

THE CENTURY

We continue our year-long enumeration of significant people on the American panorama of magic during the 100-year period known as the 20th century.

Those who passed in review last month were S.W. Erdnase, A.C. Gilbert, Professor Hoffmann, Harry Houdini, Jay Marshall, P.T. Selbit, Siegfried & Roy, Slydini, and Mark Wilson. Joining the ranks this month are another ten of those people who — in some eventful or consequential way — have influenced, shaped, or impacted the performing art of magic in the United States of America.

And remember, later in the year, and when the procession of 100 reaches its culmination, top honors and decorations will be bestowed. Our readers will be invited to select the *ne plus ultra* of magic for the century.

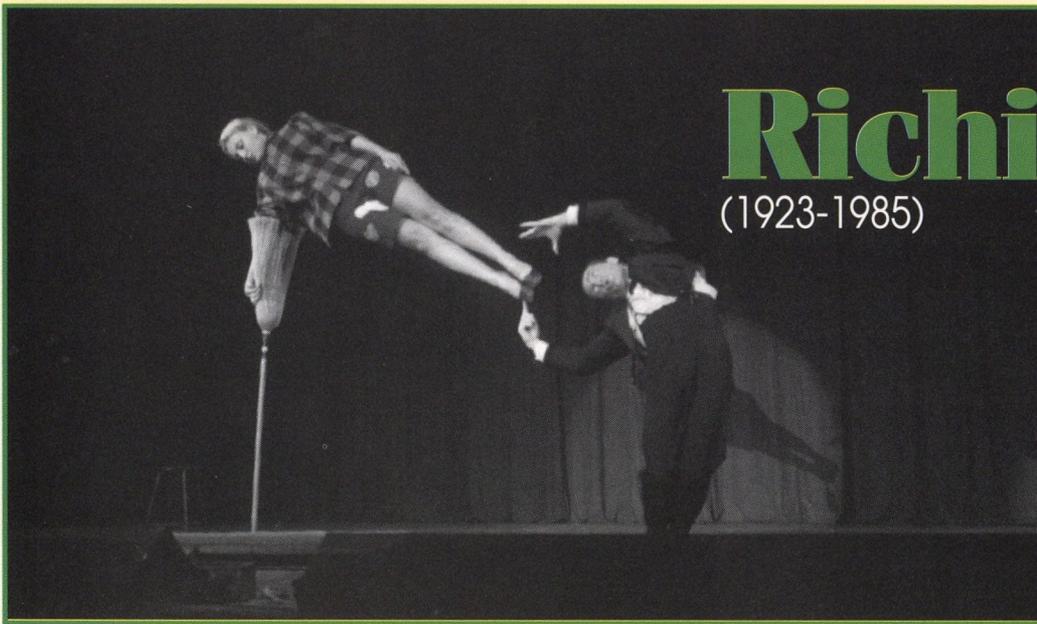


PHOTO: IRVING DESFOR, AMERICAN MUSEUM OF MAGIC

Richiardi Jr. (1923-1985)

He set the record for the most appearances by any magician during the 23-year history of *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Both Doug Henning and David Copperfield watched and, to this day, cite Richiardi as a major influence.

The Peruvian-born illusionist performed with the precision and flamboyant theatrics of a death-defying matador. “Faster than lightning” best describes that moment when the girl sitting in a chair vanished and reappeared in a trunk shown empty only a split-second earlier. When that same lady, now in a hypnotic trance, floated atop the straws of a broomstick, Richiardi literally created a dreamlike “suspension of disbelief.” However, it was an illusion of a “horrific nature” that first caused him to become a sensation in the United States.

Of Richiardi’s 1949 New York debut, the *Daily News* theater reviewer, Robert Sylvester, advised: “Take a trip up to East 138th St., where the Puerto Rico Theatre is located, and learn something about real, basic drama. But don’t sit on the first row, because you’ll get blood all over yourself.” Richiardi’s gory “Buzz Saw” created headlines that spelled big box office. The record-setting, \$40,000-a-week ticket sales came within dollars of topping that year’s Broadway hits, *Kiss Me Kate* and *Death of a Salesman*.

For over three decades, Richiardi played the nation’s top night clubs and theaters. During a 1978 return to New York, his dramatic success was again praised by the press. Richiardi, replete with “Buzz Saw,” was playing the Village Gate, when *New York Magazine* drama critic John Simon wrote: “All too often we hear wishy-washy fans gush about ‘magic in the theater’; here, at any rate, there is genuine theater in the magic.”

