

## **Magic Capital of the World (by Patrick West)**

*1976 Thesis*

In the study of history, one of the most interesting questions to investigate is, "How did it happen?" In this paper the writer will consider the unique subject of how Colon, Michigan came to be known by magicians and laymen alike as the "Magic Capital of the World".

The task of determining how any situation or event happens, necessarily involves an investigation of the past occurrences leading to the particular event chosen for study. In this case, these past events comprise the history of a small southwestern Michigan community located in St. Joseph County. Specifically, the study will concentrate on the years of 1926 through 1975, and on one aspect of the community's history, namely; the development of the magic business.

A topic such as this leads one to the investigation of the public lives of the individuals directly responsible for the establishment and operation of the unique business of manufacturing magical effects for magicians. An historical account will also be given of the development of the Abbott Magic Get-Together, an annual convention for magicians from around the world which is staged in Colon. There will be a discussion of the legitimacy of the claim that Colon is the "Magic Capital of the World".

Throughout the investigation, an attempt has been made by the writer to be objective in relating the true and factual story of the magic business in Colon. Before examining the arrival of Colon's first magician, it is prudent to look at the physical features of the area, the founding of the community, and its early history. In order to do this, one must begin with the year 1829.



In that year, 1829, Roswell Shellhous traveled from Ohio to the newly organized St. Joseph County where he built a two-room log cabin on the Nottawa prairie. His cabin was used as a hotel by land-lookers who came into the county to observe what was described as: "...the best county in the state .... The soil is exceedingly fertile, and consists principally of oak openings and prairies with innumerable water privileges."

Roswell Shelhous moved on to Illinois, but he had encouraged his brother Lorancie to come to the area.

Lorancie Shellhous arrived at the present-day location of Colon in 1830, and bought the land on Swan Creek which later became the mill site. Lorancie went back to Ohio after purchasing the land and returned with his family and two other brothers (George and Martin) in May of 1831. That spring he built a cabin at the mill site and, after making his own plow, planted six acres of prairie" ... growing

vegetables, melons, and broom corn". In the fall of 1831, Charles Palmer arrived and purchased 300 acres east of Swan Creek. Palmer, his wife and six children lived out the winter of 1831-32 with Lorancie and his wife and their five children. The following spring, Palmer built his own cabin, alleviating what must have been, at the least, a tense situation for the two families.

Colon's first industry began that spring when Shellhous constructed a saw mill at the dam where Palmer Lake flows into Swan Creek. Shellhous's mill produced 1,200 feet of lumber before the dam was washed out that year. Lorancie sold his mill site to his brother Martin, in order to finance the building of a new dam.

After surviving a severe attack of the "fever and ague", the tiny settlement progressed toward becoming a village. In 1832 George Shellhous and a man known as Indian Trader Hatch survey that plat of land that was later to become the village which lies between Palmer Lake and Sturgeon Lake. It was then that the name for the new village was decided upon. Lorancie Shellhous turned randomly in a dictionary to the word "colon" and remarked, "We will call it Colon, for the lake and river correspond in their relations exactly to the position of the colon."

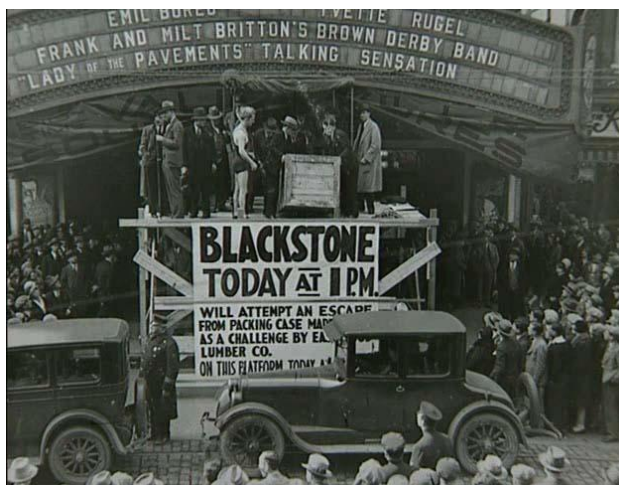
Colon grew and developed much in the usual fashion of many rural Michigan communities, progressing in population, agriculture and industries through the second half of the 19th century. By 1839, Colon had a post office which received mail once a week. In 1837, Colon could boast of a log school house, 24 feet square. A frame school had been erected by 1847. The villagers were very conscious of their duty to provide higher education for their children. Following a common practice of the day, they sold stock to local citizens and established a seminary. The school was organized in 1858 and operated until 1867 when the brick structure housing the school was rented to the school board.



Businesses in Colon also grew in number during the years of 1830 through 1900. The E. Hill and Sons bank was established in 1870. By 1889 colon had a flour mill, a tannery, a canning factory, a machine shop for repairing windmills, a daily stage run to Leonidas, and "two good hotels" with telephone connections through Michigan Bell Telephone Company. The village was linked to the major cities of Michigan, Indiana and Illinois by rail through the Air Line division of the Michigan Central Railroad which had been completed to Colon from Jackson on July 3, 1871.

The medical needs of the community were being met in the early 1860s by the community's own doctor and druggist. The social and spiritual aspects of community life were served by a Masonic Lodge and four churches; the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Universalist. The trappings of civilization had come to Colon.

Colon developed into a vigorous agricultural community in the latter half of the 19th century. In 1876 agricultural products shipped from Colon on the Michigan Central Railroad were listed as follows: 745 barrels of flour, 26 cars of hogs, six cars of sheep, five cars of cattle, 46,450 bushels of grain. The first decade of the 20th century found Colon a well-developed village and the community was incorporated as such. Another industry had come to town ... a knitting factory which in the year 1903 produced 58,457 dozen pairs of knit gloves and mittens. Social life in the community was further augmented during the first and second decades of the 20th century by road show companies performing at the Hill Opera House which had a seating capacity of 800. Further entertainment was provided in the early 20's when the people were treated to silent movies at the Dreamland Theater. Educational opportunities were increased by the construction of a library and a new high school. A fire department was established in 1904 following a fire which destroyed two major buildings. In short, Colon developed in much the same way as other farming communities in Michigan. Colon's history, however, was to take a unique turn in the summer of 1926 when a man by the name of Harry Blackstone visited Colon.



