

A JOE STEVENS STORY



Blackstone waved his wand and gave Joe Stevens the world of magic...



By Ed Parrish

It was 1946 on the grand stage of the packed Orpheum Theatre in Wichita, Kansas, when Papa Blackstone conjured up more than he could ever have imagined.

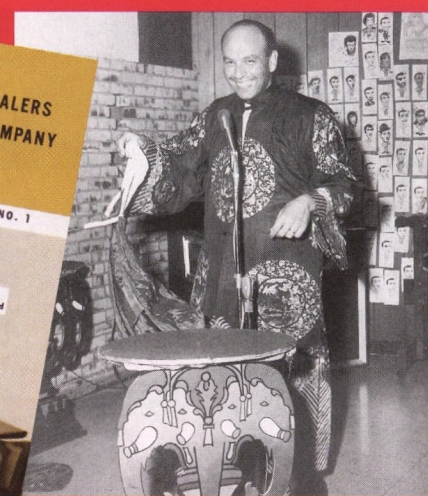
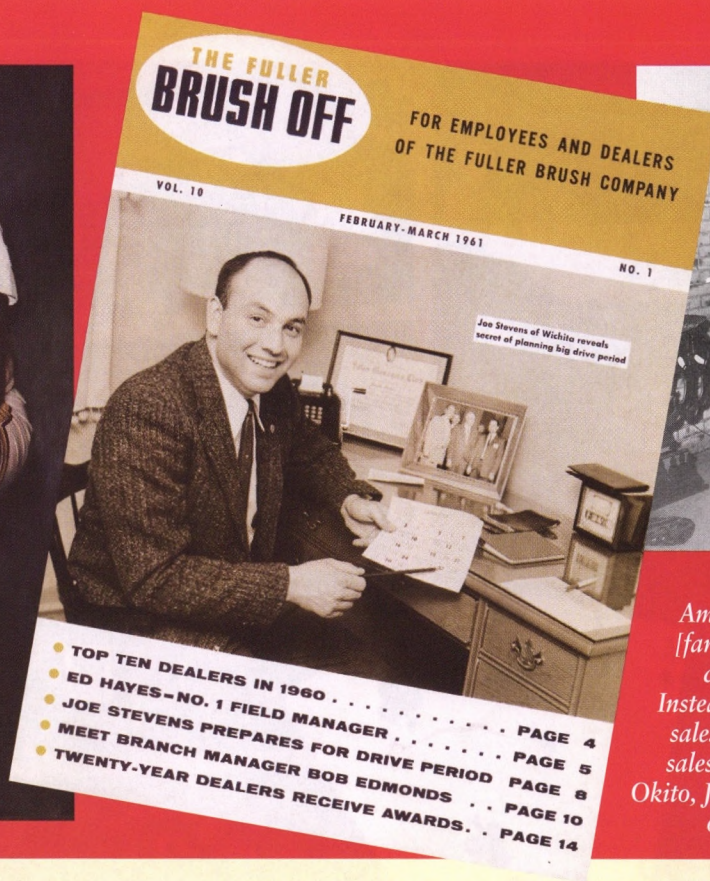
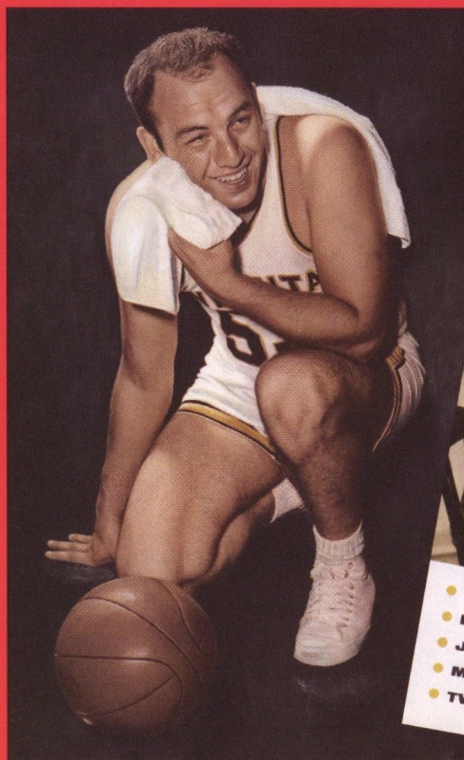
"I need a boy from the audience," he announced, and a skinny, petrified 10-year-old suddenly found himself standing next to the world's greatest magician.

