

Houdini, Harry:

An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Houdini, Harry, 1874-1926
Title:	Harry Houdini Collection
Dates:	1906-1933, undated
Extent:	4 document boxes (1.68 linear feet), 1 flat box, 1 oversize folder (osf)
Abstract:	Papers, documents, correspondence, and artifacts associated with the magician, escape artist, business man, aviator, author, and actor popularly known as Harry Houdini.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-05215
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research. Special permission from the Curator of Performing Arts, plus advance notice, is required to access artifacts. To make an appointment, please email Reference . Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials.
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Administrative Information

Provenance	The Harry Houdini Collection is comprised of papers, documents, correspondence, and artifacts associated with the magician, escape artist, business man, aviator, author, and actor popularly known as Harry Houdini. The collection was created by the Ransom Center and is comprised of material that was either purchased by or was donated to the Ransom Center and did not come directly from his estate. Material about Houdini from the Albert Davis, Robert Downing, Messmore Kendall, McManus-Young, George Schulte, and Anthony Wells collections were added in 2018.
Preferred Citation	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Harry Houdini Collection (Performing Arts Collection PA-05215).
Acquisition:	Gift (11-3-18-G), 2011; Purchases (16-04-007-P, 17-11-006-P), 2016-2017
Processed by:	Amy E. Armstrong, 2018
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Despite claiming he was born in Appleton, Wisconsin, the magician, escape artist, business man, aviator, author, and actor popularly known as Harry Houdini was born Erik Weisz in Budapest, Hungary, to Rabbi Mayer Weisz and Cecilia Steiner on March 24, 1874. As was often the case for immigrants, the spelling of the family name was changed to Weiss and Erik became Ehrich (whose nickname Ehrie, became Harry). In 1876, Rabbi Weisz immigrated ahead of his family to the United States and eventually secured a position at a synagogue in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1878. Later that same year, Cecilia Weisz, along with their four sons Erik, Herman, Nathan, and William, joined Rabbi Weisz in Wisconsin. After losing his position at the synagogue, Rabbi Weiss and his family moved to Milwaukee in 1882, where the family experienced almost constant poverty. In 1887, the family moved to the tenements of New York City. Ehrich moved around and did a series of odd jobs until meeting Jacob Hyman in 1888. The boys shared an interest in magic and after reading *The Memories of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author and Conjurer*, Ehrich decided to pursue magic professionally and formed The Brothers Houdini with Hyman in 1891.

The Brothers Houdini performed around New York City in small theatres and dime museums between 1892 and 1894, with occasional engagements in Philadelphia and Chicago, including on the midway at the 1893 Columbia Exposition. In spring 1894, the partnership with Jacob Hyman dissolved and Houdini began performing solo for a short time as Professor Houdini, then rebranded The Brothers Houdini with his actual brother Theo "Dash" Weiss (later known professionally as "Hardeen"). The partnership didn't last long, as Houdini met Willhelmina Beatrice Rahner, known to everyone as Bess, who became his professional and life-long partner when the two married—after only three weeks—on June 22, 1894. The Houdinis performed with traveling circuses and medicine shows in terrible conditions throughout 1895 and in an effort to secure a regular salary, Houdini became manager of a burlesque troupe called The Gaiety Girls. During this same year, Houdini began a series of handcuff escape publicity stunts at police stations across the northeast. The next two years were grueling for the Houdinis, as The Gaiety Girls troupe and other performance companies they performed with folded. The years between 1897 and early 1899 proved no better, as the Houdinis did almost anything to earn income including performing comedy sketches and, ironically, séances. He even attempted to sell his entire magic act and get a regular job. During this time, however, Houdini continued to perform handcuff escapes and accept challenges and earned the nickname "The King of Handcuffs."

The Houdinis lucky break came in 1899. After performing at the Palm Garden in St. Paul, Minnesota, Houdini received an offer to join the Keith-Orpheum Circuit from manager Martin Beck. To promote his show, Houdini continued to perform handcuff escapes at police stations and received great attention in local newspapers. In early 1900, the Houdinis embarked on a European tour arranged by Martin Beck, only to find upon arrival that no bookings had been made. Without Beck's help, Houdini, ever the promoter, was able to secure bookings throughout England, Scotland, and Wales to sold-out shows; many of which broke attendance records. His success continued

throughout 1904 in venues throughout central Europe and Russia. Houdini returned to the United States briefly in 1904 and then returned to Europe where he was already an established celebrity.