Harry Blackstone was one of the more prominent stage magicians of the 1920's and 30's. Harry Bouton (Blackstone was his stage name) was born in Chicago, the son of a hat maker. He and his brother Peter began their stage careers doing comedy magic. Gradually, the art evolved into a full evening show of illusions with Harry doing the performing and Peter working behind the scenes building the illusions. Blackstone's show grew in size and by 1927 a crew of a dozen people worked and traveled with Blackstone.

During the off-seasons of the early 20's, Blackstone and his troop traveled to West Lake near Kalamazoo to refit old equipment, build new effects, and relax. The company grew too large for the accommodations at West Lake and Blackstone looked elsewhere for a summer place. In the summer of 1926, his wife, Inez, drove her car south (by chance) from Kalamazoo through Leonidas and into Colon. At the western edge of the village she noticed Angel Island in Sturgeon Lake. Upon investigation, she found that the island was for sale, and she placed a down payment on the property. Harry found that the island was ideally suited for his purposes. There was a frame house and a large barn where the stage equipment could be stored and many animals which were used in the show could be kept. The barn would also serve as a workshop. There were several cottages which could be used to house the crew. Blackstone purchased the island that summer and from then until 1949 Blackstone called Colon his home. Blackstone moved to California (for health reasons) in 1949. However, he always claimed that he would rather live in Colon than anywhere else in the world.

Colon's romance with magic began that summer of 1926. Blackstone gave many of the townspeople their first taste of magic at a local citizens' club lawn party that first summer. The impression Blackstone made on the people that afternoon was very favorable. The local newspaper reported that his performance at the lawn party was the surprise of the afternoon and referred to him as the world's greatest magician. The townspeople enjoyed having a celebrity in their midst.

Blackstone Island, as it was renamed, formed a fairy-tale setting in those days. There was only one dirt



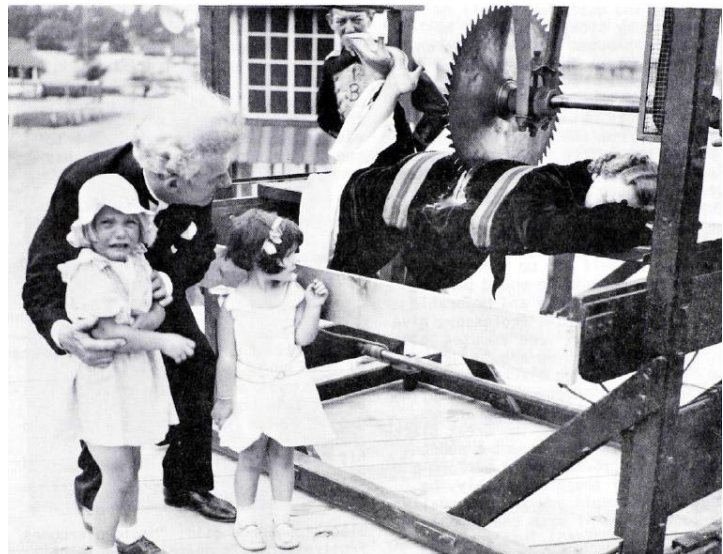
road of access which crossed a small land bridge between the village and the island. There were row boats for fishing Sturgeon Lake and the St. Joseph River which flowed through the north end of the lake. It was like having one big family for the members of the troop.

A typical day on the island began at about 7:30 a.m., with lazy smoke circling out of the chimney from the kitchen cook stove in the main house signaling that it was time for the entire crew, sometimes as many as 22 people, to come for breakfast. Afterwards, each person would go about his assigned duties.

The stock boy's duties included looking after the livestock which included a camel, a horse, and many smaller animals and fowl such as: ducks, geese, doves, and, of course, rabbits. Those involved with the actual presentations of the show had to rehearse, particularly the new tricks. Set designers and stage hands were busy building and designing stage equipment and painting the backdrops, curtains, and other stage scenery. Everyone put in a full day's work.

Another large meal would be served at the main house in the evening. On many occasions, the generous Blackstone would add to the numerous table guests by inviting friends from the village to dinner. Frequently, other magicians came to the island to visit the well-known magician and, they too became members of the household for the duration of their visits. Colon's summers were from this time on transformed by the many unusual and exciting happenings related to magic.

Such was the spring and the summer of 1927, which found Blackstone at home in Colon after closing his road show in South Bend, Indiana for the season. The month of May was a busy one for the crew, taking care of the "carloads" of equipment. It should be mentioned here that the show traveled by rail; Blackstone rented an entire Pullman car for his troupe and a box car for the equipment. Extra space for magical equipment was gained by using the passengers' luggage space in the baggage car. Each member of the show was allowed to take only carry-on luggage.



That May the crew was especially preparing new illusions to be presented by Blackstone at the second annual convention at the International Brotherhood of Magicians, of which he was vice-president. It was at this convention in Kenton, Ohio that Blackstone renewed an acquaintanceship with an Australian magician, Percy Abbott. Blackstone invited Abbott to return to Colon with him to enjoy some fishing and the relaxing environment of the small town. The local citizens were so preoccupied and awed by Blackstone's underwater escape in Sturgeon Lake, that the man who would be most responsible for making Colon the "Magic Capital of the World" went unnoticed. The local newspaper stated that a crowd of nearly 2,000 was on hand for the feat, which created a traffic jam on the island. Blackstone was bound up in rope by "...local and well-known people who were sure they could bind Harry so that he could not loosen the shackles ..." He was then placed in a box and the lid nailed shut. The box was lowered into Sturgeon Lake and a short time later Blackstone appeared on the dock. Publicity for the

event was well done and "Two moving picture operators were on hand to film the feat ..." Blackstone certainly was the "world's greatest magician" as far as the people of Colon were concerned.

When Percy Abbott arrived in Colon that summer, he intended to relax, visit with Blackstone, do a little fishing, and then resume his tour of the United States. Instead, he stayed a life-time in Colon. He married a local girl, raised four children, and founded what was to become the largest magic manufacturing company in the world. Over the course of the next 30 years, Abbott was to become a name known the world over by magicians. Though Percy Abbott never took the place of Harry Blackstone in the hearts of his fellow "Colonites", he did as much or more to put Colon "on the map".



