

Thurston in Philadelphia

By Tom Ewing



Magic historians are too familiar with the story of Howard Thurston's life for me to devote very much attention to it in this brief feature. Needless to say, he we was already a fixture on the entertainment scene both here and abroad, by the time that Harry Kellar chose him as his successor. A magician of considerable talent, culture, polish and ability, he rose to become America's favorite magician and dazzled generations of audiences with his "Wonder Show of the Universe."

He also had a long and warm association with Philadelphia from a number of standpoints. In fact, the city and some of its magic enthusiasts played a large part in helping create the Thurston image and ingrained it so thoroughly into the American psyche. For starters, he created and patented a number of magic's most famous illusions with the assistance of patent attorney James C. Wobensmith, Philadelphia native and founder of S.A.M. Assembly #4. From a period covering April 1908 through May 1935, Wobensmith worked with Thurston patenting illusions and illusionary concepts. Despite tremendous financial success, Thurston was stingy with his payments and was constantly low-balling Wobensmith. Still they had a long and friendly relationship. Once, when Thurston's daughter Jane became sick, she recovered with the Wobensmith's while the troupe moved on to the next location.



Jim Wobensmith



Among the major illusions and amusement devices Wobensmith helped Thurston patent were: The Waltz Ride, Ball Game and Straw Ride in 1908-10; The Floating Lady in 1924; The Vanishing Horse in 1926; The Floating Auto and Selbit's Million Dollar Mystery in 1928; The Vanishing Girls Cabinet in 1929; Massey's Vivisection in 1931, and, Buried Alive in 1935.

Another early association with the city came in 1902, when Thurston rented the Willowgraph Theater at Willow Grove, an amusement park on the outskirts of the city. He performed his show, opened a shop elsewhere in the theater and perfected some new illusions. The park's official opening took place on Memorial Day, 1896 and was devoted to fresh air, boating and musical entertainment. John Phillip Sousa was a popular band leader who entertained thousands of visitors between 1901 and 1926. The popularity

of Willow Grove grew as a result of there being no admission fee and because of easy access to the park by trolley car – a mere thirteen mile ride from Philadelphia. The cost of the ride was ten cents. Eventually the park featured thrilling rides like the “Captive Flying Machines;” “Venice”, a covered boat ride through a recreation of that Italian city; the “Mountain Scenic Railway,” the “Coal Mine,” which purported to be a reproduction of the big St. Nicholas Mine in upstate Pennsylvania, two carousels, and various picnic groves and lakes for boating.

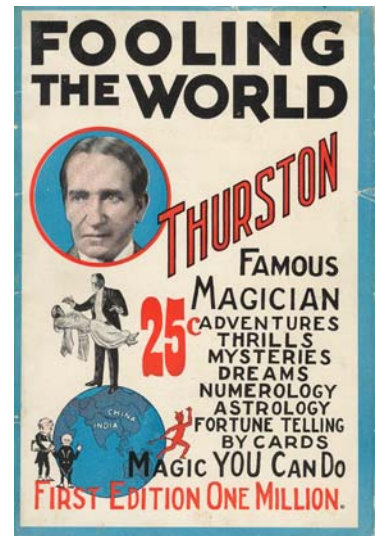
One of the illusions he presented was “One, Two, Three,” an effect featuring two cages suspended above the stage, one on each side. Using a ladder, a female assistant climbed into one and the curtain was drawn. A male assistant climbed into the other and the curtain closed. Thurston stepped up on a small stool between the cages, placed a curtain around himself and on the count of three, Thurston and the male assistant changed places and the female assistant came walking up from the back of the audience.



Another significant connection to Philadelphia came in the form of Walter B. Gibson, noted author, columnist for the *Philadelphia Ledger*, and ghost-writer for famous magicians. Gibson was a real insider in the magic world and eventually ghost-wrote Thurston’s magic books “100 Tricks You Can Do,” “200 More Tricks You Can Do,” “300 Tricks You Can Do,” and the magician’s pitch book “Fooling The World.” Every time Thurston came to town, he and Gibson met and planned publicity and future writing projects. Gibson also visited Thurston at his estate in Beechurst, New York in the 1920’s and often spent summers there working with Thurston. It was Gibson who sold Thurston’s serialized story of his life to *Collier’s Magazine* and obtained an amazing \$8,000 for the series.

