



James C. Wobensmith Assembly #4

By Tom Ewing

It seems fitting to begin the story of the Society of American Magicians Assembly #4 with Walter Brown Gibson, a magician, newspaper writer, novelist and all-time champion of magic. Gibson was born on September 12, 1897 in Germantown, Pennsylvania and first became interested in magic in 1905 when he won a small box of tricks at a party. His interest and involvement in the Philadelphia magic scene continued into adulthood when he began to write for the Philadelphia *North American* and later, the *Evening News*. During that time he turned out literally hundreds and hundreds of puzzles, brain teasers, magic tricks and science articles. Magic was his first love, however, and he eventually joined the Society of American Magicians in 1919. He was the 568th member of the Society. His membership card was signed by national president Harry Houdini.



Although not one of the original organizers of Assembly #4, he was better known to the general public of the 1930s and 1940s as Maxwell Grant, a pseudonym he used when he authored the famous crime fighter series, "The Shadow." From his earliest published article in *St. Nicholas Magazine* in 1905 until his death on December 6, 1985, he never stopped writing and creating. In addition to his own books such as "The World's Best Book of Magic," the "Book of Secrets" and a decade of Shadow novels, he also ghost-wrote Thurston's 200 Tricks You Can do," "200 More Tricks You Can Do," Blackstone's Secrets of Magic and Modern Card Tricks," "Houdini's Escapes" "Houdini's Magic" and many more. Experts estimate that by the time he died at 88, he had written more than 29 million words.

Gibson's first on-stage encounter with magic occurred in 1910 in Philadelphia at The Cricket Club near the Chestnut Hill Academy where he was a student. Another student, J. Elder Blackledge, from Indianapolis, was performing and requested a volunteer from the audience. An eager Gibson (then 10 years old), found himself on stage where Blackledge poured a pitcher of water into a paper cone, caused it to disappear, and then made the water reappear from Gibson's elbow which was being worked up and down like a farm pump. This experience on the other side of the footlights sealed his lifelong love of magic.

An early magic club enthusiast, Gibson recalled that there were a number of small magic clubs in the area including the Mahatma Club, a chapter of the National Conjuror's Association, the Yogi Club, a private group formed in 1908, and the Houdini Club. He felt the need for a more inclusive club and so he began to approach friends about forming an assembly of the Society of American Magicians. At that time, Philadelphia S.A.M. members actually belonged to Parent Assembly #1 in New York.

One of the first people Gibson approached was James Wobensmith, a patent attorney and close friend of Howard Thurston. Wobensmith proved just as excited about the possibility as Gibson and a meeting was called to discuss the creation of the new assembly. The birth of Assembly #4 really began at that formation meeting held at the Grand Fraternity Building at 1628 Arch Street on October 28, 1919. There was short advance notice of the meeting and attendance was limited. However, even the short notice didn't keep 20 people from attending. The vote to become an assembly of the S.A.M. was unanimous.

The first official meeting of Assembly #4 took place on January 14, 1920 and despite inclement weather, attendance was large. The charter had been signed by Houdini and other S.A.M. officers in New York on January 3, but had yet to be officially presented to the club.

When the first official election of officers was held, Wobensmith was elected president, Samuel O. Paul was vice president, Gibson was secretary and Howard Kenna was the first treasurer. Carl Brema, Oscar Thomson and Guernsey Moore were elected as trustees. Wobensmith served two terms and was followed by Moore in 1921-22, Thomson in 1922-23-24, Francis B. Hall in 1924-25, and eventually Gibson in 1926-27.



The most important part of the first business meeting was Wobensmith recalling his visit to New York and his cordial welcome by national officers and compeers of the parent assembly. It is also likely that Wobensmith presented to the assembly, a temporary dispensation charter which had been drawn up and sign by S.A.M. President Harry Houdini on December 23, 1919. This was done so that the assembly could officially meet until such time as national officers cold present the official charter a short time later. Assembly 4 possesses both charters although the temporary one is under the care of member Ron Geoffries, until such time as the Assembly requests its return. That night members also approved the club's by-laws and then quickly adjourned and attendees performed magic.