At this point, it is proper to include a little background material on Percy Abbott. Abbott was a native Australian, came from humble origins. He lost his parents early in life and was raised by a strict aunt. Percy struck out to make his own way while still in his early teens, doing odd jobs in Sydney. It was in Sydney where Percy became interested in magic and opened a magic shop called the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. Throughout the early 20's he toured the Orient, playing many small theaters and sometimes earning only enough for passage to the next island. He returned

to Sydney and his shop periodically, when bookings and/or income failed. It was such a tour that brought him to the United States, where he enjoyed moderate success. His passport listed England as his destination, but he was not to arrive there until 32 years later.

A few days after his arrival at Blackstone Island, Percy met Gladys Goodrich, a local girl, and decided to make Colon his home. During the year 1927, Colon's first magic business was "established and arranged" between Abbott and Blackstone. The Blackstone Magic Company, as it was called, was dissolved after only 18 months and the men never met publicly or privately for the rest of their lives. The great Blackstone never appeared at a Get-Together until after Abbott's death. In his biography, Percy preferred to "...skip over this particular era ..." because it held unpleasant memories which were not good for him nor would they be good for the reader.

Actually, there was no real scandal behind the split. It was more of a misunderstanding which, because of the personalities of the two men, became an irreproachable breach. While on the road, Blackstone "traded" an amount of merchandise from the magic shop to a magician for an illusion. (An illusion differs from a trick in the size of the presentation, and might be referred to as a big trick.) The magician promptly sent to the Blackstone Magic Company the illusion and a list of merchandise promised to him by Blackstone. Percy sent the merchandise and assumed that the illusion then belonged to the company. Later, Percy sold the illusion to another magician. Blackstone finished his tour and returned to Colon, only to find that "his" illusion had been sold. The situation simmered for a short time and then a verbal storm erupted when the two men met in a local store. Percy closed up the shop and that was the end of Colon's first magic company.

The history of the magic manufacturing business in Colon from this point on coincides with the life of Percy Abbott, rather than Harry Blackstone. While Blackstone brought fame to his name as a great magician, "Abbott built a magic manufacturing company which has become world famous for its quality-built magical effects.

Following the closing of the magic shop, it was back to the road shows for Abbott. He accepted a job working with Jean Huggard in the spring of 1929. Huggard produced a show which had been playing at Coney Island, New York successfully for years. 1929 was the year of the stock market crash and people had no money to spend on Coney Island or magic shows. After trading an illusion for a spare tire, Percy returned to Colon.

Abbott married Gladys Goodrich and they began playing schools and auditoriums. They continued this for the next five years, earning a reliable income in a time of financial disaster. The couple added to their school dates with theater bookings and two summer sessions with a carnival. In February 1934, Abbott's first child was born. This brought a halt to road shows for the couple. Percy felt it was not a good idea to raise children "en route" and the couple settled permanently in Colon.

In January of 1934, Abbott opened his second magic company in Colon and named it after the shop he had owned in Sydney, Australia. The Abbott Magic Company was located above the A&-Grocery. Percy went to the local printer on credit. In order to supplement the income of the business during its infancy, Percy continued to play shows at local schools and nearby theaters.



In March of 1934, a young magician from Eaton, Ohio came to Colon to see Abbott about enlarging his act. Recil Bordner was that magician and had received one of Percy's catalogues in the mail. The two men had met before in 1931 in Montpelier, Ohio. Percy had been working with the Skippy LaMore Show, a road company that did three-act plays. He did magic tricks during intermission.

Bordner was the son of a thrifty Ohio farmer. Farming, however, did not appeal to the young man and he decided to become a "mind reader" in order to earn enough money to go south for the winter. With a cousin as a partner and a home-built radio set, Bordner performed his first and last mind-reading act in Hicksville, Ohio. It was his last mind-reading act because people asked question which could not be answered. The questions pertaining to the stock market were particularly hard. In one incident, a woman followed Bordner back stage, demanding an answer to her question concerning stocks. This experience convinced Recil that it would be safer to become a magician. He has seen a hand bill that a magician by the name of Abbott would be appearing in Montpelier and decided to attend, hoping to pick up a few pointers from a professional.



Following the performance, Recil went back stage to meet the magician and ask questions. Abbott recognized an economic opportunity and promptly sold the amateur magician three lessons in magic for ten dollars.... quite a sizable amount, considering the fact that the country was in the midst of the Great Depression. Bordner received lesson number one that night along with a small trick. Lesson number two was given the following week at the same theater in Montpelier when the road show returned on its circuit. That night the attendance was so low that the theater manager canceled the company's engagement for the rest of the season. Bordner had to travel to Colon in order receive the third lesson. This was Recil's first visit to Colon, where, two years later he was to become a partner in a magic business destined to be the largest in the world.

Bordner spent 1932 and 1933 doing small magic in Ohio and Indiana. He enjoyed enough success to make him consider enlarging his act to include illusions. He thought this would enable him to book carnivals and county fairs. With this in mind, Bordner traveled again to Colon in March of 1934 to see Percy Abbott.

Abbott was in debt to the local printer for printing the 20-page catalogue of tricks and again recognized an economic opportunity in Recil Bordner. He convinced Bordner that if he wanted to invest in magic, it would be wiser to buy into the business of manufacturing magic, specifically, the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. Bordner borrowed \$1,000 from his father and bought half interest in the company, and a partnership was formed which lasted until 1959.



The new business remained above the grocery store until Labor Day of 1934, when the partners leased a building which had been a carriage factory from Atty. Jay Peters. The two-story frame building was well suited for the new business with the first floor serving as an office and workshop while the second floor was converted into "...a beautiful little theater with proper setting for performing the new magic ...." which the firm was to build. During working hours, the second floor was also used as a paint shop. The partners painted the building black.

Recil used a stencil which he had cut for an illusion and painted white skeletons on the structure. The present-day factory is painted in the same eerie fashion.

In an attempt to increase lagging sales, the partners decided to hold an open house on Saturday, Sept. 15, 1934. Advertisements were placed in trade journals. The event was attended by 80 magicians and sales totaled \$88.00. Magicians came from Kalamazoo, South Bend, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Cincinnati, Toledo, and Fort Wayne to watch two hours of magic performed by several magicians including Recil Bordner. Abbott acted as master of ceremonies, and his wife, Gladys, accompanied the performers on the piano. Following the show, a buffet luncheon was served to the performers and audience. The open house was closed to the public in general. However, several local dignitaries were invited, including Dr.



Niendorf and his wife and the Superintendent of Schools, A. Jaffe and his wife.