Walter B. Gibson

He was also responsible for arranging the publication of Thurston’s “My Life in Magic,” by the Dorrance Publishing Company of Philadelphia. Dorrance was a “vanity” publisher. This meant that the company would publish books for authors but they were not in the book selling business. Thurston agreed to them publishing his book thinking they would also promote it and sell it. Dorrance printed the book thinking that Thurston would sell it at his shows and further promote the book. The contract signing was publicized widely and done on stage. Thurston appeared for the signing by stepping out of his “Book of Master Magicians” illusion.

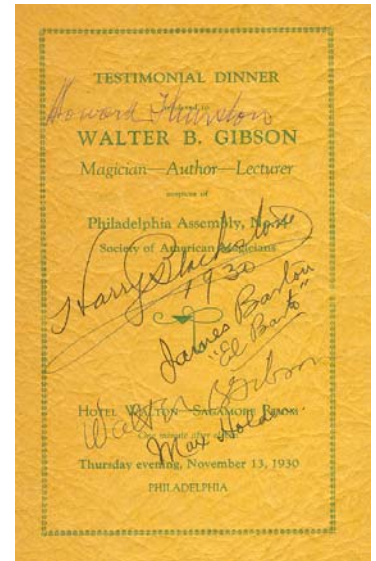


This large book contained images of famous magicians like Philippe, Heller, Herrmann, and Kellar. The last page showed Thurston who came to life and stepped out of the book on to the stage where he signed the contract. With neither party selling nor promoting the book, it did not sell very well or very long, and copies today are still difficult to come by.

When Thurston came to town, many of the local magic clubs hosted him and his daughter Jane. He visited The Yogi Club, The Houdini Club, S.A.M. Assembly #4 and other clubs. In October of 1928, the combined S.A.M., I.B.M. and Houdini Clubs of Philadelphia honored Thurston at a party in the Poor Richard Club. One hundred and nineteen people attended and the dinner, which began at

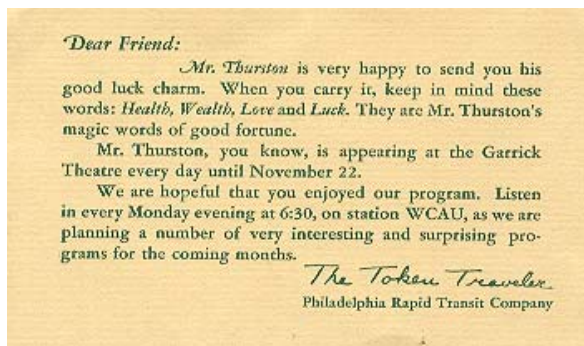
11:30 p.m. after his show at the Garrick, ended at 3:00 a.m. Local magicians performed for Thurston including Ray Palmgren, Bill Hanna, Jim Barton (El Barto), Jack Blum, Walter Gibson, Bill Wagner and 12-year-old Roberta Byron. Writing in a review of the dinner in *The Linking Ring*, Leslie Guest felt Byron was the highlight of the evening. Her magical career benefitted from a supportive father who built a small theater in his home for her, and being coached by Carl Brema, Jim Barton, and Ray Palmgren. Her standout items were billiard balls and Miser's Dream.

This program features the autographs of Thurston, Blackstone, James Barton (El Barto), Walter Gibson and Max Holden. The event was held in the Sagamore Room of the Hotel Walton in downtown Philadelphia. Jim Wobensmith was, at this time, national president of the S.A.M. and in addition to the guest of honor, Wobensmith also welcomed John Northern Hilliard and Al Baker. It was a star-studded event and the program that evening included Paul Rosini, Roberta and her sister Marion, El Barto, Blackstone, James Shannon, Jack Blum and William Hanna. It was a fantastic affair.



It was also Thurston's standard practice to seek local publicity in whatever city or town he was appearing and in the 1930's that increasingly meant appearing on radio. By November of 1930 he was already appearing on Columbia Broadcasting Network with his radio show but that didn't stop him from working out a special deal with WCAU, one of Philadelphia's biggest stations. Appearing at Nixon's Apollo Theater in Atlantic City at the time, Thurston and his manager worked out an appearance on the radio station during an hour-long program sponsored by the Philadelphia Rapid Transit authority. The opening night was November 10, 1930 and it would be

preceded by banners posted on local trolley cars, taxi cabs, subway entrances and elevated cars throughout the city. Over the strenuous objections of his manager, Thurston appeared for nine minutes and offered listeners his lucky charms, discussed magic in general and promoted his show at the Garrick Theater. Response was fantastic with more than 3,000 listeners writing in for one of the lucky coins. The impact on the theater was equally impressive as Thurston noted to Edward Keenan, advertising manager for the sponsor that his appearances have been "practically sold out every night for two weeks." The sponsor also printed up complimentary advertising cards which were distributed to



those listeners who requested one of Thurston's coins. It promoted both the regular program and Thurston's appearances in town. It was on from Philadelphia to Ford's Opera House in Baltimore.

