

James C. Wobensmith: Friend of Magic

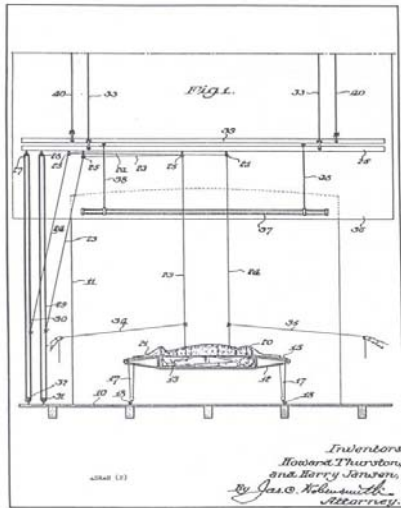
Sad to say, few outside of the most dedicated magic historians even recognize the name James C. Wobensmith. Magic book collectors know him as the author of a limited publication on magical patents. Fans of Howard Thurston know him as the talented attorney who patented many of the magician's illusions. Members of Philadelphia S.A.M. Assembly #4 know him as its founder. And, that's about it.



Wobensmith was born February 9, 1879 in north Philadelphia and was a bright child with an active mind. He graduated from Central Manual Training High School at the age of 15. In June of 1898, at the age of 19, he went to Cuba to fight in the Spanish American War. In addition to the usual risks of war, Wobensmith barely survived being poisoned when he ate tainted beef. After only 87 days he was discharged for health reasons but not before he had dropped from 150 pounds to 109. Once stateside, his first job was in the drawing department of Cramp's Shipyard along the Delaware River. A year later he answered an ad for a patent attorney's apprentice and so began a career that would span a half-century. Eventually he trained to be a patent attorney and entered the bar in 1909. He also performed magic and was a lecturer on silly patents.

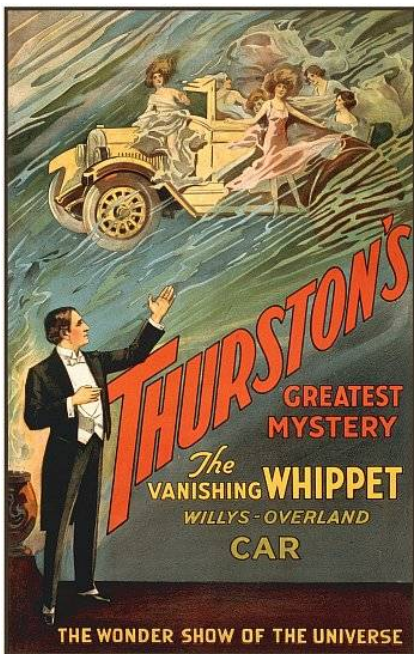
With regard to his patent work, it was very apparent that Wobensmith and Thurston were in almost constant contact as the illusionist tried to patent and present new and interesting illusions for his "The Wonder Show of the Universe." Among the illusions Wobensmith patented (or attempted to patent) were:

- The Levitation of Princess Karnack



"Aerial" - The Floating Lady, as invented by Servais LeRoy.
 Additions to the original illusion were made by Thurston and Janzen (Dante).

- Edward Massey's Vivisection
- Patent for Vivisection
- Vanishing Whippet



- Patent for Whippet
- Mystic Follies
- The Million-Dollar Mystery



- Patent for Million Dollar
- Iasia
- Buried Alive or Submerged Casket
- Edward Massey's Piercing

And a variety of amusement rides and games of chance. Correspondence confirms that Thurston was a cheapskate when it came to paying for patent work. Wobensmith's fees were customary and in most cases involved set fees that the U.S. Patent Office required. Thurston, however, was always asking Wobensmith to give him a discount.

In April of 1931 he asked Wobensmith to reduce his fees as much as possible and to stop work on patenting Massey's Piercing illusion claiming he was having a bad year. Eventually another letter arrived in which Thurston said he could hire a good patent attorney for \$45, five dollars less than Wobensmith's fee. Wobensmith fired back a letter telling Thurston that he wished to terminate their decades-long relationship and that he could go out and see what value he got for his \$45. He also noted he had not been paid for his work on Iasia and had written it off as a bad debt. Thurston quickly wrote back.

"There is nobody I like to write kidding letters to as much as I do you as they do have a good effect on you. The only reason I did this was my great affection for you, and now you take a kidding letter in earnest. Well, anyhow, I read in a magazine the names of seven patent attorney's who do the work at one half your cost and would guarantee a good selling priced for my patent, but I am willing to forsake all this and try to abide by your efforts in the patent office. Only smart patent lawyers can take a joke."

They continued to work together but Wobensmith never got rich.