Considering the one day's sales of \$88, the occasion had been a financial, as well as a social, success for the new partners. Encouraged by the success of their open house, the

partners gave public performances on Nov. 3 and 4 that Autumn. Children were admitted for 10 cents and adults for 35 cents. The show was again two hours in length, but this time only two outside acts were booked. Abbott and Bordner were the main attractions. Bordner performed "Paintings from the Great Beyond" and Percy presented the company's "latest magic creations". The success of the two public shows and that of the open house convinced the partners to host the first annual Abbott Get-Together in the autumn of 1935. That year it was still a one-night affair, held in the tiny Abbott Theater which could accommodate an audience of only about 100 people. Again, only magicians were invited. It was during this convention that Lester Lake (Marvelo), an escape artist, coined the phrase "Magic Capital of the World". He chose this phrase to describe Colon because Abbott's Magic Novelty company was fast becoming a leading producer of magical apparatus in the United States; because the Great Blackstone made his home in Colon; and because the Abbott Get-Together was becoming a major attraction for magicians. The phrase caught on and is still being used today.

The 1936 Get-Together was held Sept. 12th at the Abbott factory and was referred to as the Third Annual Get-together. The partners counted the open house of 1934 as having been the first. The Saturday night show had been increased to 14 acts and the theater was enlarged. Some of the more famous magicians of the day were present in 1936, including the "Great Nichola Marvelo", Lester Lake, who had the "biggest show in America" that year. Lake, a good friend of Abbott, directed an impromptu performance outside the magic shop on Saturday afternoon, which the public was allowed to view. The following acts appeared: Geo. Paxton, Ed Little, Bob Gysel, Al Saal, John Skinta, Percy Abbott, F. W., Thomas, Dr. Zola, Jimmy Trimble, L. L. Ireland, Joe Bert, C. L. Breindenstien, Mahendra, and Dave Coleman.

In that year another aspect of the Get-Together developed when there was an extemporaneous performance for early arrivals on Friday evening. This became a standard feature of the Get-Together and is now called the Night Before Party. Two hundred and fifty magicians registered for the 1936 convention. The Saturday night show, the largest yet, included the following acts: Sid Loraine, emcee; Bob Wedertz, Recil Bordner and Percy Abbott, creations; Harry Cecil, George Paxton, illusions: Ralph W. Hull, cards; Lyman, originalities; Kathryn Elliott and Marvelo of "Burned Alive" fame; Doc Coleman in Hokum; Jimmy Trumble, artist magician; The Great Nicola.



The popularity of the Get-Together was growing at a rapid rate and Colon's name was becoming associated with magic by a growing number of magicians. Following the Get-Together of 1936, the local newspaper, The Colon Express, referred to Colon as the "Magic Capital of the World" for the first time. The paper justified the boast stating that, "Abbott's original made magic is supplied to magicians in all parts of the world, and through the activities of the Abbott Magic Novelty Company, Colon, Michigan is recognized as "The Magic Capital of the World."

The Abbott Theater proved to be inadequately small in 1936 and the Saturday evening show was followed by many impromptu performances on the sidewalks and in the street in front of the magic factory. Because of the increase of attendance and public interest, the partners rented the high school gymnasium for the 1937 Get-Together.



Over 500 magicians were registered in 1937 and the public was invited for the first time to an Abbott Get-Together. There was a special performance staged at the auditorium for the public on Saturday afternoon. A portion of the public must have obtained admittance to the evening performance as well, because there were over 1,000 spectators crowded into the auditorium, which had an official capacity of only 800. There were many "on the spot" antics that year, including one magician who was suspended upside down from a downtown fire escape in

a straight jacket from which he escaped.

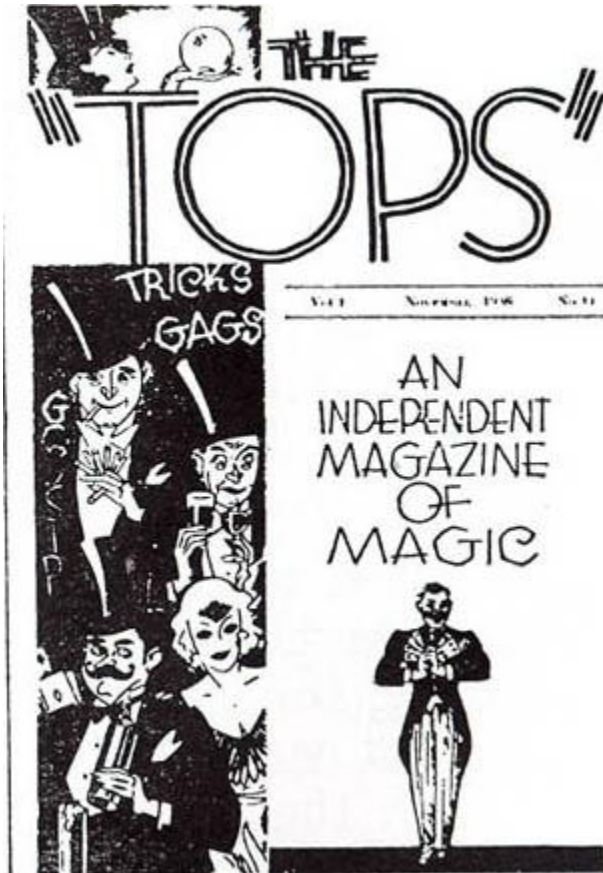
In addition to the Night Before Show, which was held at the factory for magicians only, there were lectures, discussions, and demonstrations at the Abbott factory all day Saturday and late into the night following the evening performance. The Abbott Get-Together had come of age as a major convention for magicians from all over the United States.

Obviously, the influx of 500 people into a village with a population of 1,000 was an exciting event and the local merchants and residents of Colon looked forward to the Abbott Get-Together. Many of the magicians arrived a day or two early and stayed until late Sunday. While some of the magicians stayed in motels in Sturgis, Coldwater, and Battle Creek, a large proportion rented rooms from local residents at one dollar per night. Merchants naturally enjoyed good business during the festive week end and the event was given much coverage by the local newspaper.

The success of the 1936 and 1937 Get-Together was augmented by the establishment, in January of 1936 of The Tops - An Independent Magazine of Magic. The monthly magazine was printed by the Abbott Magic Novelty Company on a press purchased from Frank Damon, publisher of The Colon

Express. Paul Goss, who worked for Damon, set type for the magazine at night. Percy was the editor of the magazine until 1941, when he turned the job over to Mel Melson, an artist from New York who was hired in 1940 to do the artistic illustrations for the Abbott catalogue.