For the thousandth time in his long-running road show, Blackstone and a nameless kid from somewhere vanished a bunny, which turned into a box of chocolates. Then to customarily thunderous applause, the magician reproduced the bunny from a newspaper. He gave the bunny to his

audience assistant, who would delightedly take it home to his dismayed mother after the show.

Without knowing it, Blackstone had performed his greatest feat of magic that day. He'd put *the touch* on young Joe Stevens.

"I was bouncing in my seat and hollering and waving to get up on the stage," Joe said. "Of course, when the assistant took me up there, I was like every other kid you ever bring up from the audience, grinning like a monkey with a thousand-yard stare and frozen in place. But just by luck, I happened to turn my head at the right moment. I saw Blackstone go to his jacket behind the newspaper and steal his load. I realized I could do



In 1958, Wichita University All-American Basketball star Joe Stevens [far left] turns down a pro basketball contract with Minneapolis Lakers. Instead, Joe becomes Fuller Brush's top salesman [center], responsible for 500 sales reps in four states. Influenced by Okito, Joe performs as Oriental character of *Candide the Magician* in 1977.

that too. Papa Blackstone hooked me then and there, and I never told a soul outside of magic how he did it. Even my first time, I understood magic had to be secret to be entertaining.”

The bug bit — and *chewed*.

Back in those days, magic shops were secretive and open only to the initiated. If you went to a magic shop and knocked or rang the bell — which you still have to do to get into Stevens Magic — the owner would come to the door and ask you what you wanted.

“If you were just curious, they wouldn’t let you in,” Joe said. “They’d politely turn you away and explain the shop was only for magicians. That’s the way things stayed until Joe Berg opened his first retail magic shop in Chicago in the late 1940s. When he did that and made money, magic shops sprang up all across the country. But there just weren’t any magic shops in Wichita back then; and even if one had been handy, it wouldn’t have been accessible to a ten-year-old aspirant like me.”

So young Joe saved his nickels and finally sent a dollar to EZ Magic for its mail-order catalog, from which he bought his first couple of tricks, both of which, in Joe’s much more seasoned estimation today, were junk.

“But I wish I still had one of them,” Joe said. “It was a couple of tubes and a flowerpot. You showed all the parts empty, and then you nested the tubes over the pot. When you took the tubes away, *Presto!* There was a little bouquet of feathers in the pot. I thought it was a great trick at the time.

After his first figurative handshake with the wand on Blackstone’s stage and exhausting his interest in EZ Magic’s mail-order tricks, Joe learned his first sleight-of-hand techniques from a magic book. He developed his skills as far as he could on his own, became bored, and his interest waned.

Then, while he was in high school, Joe found his first magic mentor, the man who shared confidential secrets of magic with him — and taught him to enjoy collecting.

“That was Lloyd Chambers,” Joe said. “Lloyd was a farmer and a high school teacher, but not at my high school. Magic was his deep passion. He had learned to love it when he was in the Navy in California, and he’d hired on as demonstrator at Thayer Magic in Los Angeles.”

When Lloyd left the Navy after World War II and came back to Wichita, he brought his skills and a pickup-truckload of Thayer magical apparatus with him.

“He opened a part-time magic shop in the 1950s,” Joe said. “It was Wichita’s very first magic shop, and that’s where I met him. He could see I had more than a passing interest, so he generously became my magic tutor. Lloyd was a charter member of the *Wizards of Wichita* [IBM Ring 49], and he was a leading collector in his time. He sponsored some of the magic events in the Wichita area back then, including lectures and a big annual magic sale. He was also an amazing friend.”

Even as Lloyd was nurturing Joe’s magical talents, Joe was developing his athletic prowess. He starred on Wichita’s North High School basketball team and won his basketball scholarship to Wichita University, which is now Wichita State University. One day when he got on the bus for a trip to an away game, a teammate pointed out the window at co-ed Martha McMillin.

“That’s the sharpest freshman on campus,” he told Joe. “I’m going to date her.”

Joe agreed with the first half of what his pal said — but he determined to head off the second half.