As he did in every city, Thurston also made it a point to give benefit performances for poor and "crippled" children at area hospitals. It was a wonderful thing to do from a humane standpoint but it was also good advertising. If a magician wants to build good will, there is nothing like being shown bringing joy to a crippled child similar to that which appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for May 21, 1925.



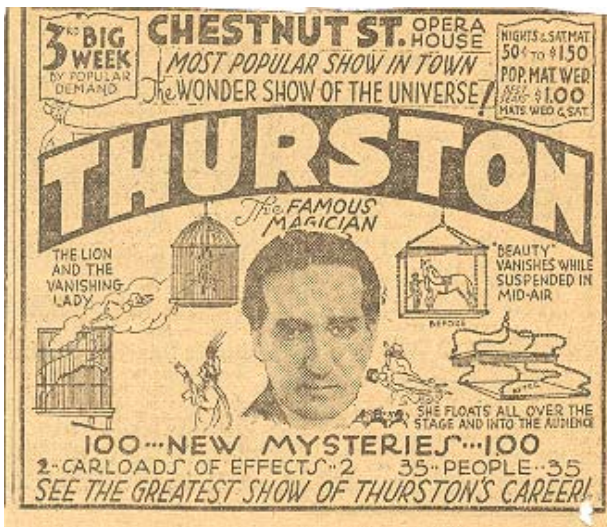
A little over a year later, Thurston again turned his attention to Philadelphia when he needed help. In a letter contained in Ken Klosterman's Thurston collection dated July 15, 1926, Thurston writes to Steve Grahman of The Vaudeville Agency, Suite 600 Jefferson Building, 1015 Chestnut Street about finding a pair of twins. There is no further record on this and one must wonder if his inquiry was successful.

The famous magician played host to 300 youngsters yesterday. Here he is shown picking a rabbit from the coat of one of the tots for whom it was the happiest day of their lives.

Philadelphia was a good vaudeville town and even as the entertainment medium was in its death throes, Thurston still benefited from getting a contract from the Edward Sherman Vaudeville Agency for a contract to appear in Baltimore at the Hippodrome in Sept of 1933.

According to Walter Gibson, Thurston also agreed to do magic for children at the Gimbel's Department Store, one of the city's largest. Hilliard was against it but in typical fashion, Thurston went ahead anyway. According to Gibson, a year later he and Thurston were walking in downtown Philadelphia when he stopped a woman and her two small children. He then asked them if they knew which theater Thurston was playing at. They didn't know the theater or Thurston. As Gibson notes they were also standing in front of a poster of Thurston which was posted on the side of a building. Thurston clarified, "You know, Thurston the magician." Whereupon one of the little boys said, "Oh I know mommy, he's that guy that does the trained birds at Gimbels." Hilliard later remarked, "All his billing like a circus and they remember him doing magic at Gimbel's!"

I have many newspaper clippings of Thurston's appearances in Philadelphia and it is not my intention to run them all. However, a selection of clippings, programs and other memorabilia seems appropriate.



Garrick Theatre

Direction Stanley Company of America

Thomas M. Love, General Manager
Samuel Nixon-Nirallinger, Bus. Mgr.

Beginning Monday, October 29, 1928
Nights at 8:15—Mats. Wed. and Sat. at 2:15

THURSTON

THE MASTER MAGICIAN

Direction of George H. Nicolai

Mr. Thurston says his object is to mystify and entertain. He wouldn't deceive you for the world.

(Program subject to change)

ORDER OF ILLUSIONS

PART ONE

1. Opening.
2. Aerial Fishing.
3. Birds of the Air.
4. Original Card Passes.
5. Duck and Rooster.
6. Gravitation Defied.
7. The Levitation of Princess Karnac. (The great hypnotic scene. The most bewildering illusion and by far the profoundest achievement of either ancient or modern magic. The dream in mid-air of the dainty Princess Karnac surpasses the fabled feats of the ancient Indian Sorcerers. Fernanda Myra as Princess Karnac.)
8. The Miracle. She floats over the stage and vanishes like a fading cloud.
9. The Mystic Follies.
10. Amusement.
11. The Triple Escape.
12. Shadows of Life.
13. A Bit of Fun.
14. Creation.
15. First appearance of MISS JANE THURSTON. (She takes after her Dad.)
16. The Elastic Lady. An Astonishing Experiment.
17. Sawing Through a Woman. (By Public Request.)
18. The Flight of Time.
19. Mystery of the Vanishing Whippet. A Real Automobile with seven beautiful girls vanishes on brilliantly lighted stage. Intermission of five minutes.