The magazine, which was from 40 to 60 pages in length, was filled with articles written by magicians



giving instructions for performing their favorite tricks; gripe columns; advertisements for all types of tricks; and written materials concerning the presentation of magic. The magazine differed from other magic magazines in that membership in a fraternal magician's organization was not necessary in order to obtain a subscription. Subscription for the year was reasonably priced at one dollar. The magazine brought to the company increased status as a leading producer of magical effect. It has continued to be published to the present time with the exception of a four-year period, 1957 through 1960, which will be discussed later.

In the seventies, Tops had a circulation of more than 4,000 and was mailed to countries throughout the world with the exception of Red China and the Soviet Union. The magazine is now under its third editor, Neil Foster. Foster, a professional magician, settled in Colon following the 1959 Get-Together to work for Abbott's as the artist for the catalogue, which had grown to over 400 pages in length. When Tops resumed publication in January of 1961, Foster became the

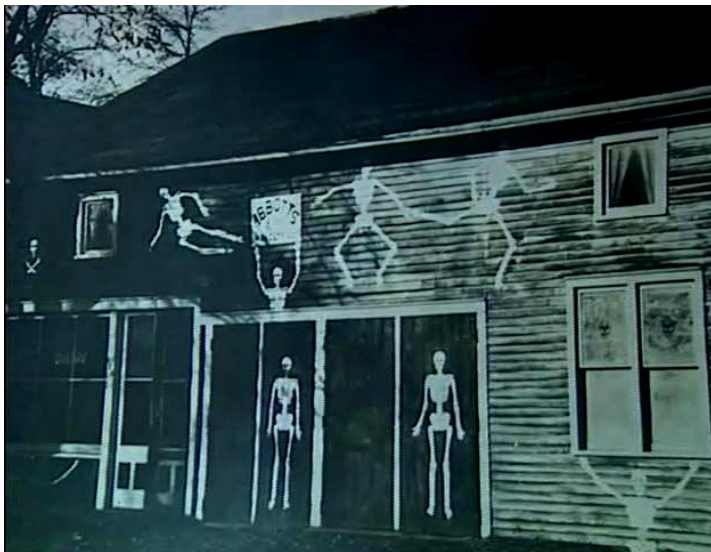
editor. The present \$9.00-a-year subscription and advertisement sales do not make the magazine a profit-making venture, but the president of Abbott's (Recil Bordner) feels that it is worthwhile because it distinguishes Abbott's Magic company from all other smaller manufacturers of magic and provides valuable publicity for the company.

Following the financial success and expansion of the business in 1936 and 1937, Abbott and Bordner anticipated an equally good year in 1938. The first eight months of 1938 did bring good fortune. The partners purchased the building that they had been leasing since 1934. The 1938 Get-Together was a repeat of the successful 1937 Get-Together with over 500 magicians in attendance. There were hours of magical performances at the factory and impromptu acts on main street of Colon all day Saturday, culminating with the big public show at the high school auditorium on Saturday night. Then fortune changed for the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. The week end after the 1938 Get-Together found Recil Bordner and Percy Abbott both out of town on well-deserved vacations. That Saturday night disaster struck when fire gutted the frame building housing the magic company. Nothing but a shell was left. The local fire department was able to save some of the files, but the loss of stock and the building was still estimated at \$10,000.

The partners were faced with a grim, but not hopeless, situation. The loss was only partially covered by insurance, but the Abbott Magic company's reputation and credit were both very sound. Percy was able to negotiate a loan from a personal friend in Jackson, Michigan. Jesse Dowly, a magician and a owner of a spring factory, loaned the money for rebuilding, with the understanding the Percy would teach Dowly's two sons to be magicians.

During the days immediately following the fire, the partners received many offers from surrounding cities to relocate their business. Some proposals were very generous, offering such inducements as free rent on building that could be occupied by the firm. However, for various reasons, the partners never gave serious consideration to these proposals. Most of the employees were local residents. Abbott and Bordner themselves had established homes in Colon and had become personally attached to the village. Therefore, once the loan had been acquired, a contractor was hired immediately to construct a new cement block building on the site of the original shop.

During the interim, the Abbott Magic company was relocated in temporary quarters. The office and showroom were set up in the warehouse of the Lamb Knit Goods Company and the workshop and printing shop in the vacant S. G. Snyder building across town. The conditions of these buildings were less than ideal. Because of insurance difficulties, there could be no fire for heat in the warehouse and the only warmth that October and November came from a hotplate beside the typewriter of the office manager. The situation was only slightly better in the workshop where a small wood stove was installed.



These hardships were of short term, however, and the new \$3,600.00 cement block building was ready for the company to occupy by December.

The year of 1939 was a hectic one for the magic firm which had to rebuild its inventory of tricks, fill standard orders, and make preparations for the coming Get-Together. The sixth annual Get-Together was a one-day affair and somewhat smaller than the previous year with the demonstrations and impromptu performances taking place in the basement of the new building.

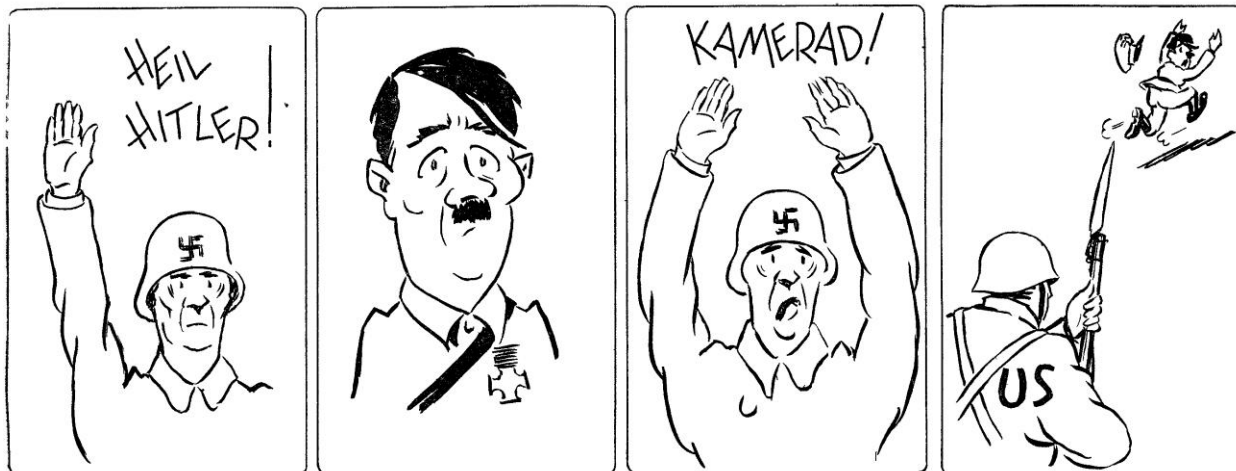
The year of 1940 found the Abbott Magic Novelty Company on the road to recovery from the setback of 1938, and the Get-Together that September was attended by nearly 500 magicians. The Night Before Show was held at the Abbott plant and Percy demonstrated the latest Abbott effects with such intriguing titles as "Phantasma": an illusion in which a girl's head became invisible. The first year of the new decade indicated good things to come for the magic business in Colon.