“Martha had gone to Wichita’s East High while I was at North,” Joe said. “Naturally, our high schools were arch rivals, and I’d spent four years helping our basketball team pretty much destroy theirs. When we got into college, she wouldn’t talk to me because she’d booed me for two years on the varsity basketball court. I pestered her time after time after time for a date, and she told me she wouldn’t go out with me if I were the only man on earth. But when my buddy said he was going to date her, I knew I had to get there first.”

After several more persistent attempts — I believe these days they call it *stalking* — Martha finally agreed to date Joe *one time*, as long as it was a double date. So Joe helped another of his basketball teammates get a date with Martha’s girlfriend, and he finally got his chance for a private talk with Martha.

“It worked,” Joe said. “From then on, it’s been pretty hard to get so much as a spatula between us.”

They became “an item.” And while Martha didn’t share Joe’s enthusiasm for magic, she was supportive, even back in the beginning, and she really liked Lloyd Chambers’ wife.

“We went out to Lloyd’s farm at least twice a month on weekends,” Joe said. “The girls became friends while they put up with us. Lloyd and

I would go out on the porch and talk. We'd usually stay out there so long that when we came back in, the girls had fallen asleep on the couches."

Joe and Martha left Wichita University in 1958, and Joe literally *walked* into the business world.

"The Minneapolis Lakers offered me a \$5,000 professional basketball contract," Joe said. "That was good money back then, but the contract wouldn't start until three months after we graduated. Well, Martha and I wanted to get married, so I needed a job to get us through the summer. The Fuller Brush Company had a want ad in the newspaper, so I applied for a three-month summer job. They hired me as a door-to-door salesman. I figured that was fine, the job would keep me in shape for basketball."

As it turned out, Joe was a natural salesman.

"I made great commissions on all the Fuller products," Joe said. "Now that's motivation! I started making a lot of money, more than twice what the basketball contract would have paid. So I decided to stay around a little longer, and the longer I stayed, the more money I made."

Martha married Joe on August 16, 1958; they were both 22 at the time. Joe told the Lakers, "No thank you," and stayed in Wichita, where Joe sold brushes and began his rise through the company ranks.

The couple's friendship with Lloyd Chambers and his wife endured. Lloyd, the consummate teacher and ultimate friend, continued to educate Joe in magic, and Joe began his hobby of buying and selling antique magic apparatus.

Then, January 15, 1960, Lloyd died.

"Martha and I were newlyweds with lots of expenses and not much income," Joe said. "There was absolutely *no* way we could afford to buy Lloyd's magic collection. I didn't dare bring the subject up."

So Joe went to the bank — *alone*.

"I borrowed the money and bought every single piece," Joe said. "Then, each week I went out to the farm and picked up a few items."

It took Joe a year to smuggle the entire Chambers-Thayer collection into his basement. Martha apparently never went downstairs during that time — even though the washing machine was on the other end of the basement, and everybody always wore clean clothes — and *she* did the laundry. At least, Martha acted as if she never caught on.

"But she's a smart woman, so she knew exactly what I was up to," Joe said. "She was just too sensitive to confront me about it. She understood how much Lloyd meant to me. Truthfully, I think she'd have been disappointed if I hadn't taken responsibility for his collection; and of course, I could never have forgiven myself. We still have most of it, and we've added several more collections over the years."

As the few who have been privileged to see Joe's magic collection today can attest, it's a whopper.

Part is in a secret treasure room in the shop — and oh, by the way, the shop itself is pretty hard to find unless you know where on Douglas Street to look. The sign in the window is lit 24 hours a day, but you still have to search for it.

