



PHOTO: ESQUIRE MAGAZINE, JANUARY 1945

Anton Bruehl

'PAGING... MR. CARDINI!'

BY BRAD BALL

“Be It Known That, Richard Cardini, The Suave Deceiver, was publicly honored as the greatest exponent of pure sleight of hand . . .”

It is a very weighty title from the New England Society of Magicians but Cardini is definitely one of the top contenders, if not the contender, for the twentieth century. His simple act would run as long as 18 minutes of hard hitting magic with a meerschau pipe as the largest prop. Unfortunately, today most magicians have little idea of what Cardini did for the world of conjuring other than the fact that his act featured killer sleight of hand. What made him so noteworthy as to reach the pinnacle of the entertainment world with a diabolically clever act is a story of skill, hard work, luck, and a judicious sense of timing.

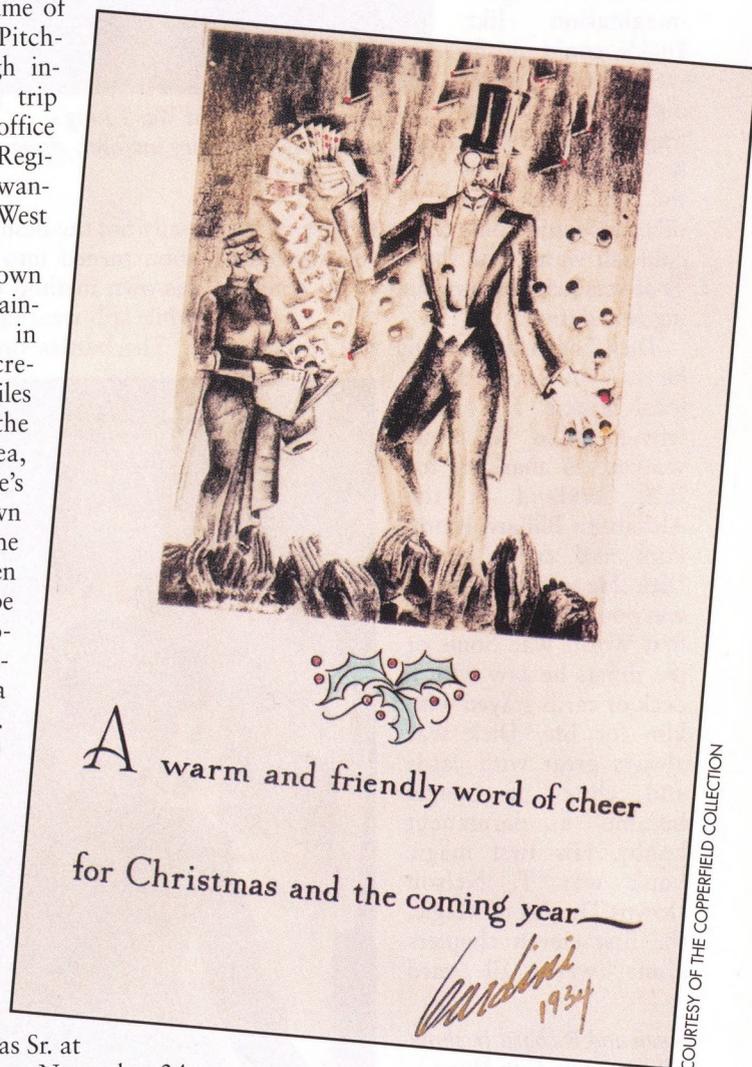
Mystery has certainly surrounded the origins of Cardini. Much like the Houdini/Weiss question of Appleton or Budapest, Cardini has as many as seven different dates and locations for his birth. Some have been provided with detailed descriptions of the tracking methods while blindly staring the true information down. For some unknown reason the correct date, which Cardini gave out himself, was usually disregarded. The actual confirmation is thanks to Cardini's daughter, Carole, for her generosity with the family's scrapbooks and 5400 miles of footwork. For most of Cardini's life his name was actually Richard Valentine Pitchford, that is with the exception of a short time during his infancy.

Keys to conquering this quest of origin began in a letter to Hon. James J. Davis, the Secretary of Labor in 1928. There is a reference to a real Welshman with the stage name of "Cardini". His real name is "Richard Valentine Thomas" from near Aberystwyth, but, through some second

marriage he took the name of "Richard Valentine Pitchford." That was enough information to trigger a trip from California to the office of the Superintendent Registrar for the District of Swansea in the County of West Glamorgan, Wales.