December 1941, however, brought bad news for the nation and difficult times for the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. Young men volunteered for the armed forces and others were drafted. Abbott's lost several craftsmen, including Paul Goss, the printer, and Wake Drake, business manager. Unlike other builders of magical apparatus at that time, however, Abbott's managed to adjust and improvise. Retired



men who had worked at Abbott's returned to help out. While some companies had trouble obtaining raw materials, Abbott's did not. The Magic company had obtained a government rating as a vital industry. The special rating was granted because the company supplied books on slight-of-hand for the Army, which used the books in their recreational programs for soldiers.

## **Hitler Packet Trick**



Because of this, the company was able to buy surplus and scrap metal. The firm improvised and many tricks were built from materials that would not have been considered worth using before the war. The company "made do" and survived the war years.

During the war years, Abbott's continued to host the Get-Togethers, which had become too large for the high school auditorium. In 1942, there were three public shows held in the opera house. Also in that year Skippy LaMore died, and Abbott's purchased the tent theater used by the road show. The 1943 and 1944 Get-Togethers were hosted in this tent. The tent theater was set up on a vacant lot. The work was supervised by the "boss canvas man" who had worked with the Skippy LaMore Show, Harley Otis from Hodunk, Michigan.

In 1945 the Get-Together's public performances were canceled due to "uncertain conditions" concerning the end of the war. However, there was a one-night open house, for magicians only, at the Abbott plant where a small tent was set up to accommodate the crowd. With the end of the war, the partners anticipated a return to the pre-war prosperity which the company had experienced.

The post-war era proved to be one of boom and expansion for the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. Abbott and Bordner increased the size of their building almost once and again with a \$2,600.00 addition. The Get-Together, which had grown to three public shows, plus the Night Before Show for magicians only, was more successful than ever before. The big tent was especially suited for the Get-Together activities, and helped to create a carnival atmosphere. Saturday night performances were followed by special midnight spook shows. The official capacity of the tent was 1,100, consisting of 700 folding canvas seats and 400 bleacher seats. Actually, however, by show time, the audience surpassed this number when an extra 100 folding chairs were crowded into the tent and standing admissions were sold.

The gross sales for the business surpassed \$200,000 for the first time in 1946. This increase in sales was due in part to a renewed interest in magic following the war and more directly to the expansion activities of the Abbott firm which had opened branch retail shops across the country. The New York shop was managed by Jim Renaux and Ken Allen. Karrell Fox and Ron Kissell ran the Detroit shop. In Indianapolis, Duke Stern was manager and salesman. George Coon and Doug O'Day operated the Chicago outlet. The Los Angeles store was managed by Geo. Boston. The late forties were indeed exciting and prosperous years for the partners in magic.



The hopes and expectations of the late forties dispersed in the first years of the fifties. The magic business declined for assorted reasons to the end of the decade. In 1950, a dance instructor in Los Angeles purchased a device called "Pufferoo" from Abbott's branch store located there. The device was operated by a foot pedal which ignited black powder producing a harmless puff of smoke. It was used by magicians for flash appearances. This Pufferoo was to be used to

enhance a dance recital. It seems that the customer was not satisfied with the amount of smoke produced and, thus, a stage hand added either more powder that was recommended or perhaps some other material to increase the flash. The result was a large flash of fire which badly burned the legs of a 13-year-old student dancer. The student's parents filed a damage suit against Percy Abbott and Recil Bordner for \$52,000. The suit dragged out over the next two years. The partners had no insurance to cover such an incident. They could not find a carrier for their unusual business. Only Lloyds of London would consider a policy and the partners had found the premium too expensive. Needless to say, such a sum as asked for in the suit would have been a great loss to the company and Percy feared that it would actually mean the end of the business. This uncertainty led the partners to cancel plans for the 1950 and 1951 Get-Togethers. Finally, the case was settled out of court with a considerably smaller judgment award to the family.

With the anxiety of the law suit behind them, the partners decided to host a Get-Together once again in 1952. The convention, which was held in the tent theater, was well attended with over 600 magicians registered. Magicians were eager to attend, and those appearing on the programs for the public performances were happy to have been booked. Following the event, however, Percy vowed not to have another Get-Together in Colon because he felt the local citizens had taken advantage of the magicians by raising room rents from \$1.00 to \$2.00 a night. Percy also expressed disappointment with the lack of cooperation on the part of local businessmen, whom he felt should cosponsor the event. After all, the local businessmen did benefit by the tourist trade during the week of the Get-Together. Businessmen in nearby towns had made offers to cosponsor the event, and in October, 1952 Percy and Recil accepted such an offer from the Three Rivers Chamber of Commerce for the 1953 Get-Together.

The "Magic Capital of the World" had lost the most prestigious gathering in magical circles.



Misfortune again struck the Abbott Magic company in the early morning hours of Saturday, November 15, 1952. Once again, it came in the form of a fire which leveled a building that had been recently purchased to house the metal shop. In addition to losing the stock and some of the metal working equipment, the firm lost the tent theater and stage equipment which had been stored in the building. The cause of the fire was never fully discovered, but faulty wiring was

suspected. The building was only partly covered by insurance and, because of the faltering financial situation of the business, the partners decided not to replace the structure. The metal shop tools were moved into the basement of the cement block building.