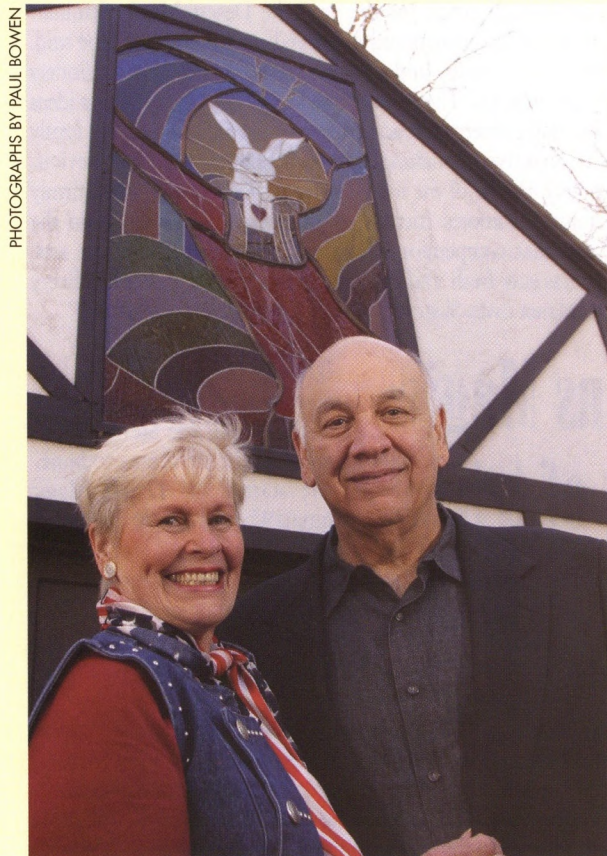
"This looks like a smaller version of what I had in my basement back in the 1960s," Joe said. It's wall-to-wall clutter, apparatus from many of magic's gilded ages, items from Conradi, Owen, Merv Taylor, P&L, Roterberg, and Willman to name a few stars. Much of it is the great Okito's, including the Temple of Quong Hi and Scare Mask.

"Okito was one of the magi," Joe said. "He devoted his entire life and energies to the magical arts. He could do it all: dream it up, design it, construct it, and perform with it."

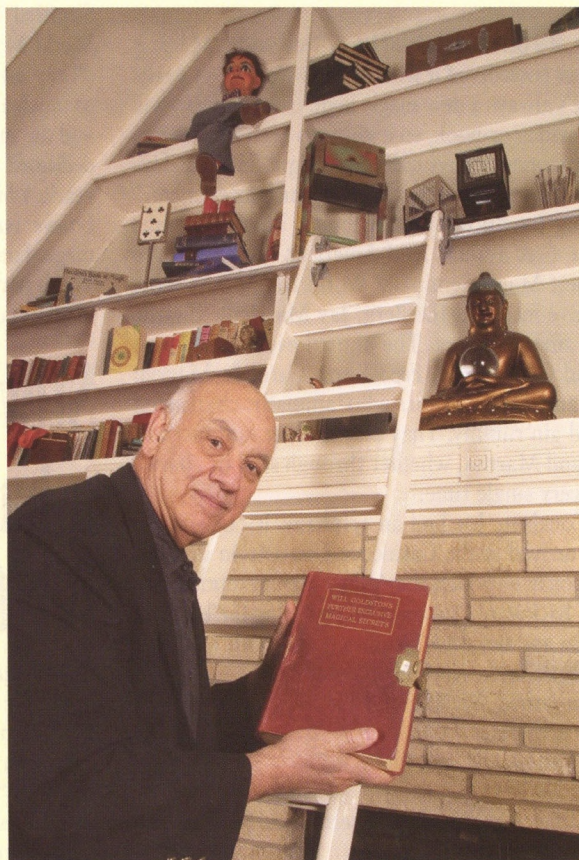
Okito was really a Dutchman named Theo Bamberg, who under his stage name, an anagram of the word, Tokio — *Tokyo*, performed in oriental costume beginning in Berlin in 1893.

Another part of Joe's collection is in the beautiful home he and Martha have built. In a tastefully impressive display along the family room's walls, Joe's home museum features hundreds of books, a dozen or so Ball Vases, many of them Thayer, also production boxes and other magical apparatus. The centerpiece above the fireplace is a rare Thayer's Whispering Buddha.