Richard Cardini (known as Dick to his friends) maintained he was born in Mumbles, a small recreational village a few miles south-southwest on the shoreline from Swansea, Wales. His mother Alice's maiden name was known to be Skinner. Playing the hunch of his original given birth date seemed to be enough collective information to give the Registrar in Swansea for a shot at a birth certificate. Five minutes and £2.50 later a woman sticks her face out of the office with a very matter of fact "here you go." Everything had fallen into place.

Richard Valentine Thomas was born to Alice Maude and Richard Valentine Thomas Sr. at George Bank, Mumbles on November 24, 1895. The certificate went on to say Alice's maiden name was Skinner and the father was a commercial traveller. Dick Cardini



A charcoal drawing, done by a fan at Billy Rose's Casino de Paree in New York, made a memorable Christmas card (circa 1934).

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had known all along when he was born but no one would listen. His one hundredth birthday would have been last month.

Growing up in the Glamorgan district of southern Wales exposed Dick to some great acts of the golden age like Chung Ling Soo, Frank Van Hoven (one of the original comedy magicians), Nate Leipzig, and The Great Lafayette. Variety performers were the television of the times. People had difficult and trying lives working in the mines and exporting coal in this “ugly, lovely town” as poet Dylan Thomas called it. A child with a magical imagination like Dick’s could profit well here and he did. First learning to tongue lit cigarettes, he would swim in the bay with the other kids and come to the surface of the cold salt water with the only lit cigarette. That was just the beginning of his conjuring foundation.

Dick began to learn the real works as he ran numbers for a local bookie. He and a friend, Billie Williams, worked as markers for Jack Ackland at the Alexandra Billiard room. Pool and cards suited Dick. He would go on to win pool contests into the first World War. Some of the things he saw with a deck of cards stayed with him for life. Dick was always great with cards and close up magic became a permanent hobby. His first magic book was T. Nelson Downs *The Art of Magic*, the first eleven chapters alone were all card

magic. Foreshadowing since he and Downs would go on to be friends and magic confidants.

Lord Kitchener put out a call for young men to enlist in his army and as many young men would, Dick joined the cause of the World War. Into some of the most horrific conditions, Dick spent time in the trenches with a deck of cards to keep his mind occupied. The winters being quite cold, he would leave his woolen gloves on to stay as warm as possible. The cards still sprung in the crisp air but the gloves made everything more cumbersome. In fact, while trying to do single card productions from the backpalm, blocks of cards would appear. While initially not the desired effect, multiple cards soon turned into fans and Dick created his own method of split fan productions while still wearing the gloves.

The battles on the Somme in France

sent Dick to the hospital twice. The second being for the remainder of the war. This was a quiet time recovering from a traumatizing “shell shock.” Slowly regaining his faculties Dick spent as many as ten hours a day with a deck in hand. A perfectionist by nature, the moves climbed to a level of true artistry.

After the war, Dick kicked around London and got a job demonstrating magic behind the counter of Gamages department store, a position formerly held by Will Goldston. These were also formative days for Dick. Along with making connections, he became familiar with stock magic and sales techniques. He once bragged of selling 98 sets of linking rings on his best day with his routine. He used an oversized ring mixed in from a larger set, an unusual ring count, and a link of six rings. That ring routine continues to sell on the shelves of magic shops today, over three quarters of a century later, under the title of *The Symphony of the Rings*. While not credited to Dick it was the basic routine he alone created.

Dick was working under the stage name of Val Raymond at the time and doing occasional shows where he could get the work. Max Holden noted his act in the London Notes section of *The Sphinx* in 1919 as the “production of doves from empty hands, no tables or body work”. Had he stayed with this dove act who knows how magic history would have changed. Instead, due partly to ill health and wanderlust Dick took a



Dick poses in his World War I King’s Shropshire Light Infantry uniform, along with his sister Lillian.

PHOTO: COURTESY BRAD BALL



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Swan and Richard Jr. show off the Radio City Music Hall display from “Aces High,” where the Cardini’s played the clubs segment.

