

In this illusionist's house of mysteries, secrets didn't vanish

By Casey Logan | World-Herald Staff Writer Jun 2, 2013



Walter Graham, a local magician, left and Lenora Schrat, right pose for a portrait with a deck of cards and a skull, at Schrat's home in Omaha on May 2.

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The little magician appeared on Lenora Schrat's doorstep, wondering, among other things, if he could see her kitchen.

He'd landed in Omaha only minutes earlier. An amateur magician from Omaha picked him up at the airport and drove him directly to Schrat's home. Now the two of them searched the house for oddities they knew lurked within.

They were looking for the secrets of David Abbott, who built this home in 1914 and spent the next 20 years astounding the world's foremost magicians with private performances in the deceitful confines of his cavernous parlor. At one time or another, the biggest names in magic — Houdini, Blackstone, Kellar, Okito, Ching Ling Foo, Thurston, Han Ping Chien — made pilgrimages to this home in Omaha's Field Club neighborhood and left dumbfounded by what they'd seen.

Now, in the summer of 2004, the little magician traced their steps. He walked to the area of the room where Abbott presented his houseguests with a teakettle — mind you, no ordinary teakettle — and instructed them to hold the spout to their ears, at which point a ghostly voice spoke to them about their lives.

He found the spot in the parlor where Abbott performed one of his most astonishing effects, causing a metallic-looking ball to

float around the room. He inspected the kitchen and pantry, where he supposed some of the behind-the-scenes work took place.

For Schrat, the little magician's visit was the latest turn in a story that just kept getting better.

"We've had a lot of fun in this old house," she says.

The fun began in 1966, when Lenora and her husband, Carl, bought the house near 33rd and Center Streets. Before the Schrats moved in, relatives of the previous owners had an estate sale. The relatives were pitching items that didn't sell — old papers and photographs and such — into a bonfire behind the house until Carl happened by and told them to just leave it. He figured his wife would get a kick out of sorting through the old stuff.

"I found all sorts of interesting things," Lenora says.

It amounted to the life's work and legacy of a man relatively unknown to most of the world but whose fans spanned the globe.

To this day, the 85-year-old Schrat marvels over some of the pieces she found, including correspondence from Houdini, the most famous illusionist the world's ever known, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author and creator of Sherlock Holmes. She knew she'd stumbled upon something significant.

What she didn't know — couldn't have known — was who would eventually come calling for it.

In 1974, eight years after moving into David Abbott's "House of Mystery," Lenora Schrat received a phone call from a businessman named Walter Graham.

For Graham, the call was a shot in the dark, an attempt to solve a mystery involving Abbott that had fascinated him for years, one that, in the grandest sense, began in 1938.

That year, Harry Blackstone Sr. — "The Great Blackstone" — performed a series of shows at the Orpheum Theater, and Graham, 15 at the time, couldn't stay away. He saw Blackstone's performance four times, including once from the balcony so he could get a better vantage point to pick up on some of the great magician's secrets.

Spellbound, Graham took up magic immediately. He performed his first show the following year. A couple of years later, at age 18, he became eligible to join the Omaha Magical Society and pledged to promote the art of magic and honor its secrets.

"I've been a member 71 years," he says.

Today, Graham is the eldest statesman of Omaha's magic community, a 90-year-old retired widower who continues to perform for schools, senior centers and care facilities around town. His home, tucked at the end of a circle drive near 90th and Pacific Streets, is its own museum to the illusionary arts.



An original playbill advertising Blackstone's "Show of 1,001 Wonders" hangs in the living room. In the basement, accoutrements of the trade fill shelf after shelf in room after room. He shows off a folding table he built himself and still uses to perform his magic shows. He picks up what appears to be a normal deck of cards, and with the flick of his wrist — it becomes a top hat.

"Top hat," he says.

Back upstairs, Graham retrieves a handful of worn books and old journals from his den. He picks up an original 1908 copy of "The Marvelous Creations of Joseffy," a booklet written by David Abbott celebrating the genius and innovations of the Chicago-based magician and inventor. He produces another Abbott booklet called "The History of a Strange Case," a 1908 account of an elderly psychic named Elizabeth Blake who supposedly could summon voices of the dead through her "spirit trumpet."

But the real gems of the bunch are early editions of Abbott's groundbreaking "Behind the Scenes With the Mediums." The book, published in 1907, represented one of the earliest exposes of psychic spiritualists who claimed to communicate with the dead. In the book, Abbott revealed in detail how spirit mediums deceived and defrauded their all-too-willing (and often grieving) audiences.

The book was a hit, selling out edition after edition. It made its author, a portly Omaha businessman, known far outside Nebraska.