Houdini continued performing his illusions, handcuff challenges, and escape acts on land and water throughout the country and the world almost continuously for the rest of his life, which was cut short at the age of 52 when he died of peritonitis as a result of a ruptured appendix on October 31, 1926.

Sources:

Buranelli, Prosper. "Houdini's Literary Escape." *The Bookman*, January 1927

Cox, John. "Chronology." *Wild About Harry*. [www.wildabouthoudini.com]

Silverman, Kenneth. *Houdini!!! The Career of Eric Weiss*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

Scope and Contents

The Harry Houdini Collection is arranged into eight series that roughly mirror the arrangement of the associated Harry Houdini Papers: I. Houdini's Act, undated; II. Correspondence, 1921-1926, undated; III. Writings, circa 1923-1924; IV. Promotional Material, 1904-circa 1970s, undated; V. Photographs, circa 1900s-circa 1920s, undated; Series VI. Personal and Professional, 1906-1933, undated; VII. Film Career, 1920-1927; and Series VIII. Collected Material Related to Houdini, 1940-1985, undated. The Harry Houdini Collection is comprised of papers, documents, correspondence, and artifacts associated with the magician, escape artist, business man, aviator, author, and actor popularly known as Harry Houdini, but were either purchased by or were donated to the Ransom Center and did not come directly from his estate. Material associated with or previously owned by Houdini will continually be added to this collection as it is acquired by the Ransom Center.

Series I. Houdini's Act includes material associated with Houdini's stage performances. The twenty-pound steel ball with attached 4 foot chain and ankle cuff is accompanied by a letter of authenticity from the Houdini Museum (Niagara Falls, Ont.).

Series II. Correspondence is further arranged into two subseries. Subseries A. Correspondence to Houdini is comprised of one letter and one telegram. Subseries B. Correspondence from Houdini contains letters to Albert Davis and one letter to Shadow Baldwin, daughter of American magician Professor S. S. Baldwin (1848-1924), also known as "The White Mahatma." In 1924, Shadow Baldwin sent Houdini her deceased father's scrapbook from his fourth world tour and this letter from Houdini is thanking her for the generous gift. The Baldwin scrapbook forms part of the scrapbook collection in the Harry Houdini Papers and images of it are available via the Center's Digitized

Collections Portal.

Series III. Writings includes manuscripts and printed works. Of primary interest is the carbon typescript draft of Houdini's antispiritualism work *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924). The associated Harry Houdini Papers contains lists of edits, draft fragments, correspondence, and a published edition with corrections and additions made directly into the text by Houdini.

Series IV. Promotional Material is subdivided into four subseries: A. Printed Material, B. Posters, C. Clippings, and D. Publications about Houdini. Except for the clippings--most of which post-date Houdini's death--this material spans the dates of Houdini's life and career. For material written about Houdini after his death, see Series VIII. Collected Material about Houdini.

Series V. Photographs includes promotional photos, portrait headshots, images of Bess Houdini, and Houdini with President Theodore Roosevelt (the edited version with the other people removed) and with actress Sarah Bernhardt.

Series VI. Personal and Professional comprises documents and ephemera related to Houdini's personal life and interests. The bulk of this series includes financial and legal documents reflecting Houdini's income and assets, expenditures, investments, bank accounts, and legal dealings. Of interest is a copy of Houdini's 1924 will and copies of several indentures regarding burial plots in Machphelah Cemetery in Queens, NY. A letter from Houdini's attorney Bernard Ernst details the settlement reached in the case of Houdini vs. B. F. Rolfe and Octagon Films. Additionally in the legal material, is a copy of Houdini's testimony regarding fortune tellers before the Subcommittee on Judiciary of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives in 1926.