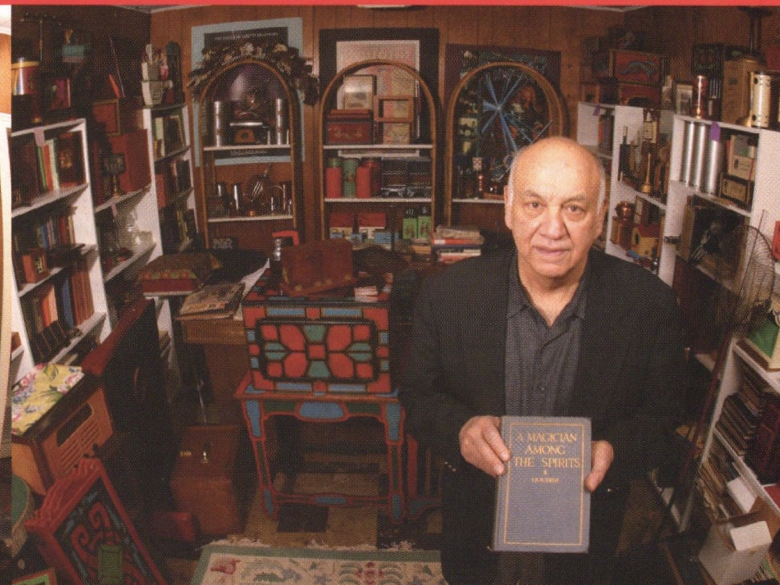
As the years went by, daughter Amy and son Mark joined the family, and Joe became Fuller Brush's top salesman. He rose to the rank of divisional manager responsible for 500 sales representatives selling in four states. Still, Joe's obsession with magic intensified, and as his skills in the art grew, so did his collection of antiques. Eighteen years into Joe's career with Fuller Brush, the Chambers-Thayer-Stevens collection provided part



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL BOWEN



Martha and Joe in front of the Stevens' estate garage [far left], where a backlit rabbit in hat lets nighttime visitors know "this is the place." Top-shelf material from Joe's household library of hundreds of antiquarian magic books [left] includes the 1920s locked-book set of Will Goldston's Exclusive Magic Secrets.



of his motivation and a sizable chunk of the early capital for opening the magic shop.

“Martha suggested we sell collectibles under the banner, *Stevens Magic Emporium*,” Joe said. “The sale was a success. We cleared a small pathway through our basement so that for the first time, we could get to the laundry room without stepping over antique magic. We figured, ‘That worked. Let’s open a real magic shop.’”

So in 1975, they opened Stevens Magic Emporium selling magic, novelties, jokes, gags, costumes, and Halloween and Christmas outfits. For the first year, Martha managed the store during the day while Joe kept the income coming with his Fuller Brush job. When he finished his workday at Fuller Brush, Joe would join Martha at the store.

Finally, in late 1976, Stevens Magic Emporium was doing well enough for Joe to leave Fuller, give Martha a richly deserved break, and take over the store full time.

“From that moment on, it’s been a labor of love,” Joe said. “Magic is my passion, and I have *never* considered it work. I can’t wait to get to the store in the morning. There’s always a new magic item, or a magician will come in, or we’ll get a new video or book, so it’s always been fun for me. Even in the early days, the money always came, and eight 25-hour days a week don’t seem to matter when you’re having this much excitement.”

Excitement is something Joe knows how to build. That very same year, 1976, he hosted the first annual Mid-American Conclave, the forerunner of today’s Desert Magic Seminars/ World Magic Seminars. Talent for the first Conclave included Joe Berg, Jay Marshall, Charlie Miller, and Faucett Ross among others. The annual event drew such greats to Wichita as David Copperfield, Fred Kaps, Carol & Marvyn Roy, Tompsoni & Co., and Dai Vernon, who annually challenged Martha to play hearts and gin rummy. They played their famous card games before spectators, and Martha, whether through skill or charm, trounced The Professor every single time.

Then, after the 1977 Conclave, Joe had an epiphany. It came in the form of Jay Marshall and arrived at the Cavalcade Convention in Tulsa over a quart of Dewar’s Scotch — which they’d just about emptied. Jay said: “Joe, you’ve got it all backward. You’re trying to bring the best Las Vegas performers to Wichita and use them to attract everybody else. Just take the conclave to Las Vegas, and everybody’ll come!”

A few days later, Slydini visited Wichita, and Joe asked him what he thought about a Las Vegas gathering.

“Okay,” Slydini said. “You plan it, and I’ll do it.”

So they did.

Slydini was the 1978 headliner, and the first Desert Magic Seminar was a success.

“We had so much fun, and for the first time we covered our expenses,” Joe said. “When you succeed with something like that, you get to expand it the next year, which we did with Dai Vernon’s attendance. When Vernon showed up in Las Vegas, so did just about everybody on the West Coast. Plus, you call media attention to the convention, and that’s priceless. We were really excited.”