David Abbott was born in 1863 and grew up on a farm near Falls City. He proved to be multitalented early on, playing various musical instruments while demonstrating a mastery of math and science. (After Einstein's theory of relativity blew minds around the world, The World-Herald in 1931 published an interview with Abbott in which he attempted to explain the theory to a lay audience.)

World-Herald archives: Magician-philosopher interprets
Einstein's theory of relativity

At the turn of the century, Abbott moved from Lincoln to Omaha, where he made his career in personal loans. He and his wife, Fannie, opted not to have children, leaving more time and money for a hobby that would become central to their lives.

Following publication of "Behind the Scenes With the Mediums," Abbott devoted more and more of his time to the study and practice of illusions, and eventually, in 1914, built a home that would be the setting for what his personalized letterhead called "soirees of mystery."

Abbott's invitation-only parlor room productions became must-see events for the most famous magicians of the time, and he attained a form of elevated celebrity: He was the conjurer's conjurer.

Abbott intended to publish a book of his secrets — his legacy passed down to his contemporaries and future generations of magicians. He spoke about the project in interviews, though the publication date kept getting postponed. When Abbott died in 1934, it remained unpublished. When Fannie died two years later, the chances of it ever happening grew slimmer.

Following the Abbotts' deaths, a lawyer named Edith Beckman bought the Center Street house and sold much of what remained at an auction — including, according to a 1937 account in *The World-Herald*, two talking teakettles for \$10 (adjusted for inflation, about \$160 today).

Over time, some of David Abbott's materials found their way to Graham, including a rough manuscript of the magician's illusive, unpublished masterwork "Abbott's Book of Mysteries." The relic was like something from an "Indiana Jones" movie: It contained Abbott's text, including detailed descriptions of his effects and how to re-enact them, but no photos showing the visual step-by-step behind each meticulous process.

Graham consulted with an editor friend at *The Linking Ring* magazine, and that confirmed the worst: The manuscript, while significant as an artifact, was unpublishable.

Graham decided to contact the home's current owners. He knew that the original auction dispersed much of the Abbotts' belongings and that the Beckman family had lived in the house for three decades. The idea that anything significant of David Abbott's still remained in the house was, at best, wishful thinking.

Even so, in 1974, Graham made the call to Lenora Schrat. He explained that a great magician once lived in her house, and he wondered if she'd found anything that might have belonged to him.

Oh, yes, Schrat said. She had a box full of Abbott's belongings.

"I could hardly catch my breath," Graham says.

They made arrangements for Graham to visit, and when he did, he brought cash. In the footsteps of Houdini and Thurston and Okito, Graham crossed the threshold into the home's entryway on his way to the parlor that was the stage for Abbott's peculiar performances.

Schrat had arranged Abbott's things — photos, letters, newspaper clippings — but what caught Graham's eye were four identical green binders. Inside the cover of the first was a title page.

"Abbott's Book of Mysteries."

Graham found page after page of text and photos, all arranged precisely as Abbott wanted the book printed. These were his mysteries, illusions that he invented or perfected, all meticulously photographed and revealed in step-by-step detail for his fellow magicians.

Balsamo, the Living Skull.

The Talking Teakettle.

The Floating Ball.

On and on.

"He had it laid out just perfectly," Graham says.

Graham left empty-handed that day. It took some time to persuade the Schrats to sell their Abbott loot, but eventually, with the exception of some autographs, he struck a deal for a couple of thousand dollars.

In 1977, Graham, then the owner of the Modern Litho printing company, self-published the book. He ran ads in magic publications, and that's how an upstart magician in New Jersey, a former high school Latin teacher, learned about David Abbott.

The magician wrote Graham a fan letter, thanking him for publishing it. The two kept in touch, and Graham watched with pride as the little magician's career took off with television appearances, off-Broadway hits and, eventually, a headlining gig in Las Vegas.

Nearly three decades into their friendship, they began to discuss transferring Abbott's materials. The little magician dreamed of publishing a new and improved version of "Abbott's Book of Mysteries," packaging its priceless contents with the author's other writings.

On a visit to Omaha in 2003, the magician told Graham to name his price for the manuscripts, letters, photos and artifacts he'd been collecting for decades. Shortly thereafter, work began on a two-volume tome that would truly enshrine Abbott in the pantheon of magic.



There was just one thing. While they had driven past Abbott's house, the little magician never went inside.

A year later, in what he would later call a "daredevil" plan, he hastily boarded a plane back to Omaha. Graham, meanwhile, called Lenora Schrat to get her blessing for the visit. He explained who the little magician was, how he was a famous performer coming all the way from Las Vegas just to see her house.