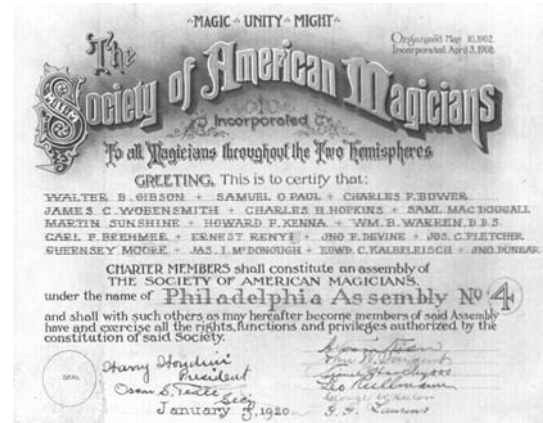
By the time his picture appeared on the front cover of *The Sphinx* magazine in July 1930, he was already well known in magic and authored an article in this issue on protecting and patenting magical ideas. He was a founding member and officer of I.B.M. Ring #6 and was very active in the S.A.M. both locally and nationally. He was also a founding member and first president of Philadelphia S.A.M. Assembly #4.



He was elected second vice president of the National S.A.M. in 1928. Then in 1929 he was elevated to first vice and finally president at the second National S.A.M. convention in Chicago by retiring President Theo Hardeen on May 31-June 1, 1930.

A month before his election on the evening of April 24, 1930, Assembly 4 gave a testimonial dinner honoring Wobensmith. Included on the show that night were Walter Gibson, El Barto, the young girl magician Roberta, and Jean Irving to name a few.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* carried a story on June 2, 1930 about his election as national president of the S.A.M. The reporter wrote that all election ballots were placed in a top hat and retiring President Theo Hardeen reached in for the first ballot. He came out with a rabbit. The second time he pulled out a lit candle, then a pair of handcuffs, a glass of water, Japanese lantern, a petunia in a flowerpot, a stein of beer and so forth. John Mulholland called for the vote counting to stop and said the vote was unanimous for Wobensmith. Someone called for a recount but it was discovered the top hat ballot box had disappeared.



Wobensmith was a very active promoter of the S.A.M. and tried to facilitate the creation of new assemblies across the country. His approach was to get as many interested people involved in the organization regardless of whether they were professionals, semi-pros, or interested amateurs. He differed in this approach from Thomas Worthington of Baltimore who was much stricter with his Society of Osiris and they debated the topic in friendly letters.

It was during his presidency that the S.A.M. held their third annual conference in Philadelphia. He not only hosted the event but he performed as well. Here is an S.A.M membership card signed by Wobensmith during his presidency for Assembly 4 member Charles Berkey.

He was also very active in I.B.M. Ring 6 and appeared at the first annual state gathering of Pennsylvania rings Jan. 22, 1931, an early forerunner of the Magician's Alliance of Eastern States (MAES). Wobensmith was also directly responsible for moving the S.A.M. national conventions out of their traditional home...New York City. When not doing patent work he lectured on making money with patents as well as silly patents throughout history. So popular was his lecture that he had a booking agent who engaged him to speak at club and lodge meetings, at libraries, association meetings and elsewhere. Among the odd patents he spoke on were:

- A fish hook with a mirror at the end to fool the fish into thinking another fish was about to get the worm
- A whisk broom that contained a half-pint flask
- A contraption that could be placed on the hood of an automobile that caused a skull and cross bones to pop into view when the drive went too fast
- An automatic hat tipper for when a man's hands are full carrying packages
- A spring-loaded device worn under a woman's skirt that jabs any masher in the hand with a sharp spike should he try to get fresh

And he was always writing. He wrote a series of pieces in *The Sphinx* on patenting and protecting magical ideas and wrote a book of magical patents, which is very collectible.

In this hobby he frequently corresponded with others with similar interests including John J. McManus. He was also active politically and was twice elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in 1915 and 1917. He was also a member of the Keystone Lodge No. 271, Free and Accepted Masons.

He created a number of amusing and entertaining magic effects but his most famous contribution to magic was the improved Afghan Bands. Prior to Wobensmith, the effect involved cutting a large paper band and having it turn into two linked rings and then one large ring. He improved it by using muslin, which could be torn, and also added additional twists that allowed for even more startling effects.

He also marketed other effects including the "Ultimate Rope and Ring Trick," and "Three Balls on a Ring." Of course, one of his closest friends and fellow Philadelphian was Walter Gibson. Throughout Gibson's years as a reporter and feature writer for various Philadelphia newspapers, he and Wobensmith were very close. It was Wobensmith whom Walter first approached about establishing an assembly of the S.A.M. in the city.

Wobensmith also hosted a dinner in Gibson's honor Nov. 13. 1930. Attending that night were Howard Thurston, Harry Blackstone, magic dealer Max Holden, the honoree, Walter Gibson, and Assembly 4 member Jim "El Barto" Barton. Also in attendance were Thurston's press secretary and author John Northern Hilliard and Al Baker - a truly stellar line-up for a great magician.



Wobensmith was also a member of the Yogi Club, one of the early magic organizations in Philadelphia that was founded in 1906. Here is a photo of Jim with some local and national magic luminaries. Shown in the line-up is Wobensmith on the left with the bow tie. Behind him is Walter Gibson, Thurston is to Jim's left, Blackstone Sr. is on the right with Thurston's daughter Jane on his left. The little girl in the front is Roberta Byron, a local vaudeville magician, and the man in the tuxedo next to her is Bill Hanna, also a longtime Philadelphia magician who was known as "The World's

Biggest Little Magician."