He was first published in the October 1905 issue of *St. Nicholas Magazine*:

Enigma

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Change this figure to another system of notation
and it will give the name of a rare old plant.

— W.B. Gibson (Age 7)

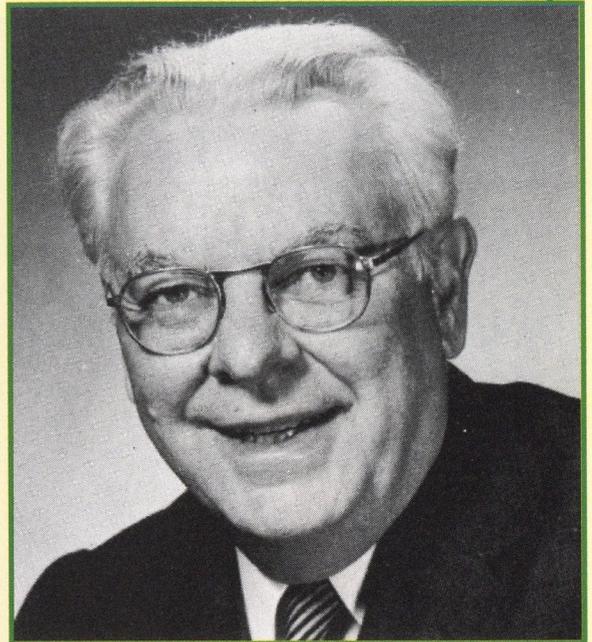
That very year at a Christmas party, he played a parlor game in which he was offered a handful of loose strings. He carefully chose one, then followed it beneath the tree to collect his present. As fate would have it, at the end of Walter's string was a magic set.

Walter Brown Gibson would go on to become one of the most prolific writers of the century. Although magicians are familiar with the hundreds of books, stories, and articles written on magic and magicians, he is perhaps best known to the public as Maxwell Grant, the creator of the mythic figure of The Shadow. With nearly 300 full-length novels, years of Shadow magazines, comic books, and newspaper strips, and hours of radio scripts, Gibson transcended the literary merits of his fictional character of The Master of Darkness, and proved himself the possessor of one of the most gifted imaginations in storytelling.

Gibson was something of a writing phenomenon. Just a few of the subjects covered by his authoritative books were: memory, gambling, chess, puzzles, hypnotism, astrology, psychic sciences, dreams, numerology, treasure hunting, yoga, judo, and space travel.

As confidant to some of magic's legendary, he interpreted their lore into lessons. Walter B. Gibson ghosted *Howard Thurston's 200 Magic Tricks You Can Do*, *Blackstone's Secrets of Magic*, *Dunninger's Secrets*, *Blackstone's Modern Card Tricks*, *Kreskin's Mind Power Book*, and *The Mark Wilson Course in Magic*, as well as *Walter Gibson's Encyclopedia of Magic and Conjuring*.

Postscript: The Enigma was the Roman numeral IV.



Walter B.
Gibson
(1897-1985)