A period of decline in the popularity of magic set in, and the expansion of the late 1940's were contrasted by the atrophy of the business in the early 1950's. The business was failing to get the orders it had in the past. Magicians were not buying new tricks. Some magicians were not even replacing worn out equipment. Magicians, in general, were finding it difficult to find bookings. Some professional magicians were forced into other lines of work to earn a living. One major reason for all this, as explained by Percy, was the advent of television. When he found out that one of his employees had purchased a television set, he exclaimed, "Don't you know that is bad for business?" In his opinion (Bordner concurred), people would simply not turn out to see a live entertainment when they could sit in the comfort of their own homes and be entertained by the "magic box". He was correct. Working magicians became fewer and fewer. The ultimate "trick" could be purchased at the electrical appliance store. How could pulling a rabbit out of a hat compete with a magical tube that could transport the viewer into fantasy land?

The orders continued to decline and business fell off. The branch and retail stores were closed. Gradually, Abbott and Bordner were forced to lay-off many of their employees. Though not a large number, under normal circumstances about 30, the number of employees dropped to an all-time low in 1957. There were two people in the wood shop, one painter, one printer, and one employee in the sewing department. Recil and Percy handled all the office work, including the shipping. In March of 1957, the last issue of *Tops* was published and the following year the annual Abbott catalogue was simply a reissue of the 1957 edition with no new material. Gross sales in 1959 had dropped to \$55,000.00.

The only bright spot for the magical enterprise during these years was the Get-together, which brought many magicians into contact with Abbott merchandise. These Get-Togethers were held in various nearby cities including Sturgis in 1955, Battle Creek in 1956, Niles in 1957 and 1958, and Coldwater in 1959. Regardless of the good attendance at the Get-Togethers, Colon had suffered greatly during the decade which some writers now characterize as the "Good Times" era.



Percy Abbott had arrived in the United States in 1926, enroute to England. He had never completed his journey. Following the Get-Together of 1959, he decided the time had come, not only to finish the journey, but also to retire from the business which he had founded. Percy's partner from the beginning, Recil Bordner, purchased Abbott's half of the business and became sole owner of the world's largest magical apparatus manufacturing firm. Percy Abbott, with his wife, Gladys, left for the long-awaited visit to England.



In an effort to re-vitalize the business, Bordner embarked on an advertising campaign in several magic magazines. He made plans to resume the Get-Together in 1960. He planned to host it once again in Colon, but canceled the event when his former partner died in August. Throughout the remaining months of 1960, Bordner continued his advertising campaign, and in January of 1961 the company resumed publication of its magazine under the title of The New Tops.

At the same time, Bordner had a catalogue printed with over 450 pages containing more than 100 magical items, including a substantial number of new effects offered for the first time. All of this activity pointed toward August of 1961 and the resumption of the Get-Together. Bordner had patched the breach between the company and local businessmen. Plans were made to stage the event in the gymnasium of the new high school with the Lions Club as cosponsor. The stage of the new facility was adequately equipped and extra bleachers set up at the rear, making the seating capacity nearly 2,000.

The success of the 1961 Get-Together was insured when Bordner made arrangements for Harry Blackstone to perform for the first time at a Get-Together. The elderly Blackstone, as previously stated, had not been invited to past Get-Togethers because of the long standing disagreement between him and Percy Abbott.

Blackstone's appearance at the 1961 Get-Together was a smashing success, as the magicians watched him with nostalgia as he re-created the illusion of the "Dancing Handkerchief".



The Great Blackstone received a standing ovation from the audience of conjurers and laymen. The Get-Together had returned as the greatest magic convention of them all and Colon was truly the "Magic Capital of the World". Blackstone died a short while after the 1961 Get-Together and was buried in the

Colon Lakeside Cemetery. Thus, the first two giants of Colon's magical experience were gone, but the third carried on with renewed vigor. The 1961 Get-Together was a great success and Recil Bordner's magic manufacturing company was on the road to economic recovery.

Bordner continued to invest in advertising and throughout the 1960's the company received additional free advertising from the local and national news media. The company was featured on television in a program called, "Industry on Parade". The Saturday Evening Post ran a story on the business, and Recil Bordner appeared on the television program "To Tell the Truth". The publicity for the company was tremendous and sales continued to rise.

By the mid-sixties, Abbott's business was back to its previous level of prosperity and continued to grow. Each year brought more magicians to the Abbott convention than the previous one. New attendance records were set at the public shows. The magic business, in general, experienced a renaissance.

Magicians were being booked to entertain at all types of events, from children's parties to business trade shows, where magical effects are used to demonstrate new products. Television, one the enemy of magic, now proved to be a tremendous promoter for conjurers. There were weekly children's magic shows and magicians appeared on late night talk shows.



A great boost to Bordner's business was the building of the props for the "Ice Capades" show which featured Harry Blackstone, Jr. in a magical extravaganza. The special equipment which had to be custom built, took several weeks to construct and the total income to the company was several thousand dollars. Just as the business was thriving and new goals were being considered, Recil Bordner was hospitalized in the spring of 1967. He had suffered a stroke as the result of pain from ulcers. The 1967 Get-Together was canceled, but Bordner's recovery was swift and the 1968 Get-Together was a complete success. By 1970, Recil was again looking forward to expanding the business.

Bordner purchased a building on the main street of Colon to use as a retail outlet, but more important as a diversionary device to keep the curiosity seekers at bay during the chaotic month of August when tourists swell the population of the town to twice its normal size. It was not that Recil did not like people to visit the showroom at the factory, but August is the month when preparation for the Get-Together is at its frantic peak. Unless a "customer " is seriously interested in buying magical equipment, there is little time for sales people or Recil himself to spend time socializing. Therefore, Recil decided it would best suit his purposes to open the store "downtown" during the summer months to accommodate the curiosity seekers and beginning magicians. It was better to have one salesman occupied than disrupt

four or five employees at the main showroom.

In 1973, Bordner decided to make another sizable investment by paying one-half the expense for having the high school gymnasium air-conditioned. His share was \$9,000. The other half of the money came from the school board, the Lions Club, American Legion, and individual contributions. The air-conditioning system was installed in record time and was ready for use during the 1973 Get-Together, making conditions in the gymnasium much more comfortable. Previously, the audience and performers had suffered greatly as the August temperatures had made the gymnasium virtually a giant sauna. The spectators for the public performances, by 1973, numbered over 1600 each night, and they did not seem to mind paying more for their tickets, considering the new comfort of the gymnasium.



