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New 1,200-book collection magically appears at the UNO library

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Books the Omaha Magical Society donated to the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries' Archives and Special Collections include a variety of titles and genres, from instruction to biography to history.

Ryan Soderlin

Some Omaha magicians recently performed what ultimately may be their most important trick.

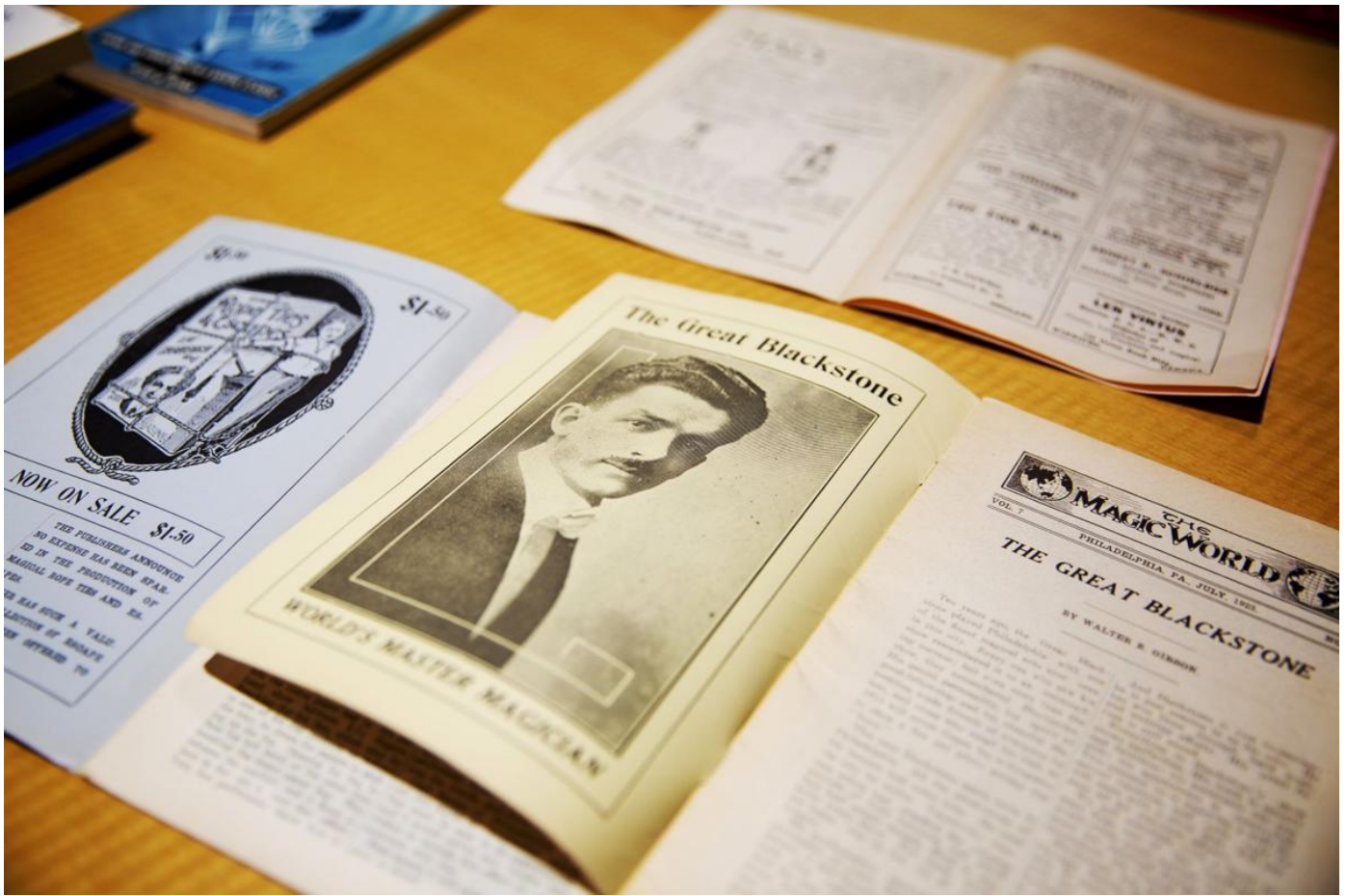
They made 1,200 books disappear from their homes and reappear in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries' Archives and Special Collections.

It's more than an illusion. The move makes the books — collected over several decades — available not only to every Omahan, but to scholars and others around the world. And there's a wide variety of genres — how-tos, history, biographies of famous magicians and more.

“This is of historical significance,” said Dave Arch, president of the 99-year-old **Omaha Magical Society**, which recently donated the books to UNO. The group is among the oldest affiliates of the Society of American Magicians.

The books had been kept in the homes of members, necessitating frequent moves, but now will be stored in one safe place.





Some volumes in the new magic book collection in the UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections were published in the 19th century.

Ryan Soderlin

“The collection is open to anyone, though you can’t just come in and browse the shelves,” said Amy Schindler, director of archives and special collections and an associate professor at the university. “It’s like museum storage, where the museum has lots of paintings on the walls but thousands more behind the scenes.”

Like everything in the **UNO Archives and Special Collections**, the books will be in a special area with cooler temperatures, lower humidity, heightened security and even a system that prevents extreme damage if there’s a fire.