Garrick Theatre

LAST WEEK

Beginning Monday, November 17, 1929
Nights at 8:30—Mats. Wed. and Sat. at 2:30

THURSTON The Master Magician

Direction of GEORGE H. NICOLAI

Mr. Thurston says his object is to mystify and entertain. He wouldn't deceive you for the world.

(Program subject to change)

ORDER OF ILLUSIONS

PART I

1. Opening.
2. Beelzebub's Bowls.
3. Enchanted Flower Pots.
4. Magic Marksmanship.
5. Birds of the Air.
6. Original Card Passes.
7. Duck and Rooster—a Grotesquerie from Gehlenland.
8. The Levitation of the Princess Karnac. The great hypnotic scene. The most bewildering illusion and by far the profoundest achievement of either ancient or modern magic. The dream in mid-air of the dainty Princess Karnac surpasses the fabled feats of the ancient Indian sorcerers.
9. The Miracle. She floats over the stage and vanishes like a cloud.
10. Carlotta's Cellar—A Mystery of the Fourth Dimension.
11. Shadows of Life.
12. Creation.
13. The Tale of the Hare and the Duck.
14. Newspaper Neurology.
15. MISS JANE THURSTON in Songs, Dances and Magic. (She takes after her dad.) (a) Song and Dance, "Just Jane." (b) Pandora's Pan. (c) Sartor Resartus. (d) A Doll's House. (e) The Swords of Damocles. (f) A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair.
16. Sawing Through a Woman (by public demand).

INTERMISSION OF FIVE MINUTES

PART II

1. The Spirit Cabinet.
2. The Magic Crystal.
3. The Mystery of the Blue Boxes.
4. Aerial Angling.
5. MISS JANE THURSTON in Moments Musical. Yards and yards of beautiful silk from nowhere. More silk from empty tubes. Bows of fish and water and the Birth of Old Glory. (a) The Mystic Follies Revisé. (b) Animal Antics. (c) Merlin's Rod. (d) The Army and Navy Forever. (e) Fancy Dancing.

Garrick Theatre

Thurston has never given a performance in which he has not mentioned Jane to his audience. And he has never given a radio talk in which he has not told his unseen hearers about the daughter, who would some day grow up and do magic with her dad. In fact, Jane Thurston may be said to be the best-known-never-seen stage girl in America. And now that she has graduated from the Rayson School of New York, where she received the highest honors; now that she has finished her ten years of musical studies and ten years of dancing under the immediate eye of the famous Ned Wayburn, Jane Thurston is co-starring with her father. She does a musical and dancing act of her own, and a joint magical act with her famous dad. The only other family act analogous to this in contemporary theatricals is the famous team of Fred and Dorothy Stone.

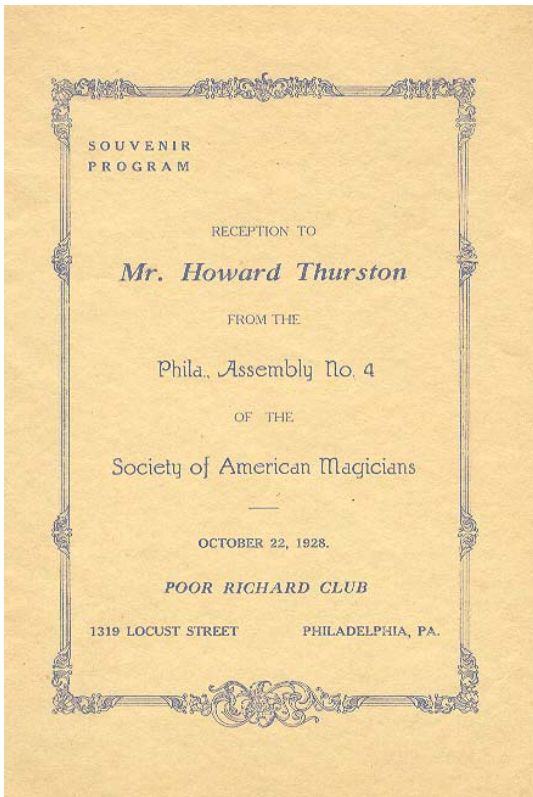
Jane Thurston is seventeen years old. She is an athlete. She won the girls' championship for long distance swimming in Long Island last summer and was runner-up in the Long Island tennis tournament. Her hobbies are aviation and swimming. For years she has been her father's secretary in his work among crippled and orphan children. This season she will help her dad entertain crippled children and orphans in every city they play.