In 1974, Bordner began to make plans for further physical expansion, by purchasing a relatively new building just outside the city limits. This building, recently vacated by a plastics molding company, was twice the size of the original factory. Bordner's plan was to relocate his wood shop, which makes the custom-built illusions, in the new building. This would allow the metal shop to expand into the space previously occupied by the wood shop. The new building would also be altered to accommodate a paint room, where spray-painting and silk-screening could be done. All painting had previously been done in a small two-room building beside the original factory. This building, by 1974, was simply not large enough to do all the work being produced by the metal, plastic and wood departments. Now, painting would be done at both locations. A great deal of new equipment, such as power table saws, band saws, drill presses, drum sanders, and routers, was purchased and installed. The new building was occupied in June of 1975.

Today, Abbott's Magic Manufacturing Company is in better financial shape than ever before. The 1975 Get-Together set new all-time records for both magicians registered and public attendance at the four evening performances, where over 1800 people were entertained each night. The elementary gymnasium was packed from early in the morning until late afternoon each day, with magicians watching demonstrations of new tricks, discussing old and new techniques, and remembering the greats and near greats.

**Author Update:** *Since Patrick wrote this thesis nearly 50 years ago, much has changed in the Magic Capital but the one constant has been Abbott Magic and the Magic Get Together. In 1977, Abbotts had perhaps their best talent competition when teenagers Lance Burton, Jeff Hobson, and Mac King won 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place respectively. In 1979 Abbotts added a Close-up Convention to its annual events and brought in famed entertainer Harry Lorayne to lecture. In March of 2012 the Close-up Convention celebrated its 33rd anniversary and is going strong.*

*Throughout the eighties, Abbotts attracted top talent to the Magic Capital such as Lance Burton, Karrell Fox, Harry Blackstone, Franz Harary, Jeff Hobson, Gen Grant, Mac King and Brett Daniels just to name a few.*



*The 90's brought Abbotts into the digital age, in about the middle of the decade it ceased publication of its popular magazine "The New Tops". In addition to many of the stars from the eighties who also performed in the nineties, Abbotts brought in a new generation of Get Together performers such as DARYL, Kevin James, Simon Lovell, Tom Mullica, and Tina Lenert. A usual Get Together will have about 20 different acts just for the evening stage shows which allows Abbotts a wonderful combination of the old and new. It was also during the 90's that the US Congress recognized Colon and Abbotts Magic as the Magic Capital of the World, confirming what Lester Lake had said nearly 70 years ago.*

*By the turn of the century, legendary Get Together performers such as Harry Blackstone Jr and Karrell Fox had passed on, joining past generations of magicians such as Blackstone Sr., Don Alan, Jack Gwynne, and many other famous magicians in the Colon Cemetery. The Colon Cemetery has now become a tourist destination, so much so that a tour of the cemetery (by Al the Only) was added to the Get Together's already tight schedule in 2008. A few years later Al wrote a very popular book on the cemetery called "The Magic Cemetery" which is available from Abbott's and Amazon.*

*Abbotts continues to bring the best talent in Magic to Colon each August for the Get Together. New Get Together performers such as The Rhythm of Magic, David Sandy, Losander, and Oscar Munoz join Get Together veterans such as Lance Burton, Mac King, Kevin James, and Jeff McBride.*

*The City of Colon also continues its growth and evolution into magic history. In 2008 Colon broke ground on a new "Magic" park that features a pavilion, boardwalk, and a kid's playground in the center of the park.*

*Tops magazine returned briefly for a few years in 2009 as "The Newest Tops" which served as an interactive online magazine with many popular writers including Jeff Hobson, David Seebach, Senor Rai, John Sturk, Tim Wright, Sandy Marshall, Richard Hughes, Julie Sobanski, Ron Jaxon, Steven Spill, Steve Chezaday, Greg Bordner, Henry Marchand, Magic Bob Zoerman, and Roger Magic Bus.*



*China*

*In 2011 Abbotts had a huge Virtual Halloween/Magic event online that went on for two months! This Halloween event became the foundation for a couple of Halloween books that would go on to become best sellers for Abbotts and opened the door for many more magic books which continue to this day.*

*Abbott's also loss Hank Moorehouse in 2011. Hank was responsible for creating the Abbott Closeup Convention and the Abbott Flea Market. He also put together the talent for the Get Togethers for the past few decades. He passed away from a stroke while touring in*

*In 2012 Abbotts completely digitalized their inventory making over 1000 items available for instant download. Abbott's online magic store offers thousands of items with just the click of a button thus making the past catalogs obsolete, but very very collectible.*

*Abbott's celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> Get Together in August of 2012.*

*The magic of Abbott's continues to evolve in the virtual world as Abbotts sponsored a virtual Easter Egg Hunt on its Magic Get Together website ([www.magicgettogether.com](http://www.magicgettogether.com)) to promote a children reading program put on by libraries across the country (including our own Colon library). Over 30 magic books in pdf format were hidden on the site as kids (and adults) would search the site for the hidden eggs.*

*The Get Together continues to flourish as the audience increases with the help of social media. Word has gotten out about this fun event and each year a new and diverse audience attends from all over the country. This was probably most evident in 2017, when the Abbott Get Together was voted #1 Unique Festival in Michigan by the Detroit Free Press (the largest daily newspaper in Detroit MI and winner of 10 Pulitzer Prizes), just a few weeks before Abbott's celebrated its 80<sup>th</sup> Get Together.*

*After the pandemic of 2020, which prevented any type of Get Together convention from happening for the first time since 1963, Abbott's continued to evolve in the years afterward. The Get Together resumed with one of its greatest talent assemblies in 2021 including a reunion of the 1977 talent contest which included Lance Burton, Jeff Hobson, Mac King, Franz Harary, and Kevin James.*

*The Abbott's Magic Get Together website ([www.magicgettogether.com](http://www.magicgettogether.com)) hit a milestone of its own in 2022 as it crossed the 10,000 picture mark on its home page. There is not another magic convention on earth that can boast this type of coverage of its history! In 2023 the Abbott Online Store ([www.abbottmagic.com](http://www.abbottmagic.com)) also went to a new platform for the first time in over a decade which prompted Abbott's to provide historical documents (like this one) to a new generation of magicians.*

*Today Abbotts continues under the leadership Greg Bordner and where many brick and mortar magic shops have become a thing of the past, Abbotts continues to thrive bringing its own manufactured magic into the 21st century.*

*It is indeed a bright future for Abbotts and the Magic Get Together!*