Siegfried & Roy jumped in enthusiastically and have generously sponsored the convention since it came to Vegas. In 1983, they paid the largest prize ever awarded in magic until then, a \$10,000 purse, the Golden Lion’s Head Award. A young magician named Paul Gertner took it home for knocking out the sharp-eyed judges’ eyeballs with his three very strong routines: Ring on Hourglass, That’s Ridiculous, and his Steel Balls and Cups.

“No matter how much we say about them, we’ll never be able to give Siegfried & Roy enough credit for the way the Desert Magic Seminar/ World Magic Seminar has grown and improved over the years,” Joe said. “They are consummate artists, and they love this art and its practitioners as much as anyone ever has. They contribute and encourage the finest ideas and the most exciting concepts to each and every detail, and they are firmly dedicated to the objective of making sure each seminar tops the previous year’s, which is why it’s one of the most fabulous events of the year. I firmly believe our seminar promotes friendly, respectful competition within the magic family, and that competition drives our progress in the magic arts. That’s why our acts stay fresh and continue to amaze our audiences. Every magician on the planet owes Siegfried & Roy a huge debt of gratitude.”

Stevens Magic: a bag of tricks for the world

Though Stevens Magic Emporium isn’t the biggest magic dealer in the world, Joe Stevens holds several world-class claims to fame.

He started the Desert Magic Seminar/World Magic Seminar, and he still has a hand in running it.

In 1982, responding to customers’ telephone queries for Ken Brooke’s this and that, Joe purchased the rights to the Ken Brooke Magic Range, a British catalog of magic for professional practitioners.

“From Ken Brooke and Paul Stone, we purchased exclusive North American distribution rights to all Ken Brooke card effects and items,” Joe said. “We also purchased exclusive rights from Joe Berg to manufacture and sell Okito-Berg effects and some Berg items as well. All those rights purchases gave us some real commercial advantages.”



Inside Stevens private museum and library of magic, Joe shows off a rare signed copy of Harry Houdini's A Magician Among the Spirits.

nology has become more dependable and valuable for creating some effects, one thing has remained constant since the days Stevens Magic opened its doors the first time: the customers.

"The magician who comes through my door today is pretty much the same guy the Ancient Egyptians depicted on a tomb wall doing the Cups and Balls," Joe said. "Every customer wants a trick. They all want to use secret knowledge and showmanship to entertain their audiences, and that's what the things we sell them enable them to do. The best part of magic is while you may understand much of it, you'll always come across something you *don't* understand. I know that's the trigger for me. That's when I get the 'I wants.'"

Joe illustrated that point with a story about a world-class illusionist. "Hans Moretti's illusions are just incredible," he said. "In particular, I love his Box Illusion, and I have no idea how he does it. When the great Hans Moretti came to Wichita, he visited my shop, and I showed him a card trick. He bought it, and

then I had to show him how to do it. That kind of thing makes this business exciting every day I come to the shop."

But now Joe is thinking about retiring ... sort of.

And then, there's the famed, second-to-none *Stevens Magic Greater Magic Video Library*, offering 60 instructional tapes so far, and featuring some of the greatest artists in the world: Don Alan, Michael Ammar, Daryl, Karrell Fox, Charlie Miller, Johnny Paul, and many other magical luminaries.

While Stevens Magic wasn't the first video-production outfit in the business, Joe and daughter Amy together turned it into the first company to launch *high-quality* instructional tapes. Amy has her master's degree in mass communications from Wichita State University, and she cut her professional teeth working in two television stations' promotional departments. Then Joe hired her into the family business. For several years, Amy was the associate producer for the *Greater Magic Video Library*, and she produced and wrote the first series of *Stevens Magic Catalogs*.

And speaking of the catalog, which for 20 years has continued to be as entertaining as it is informative, Stevens Magic was the first company to apply modern marketing theories and techniques to the sale of magic, and thereby increase sales volumes and, at considerable expense. Drawing on his 20 years of sales experience with Fuller Brush, Joe was the earliest magic dealer to incorporate high-quality photographs of his wares rather than sketches or descriptions. It was a tremendous benefit to his customers, who previously had little research information available to help with purchase activities.