"Well, that didn't cut any ice," Graham recalls.

"I said, 'No, this is my home, I don't want strangers in,'" Schrat says.

When the little magician landed in Omaha and heard the news, he called Schrat, introducing himself and making his case for a visit and possibly sweetening the pot with the promise of a few crisp bills courtesy of his publisher, and, well, voila.

"Very charming man," Schrat says. "Very intelligent, very nice."

And so on a summer evening in 2004, Graham and the little magician arrived at Schrat's door. Together, they peeked and poked their way through the home, walking through Abbott's parlor-room routine and searching out the hidden secrets of his domestic stage. When Schrat told them about the bonfire that would have destroyed Abbott's materials had Carl not stepped in, her guests stopped cold.

"On the verge of being lost for all time and saved by a husband's thoughtfulness," the little magician would later say.

Hours later, they said their goodbyes, the little magician promising to send copies of his book once it was finished.

Then a funny thing happened.

A few days later, Schrat was talking with her daughter and son-in-law. They'd just returned from Las Vegas, and Schrat wanted to know if they'd seen any good shows. They hadn't, but not for lack of interest.

More than anything, they had hoped to see — of all things — a magic act, Penn & Teller. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, Teller was out of town during their stay.

Schrat could only laugh.

She laughs today, just recalling the conversation.

"I was laughing, because Teller was here," she says.

"In magic, there's a term," says the mononymous magician Teller, speaking from his home in Las Vegas. "Misdirection: The trick you use to hide the trick."

Teller is widely known as the smaller, silent half of Penn & Teller, but that's part illusion. He appears little next to his partner, the talkative and towering Penn Jillette, but he actually is of average height. He is wordless in performance, but he speaks elsewhere, his voice sounding deliberate and scholarly, how you might imagine a Latin teacher would sound.

He is David Abbott's most vocal living fan.

"That second trick that we call misdirection is what Abbott was an absolute genius at," he says, and begins to describe the ingenious method by which Abbott would pull off the Floating Ball, a trick Teller so adores that he's made it part of his own act. The fundamental difference is that Teller typically performs it in theaters, whereas Abbott did it in his living room.

The misdirection Abbott used, Teller says, began early on, well before he even introduced the ball, disguised within an act so naturally mundane that no one would pick up on what Abbott was really doing: setting his stage.

In 2005, Teller published an exhaustive two-volume book celebrating Abbott's legacy. The first book contains the entirety of Abbott's "Behind the Scenes With the Mediums," as well as some of his other writings and an account of his life. The second is devoted to "Abbott's Book of Mysteries." Each volume features introductions and sidebars throughout written by Teller.

At the time, the set sold for \$100. Today, it might fetch \$750 on Amazon.

Teller shipped a copy to the Schrats. He inscribed it to "my gracious hosts, custodians and preservers of Mr. Abbott's legacy," and he's kept in touch. Lenora Schrat giggles when retrieving the perverse greeting cards they've received each Christmas (Teller with a severed leg; Teller, in pink tutu, hugging a chimpanzee; Teller as a projectile-vomiting Linda Blair).

In his introduction to book two, Teller devotes several pages to Walter Graham. The grand mysteries of Abbott's home — this place and the performances that attracted magicians from around the world, this magisterial book of secrets — would have remained in obscurity if not for Graham's insistence on piecing it all together.

"He was so untiring as he passed each stage of this," Teller says. "Any other person would have given up."

When asked to describe Abbott's legacy, Teller does something unexpected. He departs for a moment from the subject of magic and draws upon a larger meaning. The writings of David Abbott are of graduate level — more akin to a floridly composed manual for illusionists than an entertaining read for the public — and yet his life's work contains a lesson everyone can appreciate.

It is a lesson Teller is uniquely suited to deliver, a lesson not merely about magic or even entertainment, but about the way we talk, how we think, what we value.

"Nowadays, I think we tend to use the word amateur as 'not good,' to mean 'not professional,' to mean 'not polished,'" he says, in the mode of the former Latin instructor. "That's not what amateur means. It means someone who pursues something out of love."

In the book, Teller tells a story about the success of Abbott's "Behind the Scenes With the Mediums," and how surprised the Omaha author was to receive a check from the publisher. It wasn't something he expected or cared about, and not because he was above the lure of money. This was a man who made his business, who built his beloved house, as something of a loan shark.

But for him, creating and perfecting acts to astound and astonish existed on another plane.

"The idea that a lot of the greatest work in any form is often done by people who are not making their living at it is a very important idea," Teller says. "David Abbott is an exemplar of that."

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