Wobensmith also appeared on several shows of the Houdini Club of Philadelphia and was such close friends with Thurston that he helped one of Thurston's girl assistants recuperate from an illness by having her nursed back to health at his home while the show moved on.

He was also “friends” with Harry Houdini (which meant Harry could get something out of the relationship to his benefit) and in particular when he came to Philadelphia in February 1926, with his three-part magic, escapes and fraud spirit expose show.



According to a taped interview with Wobensmith by Bill Rauscher and accounts by Walter Gibson, Houdini was in Philadelphia that February and was mad at the Keith's organization because they wouldn't book him for an extended tour with his new three-part show. Wobensmith was visiting Houdini back stage at Keith's when he heard the escape artist threaten the Keith's representative that he would rent the Chestnut Street Opera House, advertise and promote himself and by-pass Keith's. According to Wobensmith, Houdini apparently did just that. Wobensmith also said that Houdini had Carl Brema built illusions for this final season.

As we all know, the third part of his show was his expose of mediums and fraud spiritualists. In connection with the *Philadelphia Record* newspaper, Houdini had arranged to have their top columnist Henry Hart write a lengthy feature each day that exposed local fraudulent mediums. Houdini also answered a dozen or so questions each day from subscribers and had numerous features himself.



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One day Wobensmith got a frantic call from Houdini asking for his immediate help. He was going to denounce some mediums but he needed an onstage committee. He wanted to have a lawyer, a newspaper reporter and a member of the clergy. He chose Wobensmith (the patent attorney), Walter Gibson (newspaper writer for the *Philadelphia Ledger*), and eventually had to settle for a rather shy priest who didn't want to come on stage but served his role from audience.

Public exposures were key to Houdini's publicity machine, especially if they could be done on stage. In a move that was typically Houdini, a spiritualist group, The Christian Spiritual Union, challenged Houdini to a debate at their church on the subject of Spiritualism and the Bible. Houdini declined but offered to devote the third portion of his show (where spiritualists were denounced) to doing this debate. The spiritualists agreed and the date selected was Feb. 10th. When the appointed time came Houdini introduced a dozen or so representatives of the church sitting on chairs on stage and then Wobensmith and Gibson took their seats.

He opened the debate with the following words, “Ladies and gentlemen, seated before you is the largest aggregation of ruthless swindlers and outright frauds every assembled at one time in the city of Philadelphia.” Well, the conflagration that resulted had church members waving fists, screaming, audience members jeering, and Houdini standing

there taking it all in. Eventually the theater quieted. Church members continued to claim they were a religious organization, Houdini said they were swindlers, denials followed, demands were made to prove his statement and that's when he asked his female investigator Rose Mackenberg to rise and recount her stories of visits to these mediums spiritualistic parlors. She described one woman who gave her messages from an imaginary husband and advice from relatives that didn't exist.

The accused woman on stage said she'd never met Houdini's investigator and that's when Rose told her she had left her initials on the wall of the woman's living room behind a framed photo. Houdini suggested the debate be halted while the committee went and checked to see if the initials were there. He also brought out an elderly fraudulent spirit investigator Remegius Weiss who discussed his lifetime of work. And so the battle continued to rage back and forth with charge and counter charge with the result that ran the show overtime and at midnight, Houdini's assistant Jim Collins warned his boss the theater would charge double overtime if they went beyond midnight. Houdini's response was he wouldn't stop this circus-like atmosphere no matter how much they charged. The show finally concluded about 2:00 a.m.

Wobensmith was ultimately immortalized when a bronze bust was created in his honor and installed in the S.A.M. Hall of Fame. His wife Josephine died in 1970, after 71 years of marriage and eventually he moved to a retirement home.



However, before he did he sold his collection to a scoundrel who agreed to pay him \$2,000. This man moved the collection out and later refused to pay. With it went the original charter for Assembly #4 signed by Houdini, years of minute books and club memorabilia, a large collection of books and ephemera, posters, and more. The collection was later severely damaged in floods and the remnants of it ended up in the basement of Philadelphia Magic. Dom Dimento ended up purchasing what was left. Luckily the scoundrel who cheated Wobensmith out of his collection died recently and club members imposed upon his widow to return the original charter. She acquiesced and also sent along the temporary charter (also signed by Houdini) that was presented to the club in December of 1919, until such time

as Houdini and the national officers could travel to Philadelphia for a formal signing in February of 1920.

Wobensmith died on Dec. 28, 1973 at the age of 94. During his lifetime he was the ultimate magical insider, friend, and confidant to America's leading magicians. His files are filled with letters from Thurston, Dante, Houdini, B.M. Ernst, McManus, Fasola, Massey, S.S. Henry, Worthington, Henry Ridgely Evans, Dorney, and many others. He was also a successful business man, legislator, soldier and author.

But I feel that his most important legacy was his strong belief that the future of magic lay in an inclusive concept of fellowship that evidenced itself in the form of encouraging the growth of magic by involving anyone who was interested and getting them signed up for the S.A.M. or I.B.M. For this and for his years of service to the magical fraternity, we simply say, "Thanks."