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Derham repainting; Derham retouching; both are superior in workmanship.
Red Lights Denote Exits



The *Philadelphia Daily News* carried the story on Thurston's stroke in Charleston, West Virginia. Thurston collapsed in a restaurant and this new wife Pauline Mark was at this side. Thurston had met her when he called a little girl on stage and presented her with a bunny rabbit. When they married, Mark was 38 years younger than Thurston. Thurston's death came on April 13, 1936 at the age of 66. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* carried a two-column story on his last days and some of the more exciting aspects of his career.

APRIL 13, 1936

HOWARD THURSTON MAGICIAN, DIES

Succumbs at 66 to Cerebral
Hemorrhage and Pneumonia
in Miami Beach

WAS A STUDENT AT PENN



Howard Thurston

Miami Beach, Fla., April 13—(AP)—Howard Thurston, the magician, died at his oceanside apartment here today.

Death came to Thurston after a cerebral hemorrhage, suffered March 30, had been complicated by pneumonia.

An earlier hemorrhage, which occurred during a performance last year at Charleston, W. Va., forced him into retirement.

The famous mystifier died at 1:39 P. M. with his wife at the bedside.

Thurston, who was 66, came here early in the season in an attempt to regain his health. He attempted to return to the stage shortly after Christmas but was forced to give up.

Born at Columbus, O., he was pointed for the ministry.

However, a book of magic had fallen into his hands when he was

(Continued on Last Page, Column Four)
a youngster, and it fascinated him so much that it turned the course of his life.

Mean time he became interested in the Burnham Industrial Farm at Caanan, N. Y., and while waiting the ed in magic, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania.

Thurston became interested in the Burnham Industrial Farm at Caanan, N. Y., and while waiting the opening of the fall semester at Penn, stopped at the farm.

He remained at the farm more than a year.

He gave several amateur performances for the boys and constantly practiced sleight of hand, never having forgotten that as a little boy the great Herrmann had presented him a brass collar button seemingly extracted from his forehead.

Joined Herrmann

As commencement time rolled around again, Thurston set out for Philadelphia, but at the station he again came face to face with the great Herrmann who was purchasing tickets for Syracuse. Thurston also asked for a ticket to Syracuse, and from that moment his future was determined.

Success was not instantaneous. Specializing in card tricks, Thurston utilized his knowledge of magic in selling potato peelers.

Thurston's greatest bit was an improvement on the age-old art of making cards rise from a water glass. He studied until he did away with the glass and holding the deck in one hand, he made any card called jump from the deck high in the air to his other hand. It was this trick that mystified Herrmann.

From that time his fame spread. In 1900 Thurston adopted the title "King of Cards," went to London and for six months received top billings at the Palace Theatre followed by five months at the Empire Theatre where he became friends with Edward VII, then Prince of Wales and himself a card manipulator.

Drew Fifth King

In Copenhagen he gave an impromptu exhibition with cards at the wharf in the presence of King Edward, King Christian, King George of Greece and the Czar of Russia which greatly pleased the four monarchs. Thurston had produced from "nowhere" four kings; being asked to produce a fifth, he did so.

Thurston started from San Francisco in 1905 on a two-year world tour. Among his patrons were the Emperor of Japan, the Emperor and Empress Dowager of China, the King of Siam, the Shah of Persia, the Sultan of Turkey and most of the crowned heads in Europe.

In 1908 he formed a partnership with Harry Kellar and perfected the art of illusion. To the amazement of audiences he "decapitated" his assistants and made them whole again and caused elephants to disappear.

In addition to his feats of legerdemain, Thurston was the inventor of a life saving device adopted by the Government. He also published three books, one his autobiography.

He was twice married and his daughter, Jane, by the first union, assisted him throughout his stage career. His first wife died in April, 1934.

Thurston later married Pauline Mark, of North Adams, Mass., whom he had met 15 years previously. Thurston called a little girl to the stage in Chicago and changed a box of candy into a white rabbit and gave it to her. She was Pauline Mark and at her marriage she was 38 years his junior.