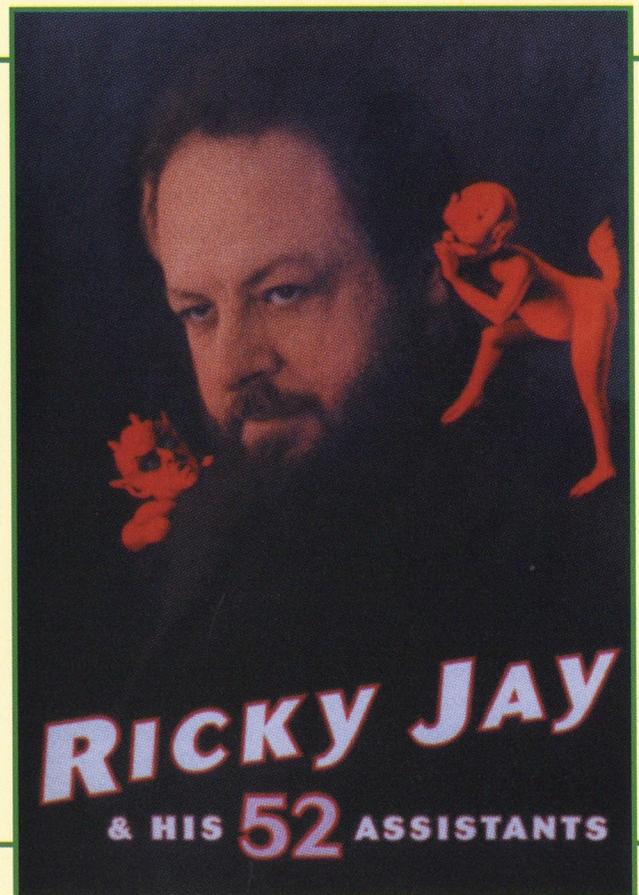
Ricky Jay

"Ricky Jay does close-up magic that flouts reality. But, rather than headline in Las Vegas, Jay prefers to live in the mysterious world of ancient montebanks, eccentric entertainers, and sleight-of-hand artists, whose secrets he preserves with a scholarly passion, and who are his true peers in the realm of illusion."

— Mark Singer
The New Yorker
April 5, 1993

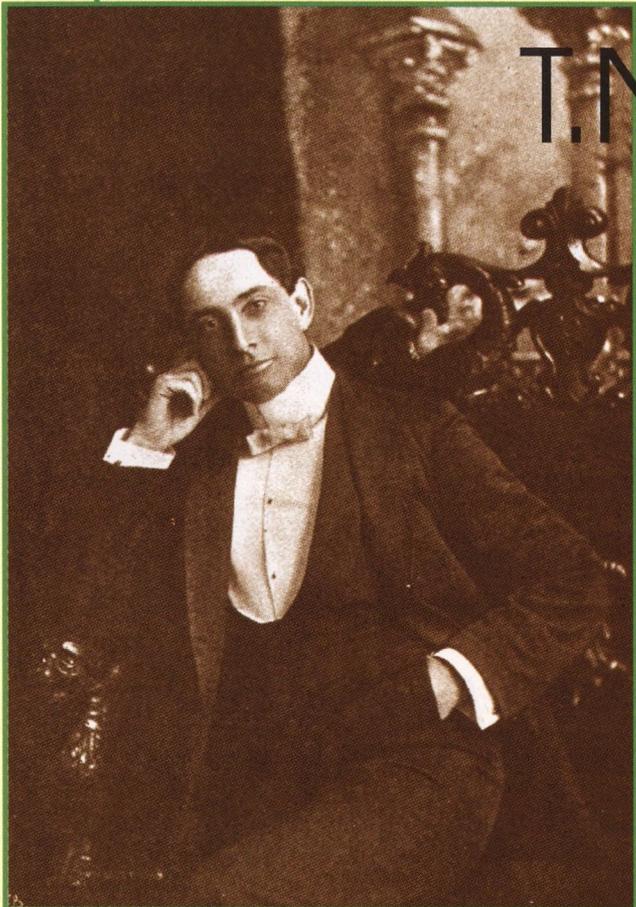
"Being onstage is Jay's lifeline to the past and his thoughtline to the future. For the audience, it is a paradigm of dazzlement. If wonder is truly the beginning of wisdom, then *Ricky Jay & His 52 Assistants* is the smartest show in town."

— Jay Cocks
Time
February 14, 1994



T. Nelson Downs

(1869-1938)



He perfected sleight of hand with coins during the long, lonely evenings spent as a railroad telegrapher in Marshalltown, Iowa. Working small-time vaudeville, by 1895, he had wrangled a booking at the Hopkins Theater in Chicago. There, he premiered his seemingly endless production of silver coins from the air, "The Miser's Dream." In his wildest dream, the 26-year-old Tommy Downs never envisioned that his persistent practice would pay off. The specialty coin act became an overnight success.

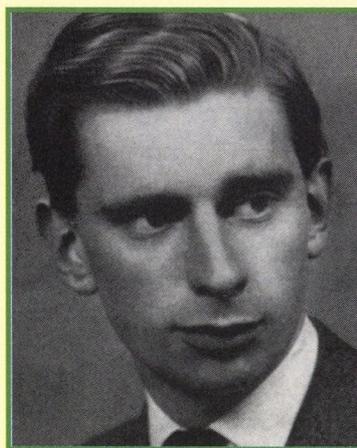
T. Nelson Downs headlined the stages of New York, then England and the Continent. Beginning in 1900, he played London's Palace Theatre for an unprecedented 66 weeks. He had repeat runs at the Wintergarten in Berlin and Hansa Theater in Hamburg; nine months in the Folies Marigny, Casino de Paree, and Folies Bergère in Paris; then back to England for 42 weeks at the Empire — at twice the money he demanded when he first played London.