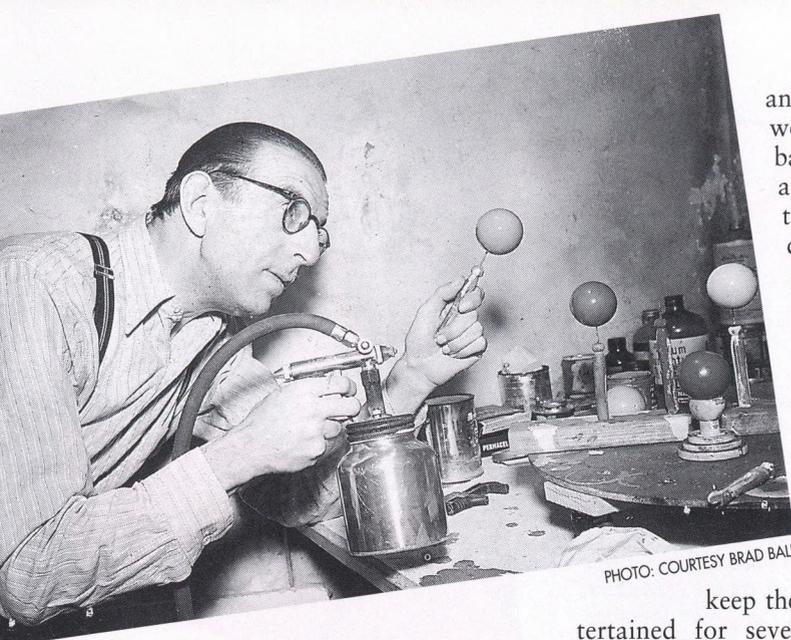


PHOTO: COURTESY BRAD BALL

Dick turned and painted billiard balls in the workshop of his Jamaica, New York home.

job on a steamship and headed to Australia. After the war, many British subjects crossed the Equator in search of a better life like Americans heading west for the gold rush. Variety billings were much the same here as in England and the United States. Val Raymond found work in the Tivoli circuit starting in Sydney in September of 1924. When he was talking to the theater manager, Jack Musgrove, they realized there was a need for a new name. One story has it that there were already Raymonds working the area with magic and another is that a local criminal shared the name. Whichever the reason, when Dick showed up for work there was no Val Raymond on the bill or more importantly the backstage admittance list. Confused, he insisted on a second look, then told the magician went by the name of Cardini. Realizing the theater manager had taken the liberty of renaming him, Dick accepted the pseudonym and grew into title of "mystic manipulator" almost exclusively from that day forward. The foundation was firmly set for the great act.

The years Dick spent "down under" introduced him to professional show business. He developed a strong work ethic and constantly honed his act and skills. His level of competence rose through the constant work. Theater critics often singled out his act with praise. This began a tradition that would follow the Cardini act everywhere, for all through his career Dick was known for never having a bad revue. Everybody has good and bad days but Dick always managed to make good impressions with reviewers. The work he was doing at this time only resembled what was to ignite his career abroad. Most of it was filled with rough patter

and light comedy. He would include billiard ball, thimble, cigarette, and card manipulations, a version of any drink called for, sympathetic silks, Cecil Lyle's hat tear, and even a floating ball.

Life on the road allowed Dick to visit with local magicians across eastern Australia. At some of the magic club meetings he attended, he would

keep the boys entertained for several hours with his close up card work. He was proud of this magic but it was reserved more for friends than for the public. There weren't many venues for close up but Dick was definitely a well rounded magician. He could hold his own with any of his peers. Throughout his life he would hone and use this tool to build on the separate stage persona.

Almost two years after entering Australia, Dick set his sights on bigger money, more work, and opportunity. He booked passage on a steamer for North America. Vancouver was the means to get to the United States and the big time. With a hearty recommendation from a theater manager and a scrapbook in hand he managed to get some bookings that might lead to regular work on any of the North American circuits. New York was where all of the name acts worked and the city with the great theatrical reputation. That would be the target.

Booking his act meant soliciting to agents and theater managers, not always the most trustworthy crowd. In fact, the first year Dick was having a difficult time. An agent promised him big time

shows but paid only small time. There was plenty of work and Dick was actually working the better houses just not getting the proper pay. He sent a letter out with an ultimatum, he decided he should receive \$500.00 per week or be forced to take his business elsewhere. It was a bold move in 1926, but it worked. While he was wrestling finances on his first trip across the U.S. something happened that would alter his act and life dramatically.

Her name was Swan Sunshine Walker. She was petite, feisty, and quite attractive. They met at the Planter's hotel in Chicago where she was working as head cashier and bookkeeper, Dick was passing through. By all accounts it can only be



A mirror-image publicity photo that was printed upside down in *The World's Greatest Magic* by Hyla M. Clark (Tree Crown, 1976). Clue: Check the monocle.