The only reason that concept doesn't seem novel today is because Joe made such a success of it. His vision has provided many other magic dealers around the world a blueprint for effective direct marketing. And of course, the Internet is having a major impact on orders. These days, fully 90% of Stevens Magic sales come from catalog and Internet customers.

But Joe's favorite claim to fame is his worldwide reputation for fair, ethical dealings. "That takes years to establish and just one incident to destroy," Joe said. "We've always tried to keep ourselves clean. Nobody's perfect, so very rarely we'll make a mistake; but when we mess up, we take instant corrective action. One trick isn't going to make or break us, no matter how good it is. But our reputation is critical, so it'd better be spotless."

Though the business has changed over the years, and modern tech-



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL BOWEN

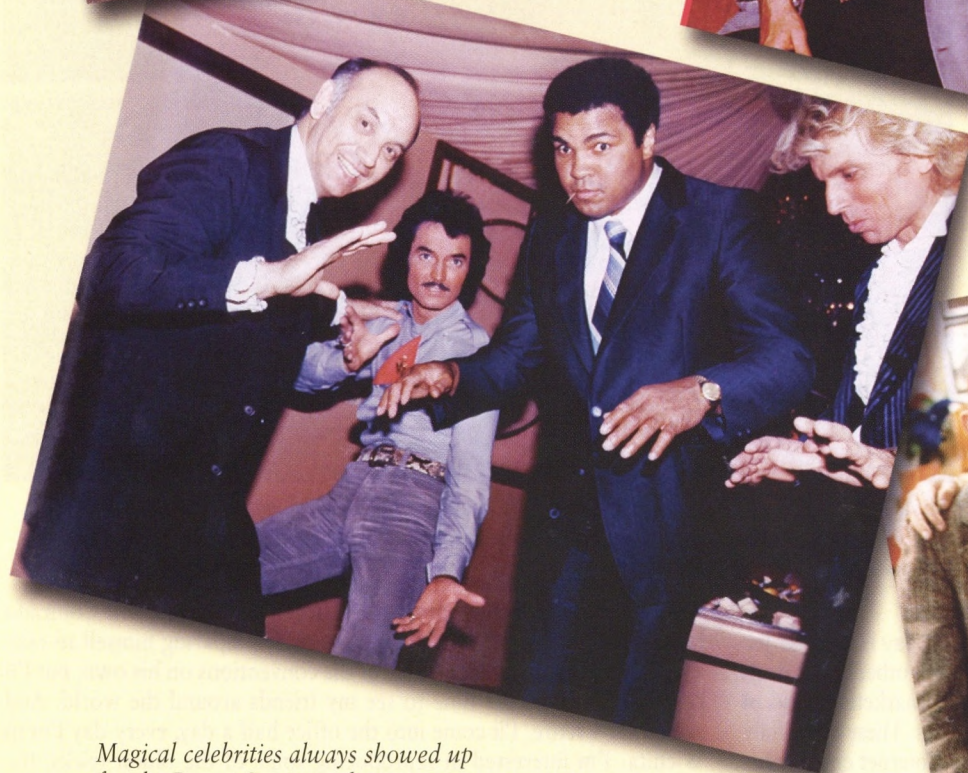
Mark Stevens pauses for a moment behind the counter of Stevens Magic Emporium for a symbolic passing of the wand from Dad — even though Mark's been running the show, full guns ahead, for several years now.

"I want to go fishing more often at my Minnesota and Colorado hideaways," Joe said. "So Mark, his son, is preparing himself to take over. He's begun attending some of the conventions on his own, but I'll go along much of the time to see my friends around the world. And even after I retire, I'll come into the office half a day, every day I'm in Wichita. I'm interested in reproducing some of the oldest tricks, the ones so old they're new to today's magicians."