He returned home in 1905, the year "nickelodeon" was coined as name for the soon-to-be 10,000 American storefronts featuring five-cent flicker-film machines. Downs discovered that his good fortune with his coin act had spawned its share of imitators. There were now other Kings, Queens, and even Princes of Coin Conjuring. And it was T. Nelson Downs who caused the specialty act to become a vaudeville vogue — cigarettes, silks, cards, watches, and even ropes, had their royalty. Although he experimented performing with cards, billiard balls, and, for a short while, four illusions, T. Nelson Downs was, and always will be, "The King of Coins."

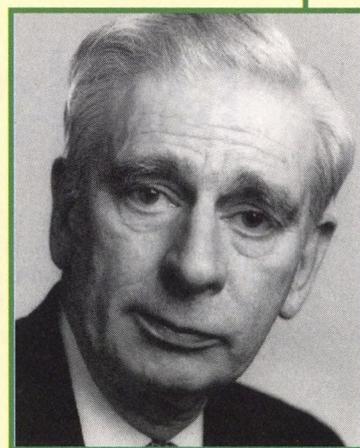
"Do an Elmsley" is a rather matter-of-factual notation in contemporary card-magic instruction. The false display count was introduced in this country when its British inventor, Alex Elmsley, attended the Chicago IBM/SAM Convention in 1959. The maneuver, originally called the Ghost Count, was essential to the workings of his "Four Card Trick," a packet effect marketed with slight success during a short lecture tour of the Midwest that summer. Upon Elmsley's return to London, he slowly disappeared from magic circles. He was rarely seen for the next 12 years, because of a dedicated career in computer technologies.

Elmsley's 1972 acceptance of a Creative Fellowship from the Academy of Magical Arts seemed to cause his resurgent interest in magic. He toured the United States in 1975 with an inspiring new lecture. Those who attended were in awe of the techniques and theories that Elmsley taught. Then, as before, Alex went back home and turned his back on the magic scene, this time for almost two decades.

Such enigmatic comings and goings caused some to compare Elmsley to Charlier, the legendary 19th century card expert. However, unlike Charlier who completely vanished without a literary trail, Elmsley resurfaced to leave formidable footprints. As the 20th century drew to a close, *The Collected Works of Alex Elmsley* was assembled and written by Stephen Minch. Midway in this two-volume publishing project, Alex returned to America in 1995, videotaping much of his work. Even if he doesn't return until sometime in the 21st century, there now exists a legacy of the brilliant magic of Alex Elmsley.



1959



1995

Alex
Elmsley

PHOTO: JIM WARNER



“Let’s just say that I am a frustrated illusionist. I should have been born a long time ago and toured with a magic show.”

— R. Harbin
Preface to *Magic of Robert Harbin*

To him, magic was both a craft and an art. Harbin not only wrote of his ideas and inventions, he was masterful in both their construction and their ultimate performance.

Early in his magical life, Harbin had aspirations to build and troupe a big show. Unfortunately, the timing was wrong. He gained prominence with his performances at a time when theaters were being closed. Vaudeville was making its swan song when Harbin played New York City’s Palace Theater in 1949.

Harbin became the talking illusionist who translated the grand traditions of the stage magician to the challenging conditions of cabaret and the limitations of television. He emphasized audience participation in his illusions and designed effects that could be performed surrounded on night club floors. For America’s first network magic special, the 1957 *Festival of Magic*, Milbourne Christopher chose the personable Harbin as the show’s world-class illusionist.

With his *Magic of Robert Harbin*, which he published in 1970, he advanced illusion theory and technology to a pinnacle. “The book,” wrote Eric Mason in the Introduction, “contains for the first time, the secrets of the best of all the original tricks and illusions (most of which can be performed surrounded) that emanated from the finest inventive brain in the magical world today.”

Robert Harbin

(1908-1978)

PHOTO: MIKE CAVENEY COLLECTION



Marvyn Roy

While studying dramatic arts at the University of California in Los Angeles, young Marvyn, already a magic-convention award winner for his originality, started developing what he called “an act with a hook.” Light bulbs of all sorts, little and big, colored and clear, with and without wires, were incorporated into just about every magical effect imaginable. After much experimentation and relentless rehearsal, a routine that was deemed “commercial” emerged. “Artistry in Light” was born at the 1950 IBM/SAM Convention in Chicago, where within weeks, a very impressed theatrical agent put Marvyn’s act into the exclusive Palmer House.