On the evening of February 24, 1920, a delegation of 15 members of the parent assembly traveled to Philadelphia by train and formally installed the assembly. President Harry Houdini led the delegation. Houdini and other officers (left) brought the charter with them. With assemblies forming quickly, it appeared that Philadelphia would have to be satisfied with being Assembly 5, because members in Chicago had announced their intention of organizing and requested they be

named Assembly 4. Eventually the national organization determined Philadelphia would get that number.

Charter members included:

Walter B. Gibson	John Dunbar	Martin Sunshine
Samuel O. Paul	Carl Brema	Howard F. Kenna
Edward C. Kalbfleisch	James I. McDonough	William Warren
Charles F. Bower	Ernest Renyi	Samuel MacDougall
James Wobensmith	John F. Devine	Guernsey Moore
Charles Hopkins	Joseph C. Fletcher	

The formation of Assembly #4 was greeted with approval from local clubs. C. Victor Dealy, president of The Yogi Club, announced that he and his members would affiliate themselves with the new assembly. The Yogi Club was first organized in 1908 and met in Dealy's home. His basement had been turned into a magic clubroom and theater whose walls were adorned with magic posters, photographs and memorabilia.

James Wobensmith



By far, the most active member and supporter of the assembly was Jim Wobensmith. He was born February 9, 1879, in Philadelphia. In his early professional career he was engaged in engineering work connected with patents, which he continued with until he was admitted to the bar in 1909. From that time onward he was engaged in the practice of law, specializing in patents, trademarks and copyrights. His most famous contribution to magic was his improvement of the effect called "The Afghan Bands," in which a ring of paper is cut with scissors and suddenly becomes two bands linked within each other. His improved version used muslin cloth that could be torn. And, because of Wobensmith's advance preparation of the bands, it allowed the singled loop first to be torn into two interlocking bands and the other, one gigantic band. It was a staple in most magicians act for decades and was a favorite of Blackstone Sr., who performed it with patter about how Santa Clause keeps his chin whiskers from tickling him at night.

He was also politically active and was twice elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. In addition to his local assembly offices, he was elected second vice president of the National S.A.M. in 1928. Then, in 1929, he was elevated to first vice president and eventually became president of the organization in 1930-31. He passed away December 28, 1973 at 94. Further detail on Wobensmith's life can be found on the "Magic Profiles" section of Mahatmaland.

In the nearly 90 years since the club's founding, information on many of the charter members has been lost to time. There were, however, several members who, because of their professional appearances, were featured in the pioneer Philadelphia magic magazine, *The Magic World*. The editor of the publication was J.E. Pierce, assembly president for 1927-28. His biography editor was another early magic magazine publisher, Charles J. Hagen. From this publication, which served as the assembly's official magazine for many years, some interesting background emerges on our early founding members.

Samuel O. Paul

In the January 1920 issue of *The Magic World*, Hagen relates that Paul was born on June 28, 1880 in Philadelphia. He first became interested in magic in 1915 and when he did, he chose hypnotism, mesmerism, telepathy and crystal gazing. His first act was titled, "Thought Transference" and used effects like Spirit Slates, Rapping Hand, Reading Sealed Billets, and Muscle Reading and he made quite an impression on his audiences. Much of his apparatus was designed and built by Carl Brema. As part of his 1920 tour, he also joined an exclusive group of magicians who could say they performed the deadly Bullet Catching trick and lived to tell about it. Luckily



he was not accidentally killed or injured as other unfortunate performers have been. Paul performed this dangerous stunt at an S.A.M. banquet honoring Houdini on January 23, 1922 at the Hotel Hanover. In addition to his Assembly 4 connections, Paul was also secretary of Mahatma Local #8 of the National Conjurers Association and held card number 401. His son reported that Paul operated a business which put one-armed bandit and other gambling machines in local taverns and bars. Business was quite good until the mafia became aware of it and forced him out of the business. In his mind reading act he appeared in turban, sash and Arabian costume.

