pick her up and take her south for a lengthy stay at their home. The Doyle's invited me and my wife Debbie to visit them and meet Bunny. I soon discovered we were about to meet "Princess Karnac." The following interview is the result of that weekend visit this past February.

The story begins in 1935 in Tiskilwa, Illinois, a small town of about 1000 that like the rest of the country, was struggling through the Great Depression. Bernadotta Smith was 17 and freshly graduated from high school. She couldn't afford college and when a friend said he knew of a job, she jumped at the prospect. Little did she realize that within months she would be levitated twice daily and sometimes more often as Blackstone Sr.'s "Princess Karnac."

Called "Bunny" her whole life, she is now 91, she enjoys life surrounded by friends and family and looks back with fondness of her days on the road.

"Of course I wanted to go to college and had hoped to enter Northwestern University, but my father was an auto mechanic and had been out of work for more than a year," Bunny explains. "After the garage owner let him go he did odd jobs but it was more than a year before he found work again and I needed to get a job. I delivered newspapers for the *Peoria Star* and put my money in the bank. Shortly thereafter both banks in town failed and closed their doors."



Bunny Luckner, lower right with Blackstone Sr.

Tiskilwa had one claim to fame and that was an Episcopal priest and amateur magician, C.D. Maddox, whom the magic *community* called "Father Maddox." Maddox was a very close friend of Blackstone and was instrumental in helping organize the International Magic Circle where he served as chaplain. Bunny babysat for the Maddoxes and also cared for their magic doves when they were out of town. Maddox knew Blackstone was looking for a new assistant and he took her up to Chicago to meet Billie Blackstone for an interview.

"It went very well," she says. "I was five feet one inch tall and weighed less than 100 pounds and that seemed to qualify me for the show. I may have even been too skinny because Mrs. Blackstone told me to go home and gain some weight. She told me to eat lots of bananas and I did. When she asked me my first name I told her 'Bernadotta' and Mrs. Blackstone said, 'Well we're going to call you Bunny.' She thought that was pretty original but I didn't tell her that had been my nickname since I was very young."



Her parents weren't too happy with her joining the show but there was no work in Tiskilwa. She began touring with Blackstone in December 1935 and on her very first show just before Christmas in Dayton, Ohio, she was "hypnotized" and levitated as Princess Karnac. There wasn't a lot of training either. "Harry told me what to do and I did it. Two of the boys brought me out as I reclined on a palanquin and Harry helped me up. He made the hypnotic pass and I fell backwards hoping the one boy would catch me. One took my head and the other my feet and carried me to the couch. That was pretty much it.

Most of the time the levitation went flawlessly but one night Bunny had a close call. "Harry had me about three or four feet off the stage and I felt the cradle begin to tilt. It just didn't stop and I quickly realized that I was about to fall. So, while Harry told the audience, 'There she could rest for a thousand years,' I whispered, 'The cradle's tipping over and I'm going to fall, do something!' He did the only thing he could - he closed the curtain, took his bow and saved the secret of the illusion from being revealed."

"I had other jobs on the show including the opening effect where Harry produced beautiful shawls and umbrellas from a piece of plain newspaper stretched over an easel. He passed one of the shawls to me and I draped it over my shoulder and arm and stepped stage left to the nearest curtain leg. A male assistant hidden behind that leg hung a bag that contained a duck on my arm under the shawl. A few seconds later, I moved forward, Harry grabbed the shawl, gave it a shake and out tumbled the duck. Finally he broke away all the paper in the frame and out stepped Mrs. Blackstone followed by beautiful silks that practically covered the stage, all to the tune of 'The Carioca'."

Bunny likewise helped with the Nest of Boxes during which Blackstone brought a spectator to the stage, borrowed his watch and caused it to vanish over the man's head. Blackstone's brother Pete caught it. The watch was later discovered in the last of a number of locked boxes inside a loaf of bread.

She also assisted with the beer production trick. Blackstone would show an empty trunk and close the lid. When he opened it again it would be filled with large beer



bottles, which he handed to Bunny and the other girls. The box would be closed again and out would step Mary Martell, a former winner of the Miss Finland contest, with a pitcher of beer which was poured into glasses and distributed to the audience. If there was a local brewery in the town Blackstone would strike a deal with the company to advertise their beer in return for providing some for the illusion.

Another illusion Bunny worked was Thayer's "X-Ray Boxes." The trick involved two large boxes with slats in the front so the audience could see they were empty. One box was placed inside the other and four girls would be produced. "I didn't mind being hidden in boxes as long as I could sit up but I just couldn't do any trick in which I had to lay flat in a hidden compartment. This trick was fun because it required Mary and me to jump from one box to the other before the other girls were produced."

Blackstone also performed a card trick with Bunny's assistance. "I don't remember exactly what he did but I was wearing a costume of silver pajama bottoms with a red bolero jacket and he did some card trick and then tossed the cards into a top hat I was holding. Eventually the top hat ended up on my head and when Harry took it off I was wearing some sort of a headdress of cards."

During her time with Blackstone she also served as seamstress for the company and was responsible for both her and Mrs. Blackstone's costumes. For all her work as both assistant and seamstress she received \$35 a week.

"And that was if you played a full week," she explains. "If you only played two days or not at all, you didn't get paid. Of course travel was covered but you still had to pay for your food and lodging. Luckily you could get a nourishing meal for about 75 cents. I also shared hotel rooms and train berths with Mary. If you ran out of money you could always borrow from next week's paycheck but that left you with less money that week. When I left the show in 1939 I hadn't saved a dime but I'd had some great times."