Marvyn Roy’s brilliant concept, the act’s visual and magical novelty, and the sheer energy of the Mr. Electric persona captured the fancy of bookers everywhere. The Roys traveled to Paris for the Lido show, toured Russia with Ed Sullivan, and played The Palladium in London. Back home, it was Radio City Music Hall and, of course, Las Vegas. At a time when magic was considered dead, a tired vaudeville cliché, Marvyn Roy & Carol caused their specialty act to become viable, in-demand, state-of-the-art entertainment.

For almost every year of the last half of the century, Mr. Electric has been magic’s busiest and most-traveled “theme act.” Aside from his global success, Marvyn Roy gave inspiration for generations of up-and-coming magicians by setting high standards of professionalism and providing a prime example that daring to be innovative has its rewards.

Dunninger (1892-1975)

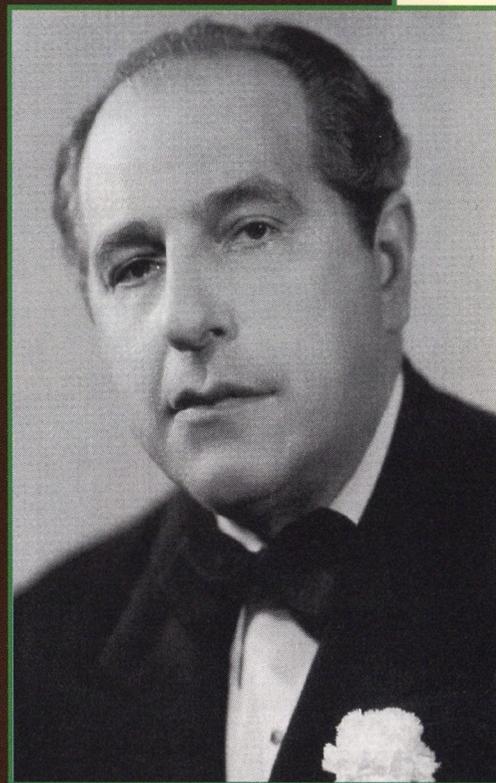
Joseph Dunninger was born the very year that English philosopher and psychic researcher, F.W.H. Meyers, devised the term “telepathy.”

Young Joseph experienced a short and successful career as a vaudeville magician. He specialized in mental magic in 1920, the same year of the first radio broadcast (WDKA Pittsburgh). Dunninger’s act soon combined spirit phenomena with thought reading. He occasionally did hypnotic challenges from radio stations.

Dunninger went on the air in 1929 with a show called *Ghost Hours*. The program was short-lived, but it proved the power of radio as a medium for his mentalism. During on-the-air “telepathic” experiments, listeners were asked to send in “what was on their mind.” The station was deluged with mail — questions, as well as answers.

When war-torn America was listening to radio nightly, Dunninger took to the airwaves. By 1943, his Sunday-night program, *Dunninger, the Master Mind*, had captured the public imagination, and soon broadcasts emanated from cities coast to coast. His book, *What’s On Your Mind*, sold 10,000 copies in six months. In 1948, Dunninger’s popularity transmitted to television, and over the next five years, his programs appeared on all three major networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC.

Dunninger became a ’50s buzzword synonymous with mind reading. Yet, throughout his career, he denied ever having any sort of supernatural powers. Some magicians, maybe those who did not understand his methods, accused the showman of misleading the public. Others, perhaps those who understood his secrets, marveled at his audacity. Dunninger merely claimed, “I only look upon myself as an entertainer” ...a most successful one at that.



U.F. Grant (1901-1978)

There has perhaps never been a more inventive and productive mind in the world of popular magic than Ulysses Frederick Simpson Grant, better known to friends as “Gen.” At age 18, he began his career in magic as a semi-professional entertainer, then was soon selling his trick ideas from his home. In the ’20s and ’30s, he owned magic shops in New York City and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. By the early ’40s, U.F. Grant had moved to the Midwest, where he became a well-established dealer/inventor/manufacturer in Columbus, Ohio. In 1943, when many entertainers were working UFO shows at home and abroad, he started Grant’s Magic on Approval — “Any items ordered that do not suit your individual needs may be returned in five days for full credit.”

