



Adding Another Story to Abbott's Mystery House

By Patrice Fisher



On July 2, 2024, when Dave Arch sent me the Zillow real estate advertisement about the David P. Abbott house going up for sale, little did he know that the passion I have had about that house and our Omaha Magical Society would be energized to the extent that it was.

Dave had sent me the listing as an FYI, because he knew that I have wanted our society to somehow buy the house if it ever came on the market. Every so often, I would mention this to the OMS Board to a common response of eye-rolling because, of course, being a non-profit club, we are impecunious. That is a fancy word for

having no money. (I have always wanted to use that five-syllable word in a sentence; sorry.)

Ever since reading an article in the *Omaha World Herald* detailing the relationship of our lifetime OMS member magician Walter Graham and his relationship to David Abbott, I have been fascinated by their story.

Abbott's magic may have ended with his death in 1934, but in 1938, fifteen-year-old Walter Graham went to a magic performance by Harry Blackstone Sr., at Omaha's Orpheum Theater. After seeing the show four times, Walter was hooked. His love

and dedication to the art and science of magic eventually led directly to the Abbott house and the genius who inhabited it.

As an adult magician and owner of an Omaha printing company, Walter knew about the "Abbott House of Mysteries" and the evening soirées Abbott hosted with his wife and assistant, Fannie, for magicians who were invited to the house after they performed at the Orpheum Theater. Also, being an avid collector of magic books, over time Graham acquired a partial manuscript detailing Abbott's inventions, scripts, and how to re-enact his illusions. In the hope of finding the missing photos



The house at 3316 Center Street in Omaha, Nebraska. Public records show the 4-bed, 2-bath house was purchased on September 9, 2024 for \$387,000.



The interior of the ninety-year-old home.

and text he needed to finally publish the masterpiece that David Abbott had often mentioned as his legacy, Graham doggedly contacted the owner of the former Abbott residence. Miraculously, there was a treasure trove of Abbott items that had been left in the house and not destroyed! Included were binders containing the lost pages and pictures needed to complete *Abbott's Book of Mysteries* (David Abbott's own title), that Walter Graham finished, self-published, and printed in 1977.

To promote this critical book that Abbott had wanted to finish, Walter ran ads in magic publications. A young, beginner magician named Teller, later of Penn & Teller fame, read the book, became fascinated with David Abbott, and wrote Graham a fan letter. That one action started decades of friendship between Graham and Teller, until Walter passed away in 2018 at the age of 95.

Their relationship was the key to the Omaha Magical Society acquiring the Abbott house, with our vision of creating

a museum dedicated to the legacy of the magic of David P. Abbott.

I texted Dave immediately after seeing the ad he had sent me regarding the house. "Do you think Teller will think I am a crackpot if I contact him and describe my dream of a museum in the Abbott House of Mysteries?"

Dave's encouraging reply was: "Not at all; go for it. You might want to mention our Magic Research Library at UNO [University of Nebraska Omaha]."

First, I had to find a way to email Teller directly. I couldn't post this on his website. I wouldn't trust that he would see any messages soon if I wrote to his *Fool Us* TV show. Even if he were to see my missive, time was of the essence! Hmm...

Well, without divulging my connections, after reaching out, I was able to obtain contact information. I felt like quite

the sleuth.

After crafting an email detailing my hopes about acquiring the Abbott house to create a magic museum, I held my breath and pressed the "send" button. After all, I had just asked one of the world's most famous magicians, Teller, to buy a house for the Omaha Magical Society! Now, some nervous doubt was setting in. I was pretty sure that Teller would understand my excitement about the brilliant life of the inventor and magician David P. Abbott and the importance of his home to his legacy in the history of magic. But what if Teller and Walter Graham had had a falling out?

I hoped I had adequately conveyed the essence of my vision to support our society's mission, dedicated to bringing the joy of magic to Omaha. This would be the ultimate form of spreading the joy of magic — not only to Omaha, but throughout America, and beyond! My thought has always been, *Omaha is near the geographical center of the United States, so let's make it the magic center for our country!* What better way to do that but through a museum honoring David P. Abbott and his amazing contributions to the art and science of magic?!

But would Teller even see my email?

After only a few hours, my husband asked me to come over to where he was comfortably settled in his recliner. (When asked "what type of décor is your home?" I fittingly call our décor, "Early Lazy-boy.") I did not think he would show me an email from Teller's business manager saying that Teller was very interested in learning more and would like to discuss this with me at my convenience. At my convenience! Immediately, I began flop-sweating and after dropping the phone twice, I dialed Dave Arch's number. Aside from my big dream, I knew Dave would be essential to having a coherent conversation about any concrete plan we would have for a meeting with Teller. I had seen Penn & Teller in the mid-'80s at the Blackstone Theater in Chicago and had decided then that when I retired I would love to learn magic. I didn't trust my brain and mouth to coordinate and convey any useful information when I finally met Teller!

What a relief. Teller was very excited about the prospect of creating a museum to David P. Abbott's legacy! He fondly told us about his relationship with Walter Graham and his wish to pay some type of homage to Walter as part of the museum.



Walter Graham.



Teller.



Inside the Abbott home, when David and Fannie lived there.

Also, let's not forget the role Fannie played in those home performances, he added. After that, he generously showed us those prized binders of Abbott drawings and detailed descriptions of his illusions.

