

# David P. Abbott's Magical Life

A Central Performer in a Different Time



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Those who spend any time near the historic Hanscom Park neighborhood may not realize a small brick home sitting at 3316 Center St. played a sizable role in the craft of magic more than a century ago. It became the stage of late-night, four-hour magic shows that were intimate and engaging.

At the center of these Center Street performances was David P. Abbott, a Falls City, Nebraska, native whose travels and opportunities eventually brought him to Omaha.

But let's not give away the secret to this whole trick.

As an 8-year-old boy, Abbott attended one of his first magic shows. Inspired by the intricacies of such a performance, Abbott returned home and conspired with his younger sister to host their own magic show—which involved guessing the number of seeds in an apple.

Abbott and his siblings grew up on a family farm with their parents, George and Sarah. George lived a life flush with activity and activism, spending time in political protests and running for public office as a Populist. George was an avid traveler, crisscrossing the country as his children grew.

“David Abbott was raised in a fearless household,” said Dave Arch, a local magician and member of the Omaha Magical Society (which this year celebrates its 100th anniversary). “The belief in the Abbott family was ‘we will land on our feet.’”

As the boy's fascination for magic grew, Abbott developed the same spirit of fearlessness as his father. According to research and writings by magician Teller (of Penn and Teller fame), Abbott completed three months of school, excelling in algebra and geometry. He discovered talents for music, too, learning to play the piano, oboe, clarinet, and guitar.

Years later, Abbott's legacy as an inventor of magic tricks and techniques began to take shape. He traveled to nearby counties in Nebraska practicing and perfecting his craft, dedicated to maintaining magic's reputation.

In fact, one of Abbott's greatest contributions to the practice of magic was his 1907 book, *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*. The book not only dove deep into magic and mediums, but the human psyche and how it can often be so easily swindled.

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It was those experiences that Abbott used as inspiration for the tricks he created—and eventually debuted for years in his east Omaha home.

“Abbott was [keen] to beat back the people who were using trickery for nefarious purposes,” Arch added.

After a stop in Lincoln to run a loan business alongside his siblings, Abbott and his wife, Fannie, eventually moved to Omaha and into the now-famous home near Hanscom Park. Abbott and his brothers secured jobs in banking and finance.

His passion for magic never waned. In his spare time, Abbott not only refined his work as a magician, he developed tricks that have continued to influence magic today. Those tricks include the Disposable Fingertip, the Red Herring Thimble, and the Black Bag.

His Center Street home was a playground for these new tricks, using all rooms, every nook and cranny, to entertain and delight intimate audiences, but also to become a master of his trade.

“He took that house and just rigged it from top to bottom with all that he needed,” Arch said. “People would come just to see him perform at his house.”

Apparently, a lot of people came just to see him perform. According to the site *Vanishing in Magic*, Teller and Todd Karr compiled a 900-page collected works of Abbott in which, “There is informative correspondence in the form of letters from Abbott's friend

Kellar, who offers unguarded commentary on the likes of [notable magicians] Ching Ling Foo, Alexander, Horace Goldin, and Okito.”

Although Abbott understood the importance of the performance, it was the behind-the-scenes work he enjoyed the most, the solitary task of developing, quite literally, the tricks of his trade. Arch said that if Abbott were alive today, chances are you'd never see him perform: “He is revered as an inventor of a lot of the magic that's still used today.”

Abbott, who died in 1934, was a founding member of the Omaha Magical Society. At its start in January 1921, it was only the seventh chartered magic club in the United States. The national parent organization, the Society of American Magicians, was led by president Harry Houdini—arguably history's most famous magician and escape artist.

One of the society's goals is to share the joy and craft of magic from generation to generation. They have donated a collection of more than 1,200 books on magic to Criss Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha as part of this goal.

Another: keeping Abbott's legacy alive by honoring area magicians who share their passion. Known as the Old Market Magician, Ryan Chandler received the society's David P. Abbott Award in 2019.

Chandler, 35, is a musician and an educator for Elkhorn Public Schools. Despite teaching full-time and raising his young son alongside his wife, Chandler has maintained a love of magic—even impressing perhaps the most well-known magical duo, Penn and Teller. In 2018, Chandler performed on their network TV show *Fool Us*.

Like other magicians before him, Chandler's love of magic was born from watching magic shows as a child—often alongside his father, Robert Chandler. He spent years developing his own tricks and practicing the tricks of others.

But what has kept Chandler drawn to this peculiar performance world is the intimate, often unexpected moments created with other people.

“I do magic because it's fun,” Chandler said. “I don't think anything I've done is all that special. The only way [to perform magic] is to share it with other people.”

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