THOSE CARDINI CARDS

BY JOHN MOEHRING

Whatever you say, don't tell him you do card manipulations in your act. These were the words of advice given to me by the dance team, Bobby Dae and Babs, as we walked across the gangway to the MS Carmania, to meet the great sleight of hand artist, Cardini.

During the busy Caribbean cruise season, the various ocean liners would often call on the same island on the same day. On Tuesday, February 27, 1966, the ship that I was performing on, the SS France, was anchored at San Juan, Puerto Rico, and, aboard another cruise ship docked there for the day were Mr. and Mrs. Richard Cardini.

"A chance to meet the master," was my thought as I signed the ship's registry. The performers from our ship had been invited aboard the Carmania to visit with their entertainers. On similar occasions, I had the opportunities to meet several magicians working the different cruise ships, however, this was the chance to meet a living legend.

An assistant purser showed us to one of the lounges and everyone was formally introduced. After a steward had taken drink orders, Mr. Cardini turned to me and said, *I understand that you do cards?*

After a hesitant nod, and a smile, I remember trying to decide whether to say "yes" or "no" or "sorta." The short silence was broken, as Cardini picked up a deck of cards from the table, and remarked, *This little experiment with the playing cards is something that I usually do not attempt when other magicians are present.*

A card was selected by Jo Mirasolo, the girl singer from our show. While Cardini shuffled the cards, his wife, Swan, brought forth a small covered birdcage that had been on the floor beside her chair. Some droll patter about the extraordinary abilities of educated animals introduced a parakeet, or budgerigar, as it was called by Cardini. The bird was successful in finding the picked card, and, I would swear that I heard the budgie screech out, "trey of hearts," with a British accent.

Seven years prior to this shipboard meeting, I had the privilege of watching Cardini's immaculate act at a combined convention of the International Brotherhood of Magicians and the Society of American Magicians held in Chicago. "The Suave Deceiver" made his stage entrance, and twelve minutes later an awe-struck 16-year-old had found an idol in magic. In later years, when I would describe the great artistic accomplishments of Cardini, certain magicians would agree, but then go on to tell tales of Cardini as an unhappy, bitter old man plagued by his imitators. He supposedly detested magicians who would do split fan card productions or cigarette manipulations in their acts. As a teenager practicing the "Cardini Method of Backhand Production of Cards," from page 548 of *Greater Magic*, I debated whether or not to use it in my act for fear that Cardini would hear about

me and add my name to his ever growing hate list of card manipulators.

However, when I finally got to shake Cardini's hand in 1966, I left our meeting with the feeling that the performer took pride in the acceptance of the fact that he was the most imitated magician in the world.

After about an hour of enlightening show biz gossip aboard the Carmania, three or four ladies in the gathering of entertainers declared that it was time for a shopping excursion ashore. Most of the men invited themselves to be tour guides. The group of almost a dozen had to split up into three taxicabs for the short ride into Old San Juan.

Naturally, I jumped into the cab with Cardini and Swan. I popped a question that I thought might ruffle his feathers: *What magic acts have you seen lately that you consider to be capable and competent card manipulators?* I listened as Cardini expressed his praise for the contemporary performances of Fred Kaps and Channing Pollock. Swan did not agree wholeheartedly. *They are still copycats of a different kind.* But, Cardini continued to talk about the distinctive styles of Kaps and Pollock.

I told Cardini that I had seen Channing Pollock while in college, and went backstage after his appearance with the Liberace Show. While waiting to meet him, I picked up a couple of cards that Channing had dropped on the stage, and was surprised to discover that they were common, bridge sized cards with scenic artwork backs. I said they looked like he bought them at Woolworth's or a drug store. Cardini merely commented, *The fanning cards that I have used in my act through the years are purchased at Walgreen's.* Swan added: *And, they've been dropped on stages all over the world. About ten years ago, I gave up on trying to pick up and reuse those cards.*

As our group wandered through the picturesque shops and quaint streets of Old San Juan, I did get separated from the Cardinis. However, when we did get back together for a late lunch, I did manage to sit close enough to Cardini to hear of vaudeville stores and struggling acts, contrasted with anecdotes of appearances with celebrities and command performances before kings and queens.