Edward C. Kalbfleisch



Kalbfleisch was born sometime around 1893 in New York City. As a young boy interested in magic, he would stop by the magic shops of Otto Maurer, Martinka, and Peck & Snyder. His first public appearance came at the age of 14. He eventually travelled with his own show until the outbreak of World War I. Enlisting in the Marines, he continued his magic while on duty and ultimately became known as "The Magical Marine." When he returned from the war, he teamed up with Sm Paul doing a combination illusion and mind-reading act. He also performed ventriloquism and was a crowd pleaser. Appearing in Marine uniform, he worked two vent figures, one which wore a tiny Marine uniform. He was also a member of the National Conjurers Association.

Carl Brema



Brema's actual name was Brehmer, and he was one of magic's most creative inventors and designers. His start in magic came during the Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876. At that time, noted magician Robert Nickle was performing magic and exhibiting apparatus in a booth stocked with magic supplied by Thomas Yost. Brema, (left) was hired to work as a plant in the audience and never "left the game" as he put it. His first professional appearance came in 1886 at Colonel Wood's Museum in Philadelphia. After that he combined performing with the manufacturing of magical apparatus. An early partner in his act was a clown who performed under the name "Marltony." Among the items Brema produced in the early 1920s were his improved Hindoo Wants, mahogany Die Boxes, Automatic Rising Cards, a new style of Coin Ladder, and production of a lighted lamp from an undraped table. Most of the magic used during Houdini's final tour came from Brema's shop. The shop was located at 524 Market Street.

Guernsey Moore

Although no photograph remains of Moore, we know that he served as president of the Assembly in 1921. Professionally he was a talented cartoonist and illustrator who worked for the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia. Curtis published the *Saturday Evening Post* and Moore drew many of the illustrations used in the magazine. In one particular issue he illustrated an article on patents and utilized the knowledge and background of patent attorney Jim Wobensmith. A cartoon drawn by Moore resides in the S.A.M. Hall of Fame Museum.

Charles H. Hopkins

Hopkins was another big-time supporter of magic in Philadelphia and a respected and recognized authority on card magic. Hopkins was born on April 22, 1899 and first began doing magic in 1910. He owned and operated the Charles H. Hopkins Printing Company at 1016 Cherry Street. One of his better



know contributions to magic was the classic text "Outs, Precautions and Challenges," which explored the ways magicians can protect themselves against card tricks that fair to work. He also published John Thompson's book, "My Best," Ted Annemann's "Practical Mental Effects," and the "Encyclopedia of Cigarette Tricks." He also printed nearly all of the promotional giveaways used by female magician Dell O'Dell to promote her show and herself. Because of his expertise in printing and design, Hopkins was invited to Kansas City by Dr. A.M. Wilson, editor of *The Sphinx*, to provide recommendations on improving the layout and design of the famous magic magazine. So, in the winter of 1929, Hopkins visited Wilson and suggested improvements that took effect in the March issue. In one edition of the magazine, Wilson commented that he learned more about publishing in the few days of Hopkins' visit than he had during his previous decades in the business. While one of the charter members of the Assembly, Hopkins did not hold the presidency until 1935-36. Assembly 4's highest award is named in his honor and is presented annually to the magician who typifies Hopkins' gentlemanly approach of magic.

Howard F. Kenna

The only records that exist for this member are the advertisements he ran in *The Wizard Monthly* magazine edited by Gus Boehn and published in Philadelphia in the first quarter of the 20th century. Kenna performed in small clubs and society affairs.

Ernest Renyi

Renyi performed principally in the Philadelphia area most of his life. His act consisted of comedy magic and at one point he called himself "The Wet Magician." One can only wonder what type of act he had. In 1921 he and Walter Gibson both performed magic with Ruppel's Carnival and traveled around the Northeast. He was also a frequent contributor of magic effects for *Pierce's Magic World* and appeared on many of Assembly 4's annual shows.

From its humble beginnings nearly 90 years ago, Assembly 4 has grown into one of the most dynamic magic clubs in the country and the third oldest assembly. Its membership list topped 100 many years ago, and from its ranks has come some of magic's leading professionals. The assembly hosted the S.A.M. national convention in 1931 and 1976. Our members have assumed the national presidency five times. Although all of the early members are gone, today's generation carries on the traditions of the Society—Magic, Unity and Might.

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