One time Bunny stayed up all night on the train playing cards and talking with Mary and when they arrived in the town, she decided to take a short nap at the hotel. "Suddenly the phone woke me and it was someone from the show saying, 'Bunny, where are you! The show starts in fifteen minutes! Get down here right away!' Well, I ran several blocks to the theater, dashed downstairs to the dressing room and was up on the stage before the curtain went up. Later Harry yelled at me and told me not to take naps at the hotel. He said that if I needed to take a nap I could sleep on one of the pieces of equipment. I never let that happen again."

As mentioned earlier, in 1938 Bunny married Frank Luckner who had a lifetime love of magic beginning in 1915 when he was only 14 years old. In 1920 he answered an advertisement in *Billboard* for an assistant on the Mysterious Smith show and stayed until he joined the Blackstone show in 1927. Luckner and his former wife Lucille, who was also an assistant to Mysterious Smith and Blackstone, had three children - Francis, Todd and Judy. After the divorce the children lived in Corning, New York with Luckner's parents. Luckner missed his children and also had aspirations of taking his own magic show out on the road so, in 1939 he left the Blackstone show and took Bunny with him.

Frank Luckner returned to the Blackstone show occasionally over the years but eventually succeeded in building his own show and touring New York State and the northeastern part of the country. Much of the show was built at Corning's State Theater where Frank served as a movie projectionist. Bunny assisted her husband on stage and continued to levitate but using a different method than Blackstone's. She also made all of the costumes for the show. Each of Luckner's children assisted by appearing out of the Doll House illusion, helping with the Substitution Trunk, and other effects. Luckner was very successful at school, lodge and fraternal organization shows.



Another profitable sideline for Luckner was his fireworks business. He would put on fireworks displays for holidays and special events and created all of the set pieces in his garage behind the house. These were the days before fireworks displays could be lit by remote and Luckner had to light the fuses himself.

He and family members also built the set pieces that when lit, formed images like the Liberty Bell, American Flag, Statue of Liberty, Niagara Falls, and closing effects like "Good Night" or "Thank You." Youngest daughter Judy designed many of these early displays. Her birth in 1936 was announced from the stage by Blackstone to great applause from the audience.



Bunny had the opportunity to meet famous movie stars and magical figures while with the show. "In 1938 Mickey Rooney attended the show and Harry brought him up on the stage," Bunny says. "He had just finished the MGM movie 'Boys Town.' Afterward he came backstage and met the company. Another time Bess Houdini and Edward Saint came backstage. Bess was short and looked like a China doll. She and Saint did all those séances trying to reach Houdini. We also met a young Shirley Temple and also Stan Laurel who came back stage to see his English colleague Ted Banks, Blackstone's stage manager."

Bunny became less involved with Frank's show, taking a job in downtown Corning for the J.C. Penny Company for 10 years and then 30 years for the Rockwell Department store. She was a women's fashion buyer and responsible for window and in-store displays. She recalls enjoying business trips to New York, attending fashion shows, and "spending other people's money" buying clothes and accessories to stock the store. She retired in 1986.

Over the years Bunny and Frank collected a lifetime of magic equipment, illusions, promotional material and mementos that chronicled their show business days. All that changed when, on the morning of June 14, 1972, a tropical disturbance was detected over the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. It eventually became Hurricane Agnes.

As it swept up the east coast it wreaked havoc with the worst damage and flooding occurring from central Maryland and Pennsylvania into the Finger Lakes region of New York. Corning and Elmira were directly in her path. The Luckner house was a few blocks from the Chemung River, which flows through downtown Corning. It was fed by two other rivers, the Cohocton and Tioga, upstream from the town. Agnes produced average rainfall amounts of 6 to 12 inches as she went, but in the Corning area, it totaled 15 inches.

Runoff from the surrounding hills quickly filled the rivers and local dams designed to protect against flooding eventually gave way sweeping debris and destruction through the city. Train cars loaded with large rolls of paper used to make boxes for the Corning Glass Company swept through town knocking houses off foundations and scouring the landscape. The Luckner family and others had advance warning from authorities and fled their homes. When they and their neighbors returned they found their houses filled with mud and all the contents inside ruined. Like others, the Luckners took a government disaster assistance loan which took them twenty years to pay off.

Swept away or damaged by the flood were all of Frank's illusions, memorabilia from the Blackstone show and family mementoes which had been stored in the garage. "We lost a lot of precious things," explains Bunny. "I had kept very complete diaries of my travels with the Blackstone show – towns we played, interesting things that happened along the way, people we'd met, and souvenirs. Those all got destroyed in the flood. We saved what records we could and cleaned them up but I have to rely now on memories from my days with Blackstone."

Perhaps this is good because the most precious collectibles are memories. And, unlike e-mails that may be lost or deleted, Bunny's memories of portraying Princess Karnac, floating back to earth and awakening from her trance, are, as Blackstone told his audience, "something you will remember to the longest day you live."



Left to right, Judy Doyle, Bunny's step-daughter, Bunny Luckner, Walter Doyle, Judy's husband.

Tom Ewing is national historian for the Society of American Magicians, archivist of S.A.M. Assembly #4, master of ceremonies for the annual meetings of The Magic Collectors' Association and the New England Magic Collectors Association.