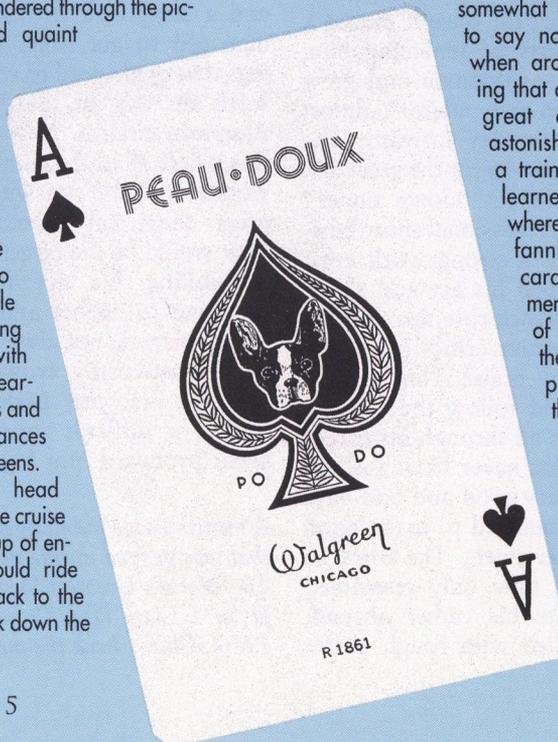
It was time to head back to our respective cruise ships. I told my group of entertainers that I would ride with the Cardinis back to the Carmania, then walk down the



pier and catch the tender to the SS France. Our taxi was less than a block from the restaurant where we had lunch when I spotted a Walgreen's Drugs sign. I jokingly commented that we should stop and stock up on playing cards. Apparently, Cardini took me seriously because he told the cab driver to turn around. For about seventy cents each, I purchased the last four decks in stock of those cards with the artistic black, white, red and gold back design.

I met Cardini and Swan after they had retired and were working cruises only once or twice a year as a carefree escape from New York winters. I'll never forget that warm February morning in

San Juan that started with a somewhat foolish admonition to say nothing about cards when around Cardini. During that day, I witnessed the great one perform an astonishing card trick with a trained bird, and, then learned the secret of where to obtain the best fanning cars. Those cards became instant memorabilia. A couple of the decks still have the cellophane wrapping intact, because they were never intended to be used in an act. They were, after all, the cards of the inimitable Cardini, and are still referred to as those Cardini cards. ♦



described as love at first sight and within weeks vows were exchanged. She was placed into the act and remained nameless to the audience. During the 47 years they were married she would make sure everything was organized, including loading him up before each show.

Vaudeville work was busier than ever, the act was working well and booked continuously. By this time Dick had dropped the patter working silently with musical accompaniment. Smoke gets in your eyes, Goodnight ladies, and the magically popular Zenda waltz were the numbers musicians would come to remember the act by. The early 1930's must have been quite an exciting time for the Cardini's. The people they worked with in many cases have become legends like the Marx brothers, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Eleanor Powell, Will Rogers, and many more.

The act itself began with Swan dressed as a page boy, she became known as the "chameleon page," entering from the wings with a loud "Paging Mr. Cardini, paging Mr. Cardini." Many of the acts working vaudeville were without any billing so this guaranteed the audience would remember the name, a clever idea that worked well. The curtains would part and in would walk Dick dressed immaculately in evening



PHOTO: COURTESY BRAD BALL



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attire including a cape, walking stick, dress gloves, top hat, and the ever present monocle. Dick would be reading a newspaper which was handed to Swan and used as a receptacle for what was to follow. His stage presence would give the appearance that he was pleasantly intoxicated, just a bit tipsy, never obnoxiously out of place. That was his edge and that was how he cast his spell over the audience. He would let the audience believe he was

a s confused and surprised as they were.

Generally, the act could be divided into three sections with card manipulations, billiard balls, and finally cigarettes. The split card fan productions he learned in the trenches were featured while wearing the dress gloves, a point reviewers remembered. Fans and individual cards seemed to plague him from everywhere. Just when you thought it was over the same happened only with billiard balls, this time they kept changing colors. The wooden billiard balls which he turned himself were large enough (2 1/8") to be used in a real game. After the balls were rolled off stage for the dramatic sound, cigarettes everywhere, by the dozens. There were interludes with an unknotting

The act, the moves and even the image have, at one time or another, been lifted without due credit, such as the case with this 1983 greeting card.



PHOTO: COURTESY BRAD BALL

Cruising the seas as Mr. and Mrs. Wishee Washee, a favorite act of the Cardini's in later years.

silk, spinning flowers, flashes and matches that caught everyone off guard. The act usually ran twelve minutes and as it has been said "stopped the show".