It's not as homey as a member's den, but it's way more likely to ensure that the collection endures. You can't sink into a cozy chair near the collection to read books because the stacks are closed to everyone but library staff. Patrons can ask to see specific books as long as they don't leave the premises.

A collection must meet several criteria to be accepted into the UNO archives, including size, diversity, cohesiveness of topic and whether it duplicates other offerings.



Amy Schindler, director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, has been sorting and organizing the recent donation of 1,200 books from the Omaha Magical Society. Some of the books date to the 1890s.

Ryan Soderlin

The potential for widespread research is an important consideration, Schindler said, and the variety of books in the magic society's library was a major selling point.

It has books about contemporary illusionists such as David Copperfield and legends such as Harry Houdini.

“It also includes books about the more carnival or vaudeville aspects of magic,” Schindler said, “and ‘Magic Tricks for Boys,’ so it would be useful to students who want to study the history of leisure, childhood or gender roles.”

Other possible areas of study the books may afford are entertainment, performers and gambling, she said, and she's sure there are additional possibilities.



Sharing the passion for magic from one generation to another.



One of the many books in the new collection donated by the Omaha Magical Society to the UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections.

Ryan Soderlin

Professional Omaha magician Joe Cole said he thinks the collection is impressive.

“It’s one of the best around,” Cole said. “I think the only library that surpasses it is at the Magic Castle,” a mansion in Hollywood filled with magic memorabilia that’s run by the Academy of Magical Arts.

Schindler and her staff have been going through the books, preparing them for storage.

“We touch every single book, magazine and pamphlet and look it up online,” she said. “If one other library (in the world) owns it, it will be on (an international) database.”

That’s how she discovered that the collection includes at least one book found in only one other library. It’s about hand tricks with cigarettes, of all things, and the other copy is housed at the Central Intelligence Agency library in Washington, D.C., of all places.

The society's library began when a member died and bequeathed his books to the society, Another member put \$500 in his will to support the collection, and several more made sure their volumes would go to the group when they were gone.



Scholars from several areas of study will find something useful in the new collection of magic books at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Criss Library, said Amy Schindler, director of Archives and Special Collections.

Ryan Soderlin

People kept it in their homes for extended periods, said society president Arch.

“Everybody was taking turns,” he said, but it became harder to convince members to house the books. “They said, ‘I’m not having that in my place.’”

If club members wanted to see a book, they had to contact the collection's current host and set up a time.

“It was getting to the point where you felt like you were infringing on the family that was generously housing the library,” said Arch, who made his living as a professional magician for several years.

It became evident that the collection needed a permanent home, especially when they realized they could share their collective knowledge with the world.

Omaha Magical Society board members visited UNO, met with Schindler and liked what they saw.

“The UNO library has such a great policy,” Arch said. “You can bring in your camera and take a picture of whatever you want in the books, even though you can’t check them out. I think the books are going to be seen more at UNO than they were before.”



Omaha Magical Society members Larry Brodahl, left, and Dave Arch deliver the group's collection of 1,200 books to UNO's Criss Library. Arch is the society's president.

Some might wonder if the society's members are afraid all this sharing might make magic less mysterious.

Arch said that has been happening ever since "The Masked Magician" was on the Fox Network in the late 1990s. The entire show centered on showing a trick and then unraveling how it was done.

"We went crazy," he said. "Our whole world was over because people would know our secrets."

But something, ahem, magical happened. Young magicians invented new ways to do old tricks after the secrets were exposed. Many now say the television show inspired them to embrace the world of illusion.

"Older magicians were tearing their hair out, and the younger ones were getting hooked," Arch said.

Besides, Cole said, magic is best learned from books, not television or, heaven forbid, the internet.

That's how he learned as a kid in St. Louis, checking out books from the school and public libraries.

He has been a professional magician for 21 years, performing at parties, classrooms and restaurants such as the Upstream Brewing Co. and The Good Life. In schools, he visits libraries beforehand, assesses magic book collections and then promotes those titles in his presentations.

"I tell them, 'This next trick is on page 785. If you want to learn this trick, you'll have to read it,'" he said.

A member of the Omaha Magical Society, Cole has a fair collection of books himself.

"When I pass away it will all be at UNO, I guess," he said with a laugh.



Magician Pete Petrashek shows off some of his props, in 1990.

BILL BATSON/THE WORLD-HERALD

Arch said the future of magic looks bright. The society has about 60 members; the oldest is magician Pete Petrashek, who turns 95 next week. He worked well into his 80s, performing for thousands of Omahans over the years. And as a cameraman for what now is WOWT-TV, he worked with another young guy who dabbled in magic and was about to become famous as a talk-show host. That guy, of course, was Johnny Carson.

Petrashek said he, too, learned how to be a magician from library books. He suspects books he later purchased are part of the collection at the UNO library.

“When I was a kid and we used to go to county fairs and festivals, I would see magicians onstage and they fascinated me,” he said.

The youngest member of the society is 7 years old. The group also has an offshoot expressly for young magicians.

Whether you're a practitioner or a fan, you get mesmerized, said Arch, a 35-year veteran of the Omaha club.

“There's very few experiences in life that can stir the childlike wonder we once experienced on a regular basis, and magic, well-performed, can do that,” he said.

“We like that feeling.”