We brainstormed ideas, and he smiled as he said that he "might be able to help with rigging the Floating Ball routine in the house." He was so gracious and personable that I was actually able to contribute to the conversation a bit. At the end of our meeting, Teller handed the details over to his business manager who was also there. Before leaving, Teller enthusiastically ended our meeting by saying, "We can do this together!"

With the support and approval of The OMS Board, now our journey begins!

With the acquisition of the house, the club expands its base to include both those who enjoy magic and also those who enjoy the preservation of Omaha history. It is our goal to recreate the home, with the atmosphere and illusions that Abbott invented and/or performed during late night soirées, by invitation only, for magicians visiting Omaha through the vaudeville circuit or to visit David P. Abbott as his reputation grew.

The OMS board believes this heightened public visibility will continue expanding the purpose of our club as stated in our constitution: "To promote and advance the art of magic and to secure its general recognition as one of the performing arts."

The Mystery House is planned to open in the summer of 2026. 🍄

DAVID ABBOTT

Born near Falls City, Nebraska on September 22, 1863, David Phelps Abbott was an American magician, author, and inventor, known for creating effects such as the Floating Ball as well as for his publications exposing mediums.

Abbott lived most of his life in Omaha, and was married to Fannie E. Abbott, who served as an indispensable assistant to him in the performance and inventing of his many magic effects. David died of diabetes on June 12, 1934 and was buried at Westlawn-Hillcrest in Omaha.

He became a wealthy businessman in the American Midwest and was well versed in arts and science. In fact, after Albert Einstein published his theory of relativity Abbott attempted to explain it in a newspaper article. As a magician, he performed for invited guests in the private theater in his home, which he built in 1914. There he demonstrated his Talking Teakettle decades before miniature radio electronics came into view. Abbott built his work of magic and deception on the devious principles he learned from spirit mediums.

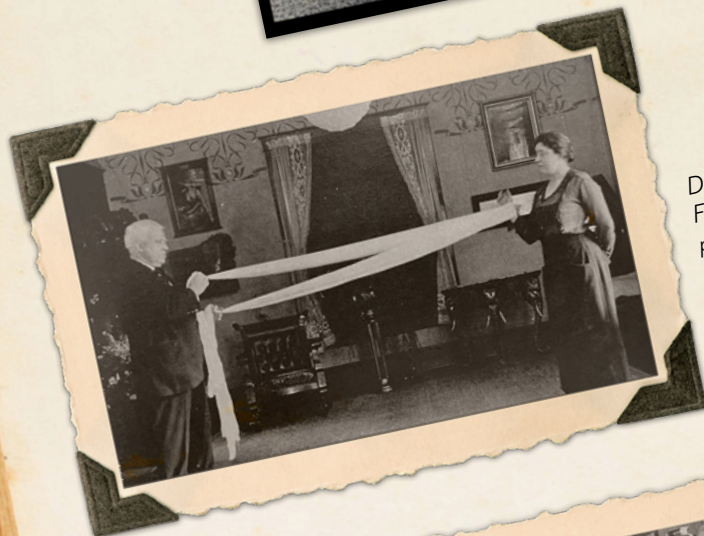
Due to the fact that the Omaha Orpheum theater was a common stopping off place on the vaudeville circuit, many of the greats in magic — Kellar, Thurston, Horace Goldin, Theo Bamberg, Ching Ling Foo, Blackstone, and Houdini, among others — made pilgrimage to the Omaha Field Club neighborhood, The house now known as The Mystery House. They went there to be dumbfounded and to learn.

A friend of Harry Houdini, Abbott's most well-known work was *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*, exposing charlatan mediums taking advantage of the public during the height of the spiritualism craze. Published in 1907, it went through several editions.

Abbott wrote a second full-length book describing not only the séances given in his home but many magical feats that had astounded top professional performers. He died before it could be published and for a long time the manuscript could not be found. When the Abbott home was sold in 1936, the manuscript was thought to be lost. It was discovered by Omaha Magical Society member Walter Graham and published as *David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries* in 1977. Both of Abbott's books, and much more, were later published as a two-volume edition on his life and inventions, edited by Teller and Todd Karr.

In September of 2024, The Mystery House was purchased by the Omaha Magical Society in partnership with Teller, the goal being to recreate the setting in which David Abbott performed his most famous illusions, tricking out the house again like he had it so that those illusions could be performed within the parlor, the drawing room, and the dining room of his home.

David Abbott's
Floating Ball.



David and
Fannie Abbott
performing in
their home.

Abbott presents
his Talking
Teakettle.



Members of the Omaha Magical Society, from left, Vice President Adam Schacht, Secretary Patrice Fisher, President Steve Lindeman and Treasurer Bob Gehringer in front of magician David P. Abbott's house. Abbott once enthralled guests with four-hour shows in the parlor of his home.

Magical moment: Omaha group now owns 'house of mystery'

Renowned magician Teller buys David P. Abbott home, donates it to local organization

MARJIE DUCKY
World-Herald Staff Writer

There was the talking tea kettle, the floating ball and spirit paintings. Those magical moments of Omaha magician David P. Abbott will appear again with the purchase of the "house of mystery" where he once enthralled guests with four-hour shows in his parlor.

The renowned magician Teller, who helped write a two-volume set about Abbott and his home, purchased the house at 3316 Center St. and donated it to the Omaha Magical Society.



Abbott tricked out his home, at 3316 Center St., to perform shows there in the 1910s and 1920s. The Omaha Magical Society will be in charge of returning the house's interior to that heyday.

Please see HOUSE, Page B2

Local news coverage says the home was purchased by Teller and donated to the Omaha Magical Society.