Dick's proudest moment arrived in 1933. While working the Palladium in London he received a special invitation to a Royal Command Performance for the King and Queen of his native England. All of the relatives and friends could now see the little Welsh boy had made good. The Prince of Wales was so taken by the magic, Dick spent four hours showing and teaching him card tricks. Their career longevity went on to share their act with three President's; spanning the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower administrations. An interesting note to the Palladium performances is that the theater had a special set of curtains reserved for the Cardini's that became known as the "Cardini Blues" since they were the sole user.

The high quality of the act gained the Cardini's plenty of popularity. Magicians would come from far away just to see him and then sit through several shows. There are still stories of how Dick would spot them in the audience and send a sandwich out for a lunch break. But with the notoriety came imitators. Then it got out of hand to Dick. It seemed guys were stealing his act which he had so carefully crafted, move for move, and trying to grab his business. It got to the point where it was almost a joke, except to Dick, who was now known as the most imitated magician in the world. There were feuds involving the Theater Manager's Association trying to have imitators banned, mostly just fruitless arguments falling on deaf ears. Dick became bitter. Magic was all he knew, he was great at it, so he continued doing what he did. They could imitate his

moves, even his mannerisms but the misdirection, timing, and personality were all Cardini.

Vaudeville began to decline with the advent of talking pictures and many acts were out of work. The Cardini's saw this coming and became the first to successfully transition into supper clubs. Their act was perfect for this intimate setting and they would continue this way for years to come. New York was home to many of these clubs including Billy Rose's Casino de Paree, the first of its kind, where Dick set record appearances. Rose was a big fan and used the act in several of his productions.

Not only was Dick a craftsman on stage but in his spare time at home he loved to tinker with mechanical magic. His grandfather was a watchmaker which may be from where this interest came. Dick carried his love of perfection into his workshop and created some of the best thread reels magicians had seen. Each reel was signed by Cardini and the owner knew if there was ever a problem it would be repaired to original condition or replaced.

In the later part of their career the Cardinis enjoyed a more relaxed travel and work experience. They were booked on cruise ships when it was truly a lifestyle of the wealthy and

famous. The cruises were generally longer than a few days so there had to be plenty of material for several shows. Dick pieced out the regular act and added some of his pets to routines. His favorite was a faux Chinese act, Mr. and Mrs. Wishee Washee, that featured his ring routine and a trick with a duck that had everyone laughing.

When television began to become popular there was plenty of pressure to do the act on the small screen. Dick's long time friend and theater critic Ed Sullivan had made several offers for him to appear on his show but afraid of burning out an audience the invitation was declined. In 1961, Dick and Swan were flown to England for their last of three TV dates. "The Variety Show" from the Granada TV Network allowed Dick only four minutes to do his act. Furious, Dick threatened to walk out requesting more time. They were ready to leave until the producer reminded them they had already paid their travel expenses. They went on with the stipulation that all copies of the broadcast be destroyed within 28 days. The two other TV appearances include the Ford Star Revue (1950) and the Festival of Magic (1957) which is the only copy of parts of the act that can be readily seen today at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York City.

The couple retired to their property on a mountainside in Gardiner, NY where they would do small shows and Dick would make reels when so inclined. The house, originally one of the first wooden travelling trailers, was parked on the lot. Slowly, addition by



PHOTO: COURTESY BRAD BALL

Before fiber cases, there was wicker to carry all of those magic props around.



addition, it became their home including blasting out a basement for a workshop. Some of the awards they had received were displayed including his Performing and Creative Fellowships from the Academy of Magical Arts, a gold watch and medal from the S.A.M., certificates commemorating the Royal Command show, and photos from Esquire and Vanity Fair. It was here that Dick died from heart problems on November 12, 1973. Swan stayed in the house on the hill until winter seasons got to be a problem and she would spend them in California with her daughter, Carole. Swan died there in December of 1993. They also had a son, Richard Jr., who had spent his youth travelling with his famous parents across the globe.

If sleight of hand is the poetry of magic then Cardini was the greatest artist in our

profession. His skill with character and misdirection was second only to his manipulative abilities which left all others behind. After years and years of honing the act in the public eye they nearly achieved perfection. Ask anyone who had seen them. What a travesty it would be were it all forgotten. ♦

Brad Ball has been a Cardini fan and friend of the family for over 15 years. He recently spoke at the L.A. Conference on Magic History, and is currently at work on a book about the master. In his spare time, he is an airline pilot.

At age 61, Dick makes his second and final television appearance on Milbourne Christopher's 1957 special, "Festival of Magic," for NBC. Once again, the audience and the critics were suavely deceived.



PHOTOS: ELECTRONICALLY PREPARED BY BILL McILHANY