Papa Blackstone would be proud. His longest-running spell, the one he cast in 1946 on that ten-year-old Wichita kid, continues to work wonders for everyone in magic. ♦

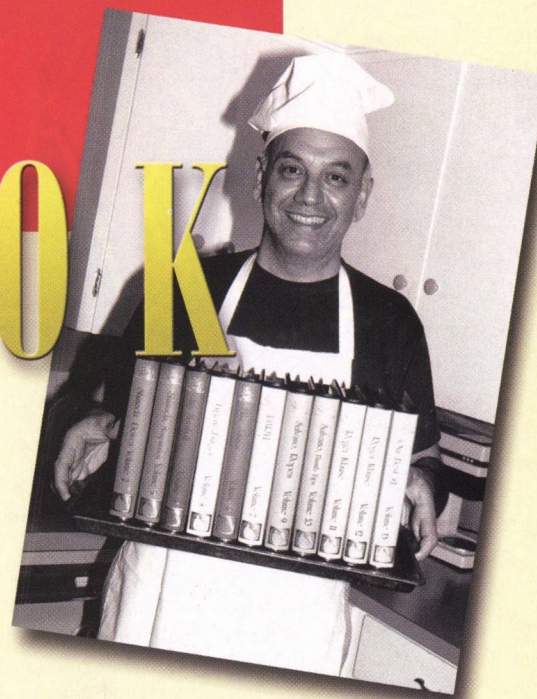
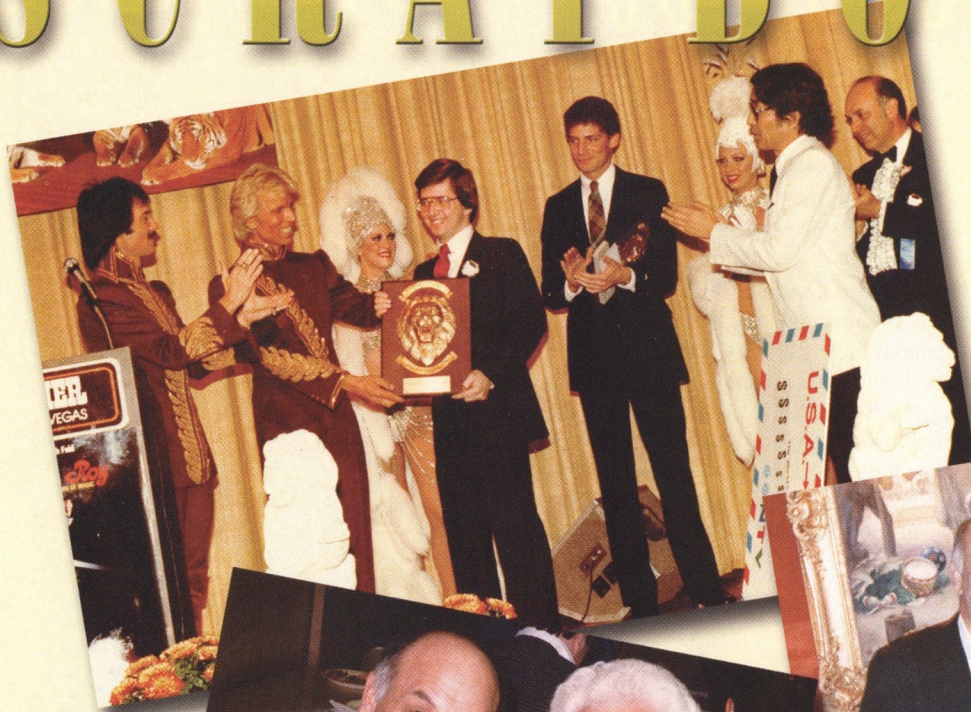
Ed Parrish resides in Wichita, Kansas and, when not writing about or performing magic, edits Cessna Aircraft Company's corporate magazine, Directions.

A couple of pages from THE STEVENS



Magical celebrities always showed up for the Desert Seminars, but one year, world champ Muhammad Ali [above] joined Joe and Siegfried & Roy for the festivities. [Top left] Vernon, Slydini, Paul Stone, and Copperfield join Joe and Martha for showtime at the Frontier. [Top right] Joe and The Professor; Faucett Ross and Joe [right].

SCRAPBOOK



[Top left] In 1983, when close-up contest awards jumped to \$10,000, Paul Gertner became first to win the S&R Gold Lion's Head and \$5,000.

Joe announces the "Baker's Dozen" [top right] purchase plan of the Greater Magic Video Library. Joe and Marvin "Buma" Berger [center left]; Joe and Georges Proust [center right] at Christian Fechner's home in Paris.

[Left] In 2002, Rich Bloch, Siegfried & Roy, and Joe toast the evolution of the Desert Seminar to the World Magic Seminar.