

Thomas W. Yost

Philadelphia's First Magic Shop



Boston has C. Milton Chase. New York has Martinka's. Chicago has August Roterberg. In fact, cities across the nation all have their early magic shops. For more than 40 years spanning the turn of the 20th century, well-known and unknown magicians alike, gathered at the magic shop of Thomas W. Yost in Philadelphia.

Thomas W. Yost was born March 15, 1832 in Philadelphia and opened for business in 1870 in a store located at 35 North Ninth Street, where he occupied the second floor. Less than a year later, he moved to 901 Filbert Street, where he continued to provide imported and custom-made magic to local enthusiasts and top professionals of the day.

In Dr. Robert Albo's book *The Magic of America*, he notes that Yost imported some of his magic stock from Germany, mainly from Willmann. A look through his catalog confirms this. However, he described himself as a manufacturer of magic and there is no doubt he had a thriving business building magic and undertaking custom jobs.

However, while he may have done custom work, apparently he wasn't fast enough for Paul Gemmill (Paul Fleming) for whom he was building a sand frame. On January 15, 1902, Fleming wrote inquiring about why it was taking so long to construct the piece of magic. In a patient but stern letter, Yost noted that he was working on a number of custom items for other magicians, but added that the frame took considerable time to build and could only be assembled a piece at a time. He then went on for two pages describing the care he was taking in constructing the piece.

Thanks to a full-page article in the Aug. 10, 1902 *Philadelphia Sunday Press*, we can get a glimpse of what Yost's shop looked like shortly before he retired and hired Edward H. (Ned) Collins to run his shop. The photographs accompanying the article show a well-equipped wood and metal working shop, shelves and shelves of ventriloquist figure heads, and well-stocked glass-front shelves offering all the latest illusions. In one photograph Yost is shown with his hand resting atop a cannonball vanish while in another he stands at his bench constructing a rifle to be used in some illusion.

The gist of the article is that Yost was a man who was very comfortable working behind the scenes building illusions so that other magicians could fool the public. It is noted that although Yost never performed publicly, he was extremely well-versed in all aspects of magic.

Like many magicians of the period, he was also very interested in exposing the tricks and traps used by fraudulent mediums. In the 1880's, one of the most thorough investigations into fake spiritualism was conducted by a noted group of Philadelphia professors and doctors who composed The Seybert Commission. In 1884 Henry Seybert bequeathed \$10,000 in his will to the University of Pennsylvania with the provision that a commission be assembled to investigate spiritualists and mediums. The commission investigated some of the most famous mediums of the time including Henry Slade, the slate writer, Madame Diss Debar, and Mrs. Margaret Fox Kane. The Commission utilized the service of a number of experts in magic including Harry Kellar and Yost. While Kellar was most famous for disclosing how Slade made his writings appear on slates held under the table, Yost did the practical investigations by traveling all over the country investigating mediums.

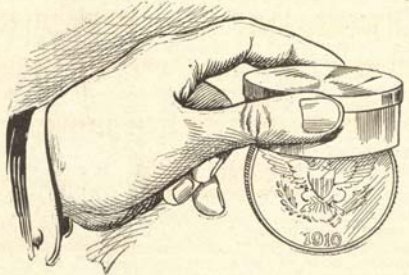
Over the course of the shops existence, magicians like Signor Blitz, Wyman the Wizard, Robert Heller, Frickel, Anderson and the entire Herrmann family stopped and shopped in Yost's establishment. In fact, most magicians who appeared in the city visited Yost including the talented French magician, Casanauve who was appearing at the city's Concert Hall. Yost described him as "one of the most skillful magicians ever seen here," but felt that his tricks lost something because Casanauve used an interpreter.

He was also very good friends with Wyman the Wizard, who spent many long hours recalling his glory days and swapping tales with Yost. In fact, one day as he was about to leave the shop, Wyman turned to Yost and said, "This is the last you'll see of Wyman the Wizard." A week later, July 31, 1881, he was dead.

The magician with whom Yost had the longest and most interesting relationship was Robert Nickel, he of the facial topiary. Nickel and Yost were almost constant companions from 1874 to 1885 and according to Yost, whenever Nickel was in town he used his shop for his headquarters. When the Philadelphia Centennial opened in 1876, Nickel applied for space with the intention of selling small magic tricks. When he went to the space allotted to him, it was too big and so he gave half of it to Yost. For the next six months, he and Nickel sold small magic to fair goers. Of greater benefit to Nickel was that it helped establish him as a leading magician and he gave repeated performances in the grand stand in the main building.

Yost's advertisements first appeared in *Mahatma*, but they only noted that he was operating a magic store in Philadelphia. He appeared regularly in *The Sphinx* offering a varied selection of magic.

Okito's Coin Box



When "Okito" (Theo Bamberg), was in Philadelphia with the Thurston Show, he succeeded in "befoozling" us with the above. He kindly accorded us the privilege of making and selling it. As a pocket trick, requiring neither practice nor sleights, it is par excellence. We sold nearly 1500 of the "Siberian Transport Chain"; we expect to do better with this.

A round, nickel-plated box and cover, 2 1/4 inches in diameter and 1/2 inch deep are examined and a marked coin is dropped in the box by a spectator. The coin is continuously rattled in the box and its presence is unmistakable. At the word of command it falls from the box while held by the spectator, without change or shift. The box and cover may be, immediately, examined by anyone.

We wish it to be understood that no duplicate coin, disc or "fake" is used and that no sleights are required. As a vest pocket trick it has no superior. It is not to be undervalued because we do not overcharge for it.

Price, 50 cents.

YOST & COMPANY
Established 1870. 901 Filbert St., PHILADELPHIA
New Illustrated Catalogue

One particular ad in the November 1910 issue shows that Yost was the first dealer to make and distribute what was then the entirely new Okito Coin Box. Okito (Theodore Bamberg) was traveling at the time with the Thurston show doing shadowgraphs and during this stop in Philadelphia, showed the effect to Yost. Yost quickly obtained the rights and began selling them for fifty cents.

In 1914, Yost sold his shop to Clyde W. Powers of New York.

A few years later, Powers sold all of the stock of his shop and Yost's at bargain basement prices. An ad in the August 1916 *Sphinx* offers to sell \$15.00 of magic for \$5.00; \$50.00 worth of magic for \$15.00, and \$100 worth of magic for \$25.00.

The remnants of Yost's shop were acquired by Frank Ducrot, who by that time had already purchased the Hornmann Magic Company. Yost passed away in 1917 and was buried in Sellersville, Pennsylvania.

**\$10,000 Stock of
CLYDE W. POWERS
and YOST & CO.
TO BE SOLD IN SIX WEEKS**

We desire to sell our stock of magic, illusions, etc., before October 1st, and in order to do so we make these attractive offers:

Pick out \$15 worth of goods listed in either my catalog or Yost & Co.'s, and send us \$5.00.
Pick out \$50 worth and send us \$15.00.
Pick out \$100 worth and send us \$25.00.

We advise every reader of *The Sphinx* to take advantage of these offers and get what you want before it is too late.

Make any selection you want, but be sure to make a second choice because we may be out of a few articles. With a secondary choice your full order can be shipped without delay.

Look over the catalog now and make your choice.

**CLYDE W. POWERS
YOST & CO.**

PAUL CARLTON, Mgr. 329-331 W. 42nd St., N. Y.