Although Grant’s apparatus was never recognized for its artistic craftsmanship or collectability, his clever tricks were, above all, performable and affordable. What amateur or professional could thumb through a catalog and resist the temptation to order at least one Grant creation? After all, there was “Walking thru a Ribbon,” “Temple Screen,” “Super-X Levitation,” “The Farmer & the Witch,” “Pig Turns Around,” “Packing Box Escape,” “Nite Club Dove Vanish,” “French Guillotine,” “Flying Carpet,” “Chen-Lee Water Suspension,” “Candle-Lite,” “Comedy Egg Bag,” “Crystal Silk Cylinder,” and “Stratospheres,” among dozens of others. Not to mention the hundreds of manuscripts, pamphlets, and contributions in books and magazines that sprang from the ingenious mind of U.F. Grant.

Howard Thurston

(1879-1938)

Originally a theological student from Columbus, Ohio with a desire to perform evangelical work, Howard Franklin Thurston, at the turn-of-the-century, found himself centerstage of the most prestigious theaters, billed as “The Premier Card Manipulator of the World.”

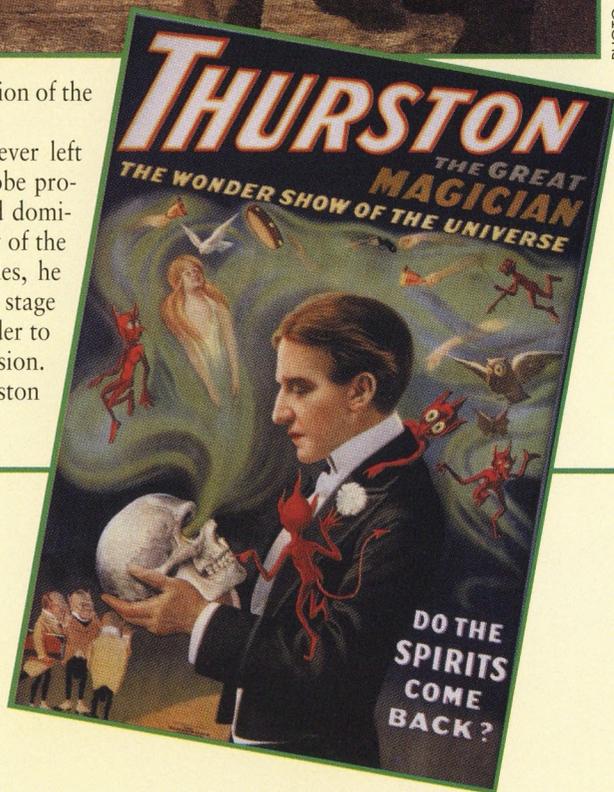
To the strains of the “Zenda Waltz,” playing cards appeared and disappeared at his fingertips. Cards selected and called for floated upward from the deck to his outstretched hand. With breathtaking accuracy, pasteboards were scaled to the farthest reaches of the balcony. Assisted by the faithful George White — who trouped with Thurston for 37 years — the act’s finale was the ovation-evoking, outlandish production of a boisterous duck from under the coat collar of a gentlemen seated on the front row.

Beginning in 1902, with an appearance at Keith’s Theater in Boston, Thurston expanded his 17-minute vaudeville turn into a full-evening show. Over the years, his favorite mystery became his eloquent and elaborate theatrical presentation of the “Levitation of the Princess Karnac.” Yet, the card act was always a part of the big show.

Thurston was a zealous performer, whose missionary ambitions never left him. While his predecessors, Herrmann and Kellar, had traveled the globe proclaiming they possessed the “World’s Greatest” shows, Thurston would dominate theaters with an extravaganza he deemed to be “The Wonder Show of the Universe.” Yet, his orbit was truly the United States. For three decades, he criss-crossed the continent — with three railroad cars full of illusions, stage equipment, costumes, scenery, and a cast of 40 — bringing endless wonder to the masses. He was a household name long before radio and television. Throughout the “Roaring ’20s,” until he died in 1936, Howard Thurston was America’s foremost magician. ♦



PHOTO: KENNETH KLOSTERMAN COLLECTION



Next month,
“The Century” continues...

A contemporary close-up artist with Old World charm, an enigma who made an indelible mark in publishing, and a tie-dyed trixter who literally vanished from the scene are among the dozen who join the growing parade.