Also in this series is a note written by Bess Houdini on a sheet of Houdini's "Lettergram" stationery wherein she describes a code that she and Houdini created to communicate. There is no further explanation regarding the context or purpose, but it may perhaps be the code they created to communicate after death.

Series VII. Film Career contains primarily financial and legal documents, such as check ledgers and stock certificates, regarding Houdini Picture Corporation and Film Developing Corporation / Weehawken Street Corporation. Related to Houdini's films are lobby cards from the Palace Theatre in Dallas, Texas, containing the music cues for the silent film *Terror Island* (1920) which starred Harry Houdini.

Series VIII. Collected Material about Houdini is subdivided into three series: A. Publications, B. Memorialization, and C. Visual Material. This material post-dates Houdini's death and includes brochures, correspondence, documents, and publications that pay tribute to or contribute to the understanding of Houdini's life, career, and celebrity status in American popular culture.

Related Material

For additional materials related to Harry Houdini or magic at the Ransom Center, see the Harry Houdini Papers, the Magic Collection, the Scrapbook Collection, the Poster Collection, the Prints Collection, the Playbills and Programs Collection, the Albert Davis Collection, the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Collection the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Literary File Photography Collection, the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, the Silent Film Title Card Collection, the Sarah Bernhardt Collection, the Elbert Hubbard Collection, the McManus-Young Collection, the Literary Files Collection, and the Ransom Center's library holdings.

Additional materials from Houdini's personal collection can be found in various assembled collections at the Ransom Center including the Edwin Booth Collection, Circus Collection, Playbills and Programs Collections, Theater Biography Collection, Theater Arts Manuscripts Collection, and the Ransom Center's library holdings.

Index Terms

People

Houdini, Beatrice, 1876-1943.

Houdini, Harry, 1874-1926.

Subjects

Entertainers.

Escape artists.

Magicians.

Document Types

Artifacts.

Correspondence.

Series I. Houdini's Act, undated

Ball weight with ankle cuff, undated

Restricted Access by
appointment

Series II. Correspondence, 1921-1926, undated

Subseries A. Correspondence to Houdini

Day, Harry. Letter, 1921

Container 1.1

Weiss, Leo. Telegram, undated

Subseries B. Correspondence from Houdini

Baldwin, Shadow. Letter regarding gift of Professor Baldwin's scrapbook, 1924

Container
1.2

Davis, Albert. Letters, 1924-1926; includes letter from Houdini's secretary Julia Sawyer regarding disposition of Houdini papers and sympathy acknowledgement from Bess Houdini, 1926

Container
1.3

Series III. Writings, circa 1923-1924

Subseries A. Book-Length Works

A Magician Among the Spirits (1924)

Manuscript draft. Carbon copy typescript with handwritten edits, chapter synopses, circa 1923-1924

Container
1.4-7

Original folders, circa 1923-1924 RESTRICTED

Restricted 5

Subseries B. Printed Works by Houdini

Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium "Margery" to win the \$2500 prize offered by the Scientific American. Booklets, 1924

Container
1.8

Series IV. Promotional Material, 1904-circa 1970s, undated

Subseries A. Printed Material

Programs, playbills, handbills

1914, July 15. Battery, Near the Aquarium. Handbill (photocopy), undated

Container
1.9

Subseries B. Posters

Houdini at the London Hippodrome. Broadside, 1904

Container osf
1

Subseries C. Clippings (some are photocopies)

1920s

Container 1.10

1940s

Container 1.11

1960s

Container 1.12

1970s

Container 1.13, osf 1

Subseries D. Publications about Houdini

Adams, R. D. Lifting the Curtain: The Man Who Made Houdini's Magic Apparatus (Modern Mechanics and Inventions). Tearsheets, October 1926

Container
1.14

Series V. Photographs, circa 1900s-circa 1920s, undated

Promotional

Houdini posed in various restraints. Prints mounted on card, circa 1900s-1920s

Container
1.15

Promotional window display, New York Hippodrome. Print, undated

Container
1.16

Images of promotional posters. Prints, undated

Houdini Portraits

Headshots of Houdini. Prints, circa 1920s

Container 1.17

Bess Houdini and Weiss Family

Publicity photos of Bess Houdini and performer encased in ice. Prints, circa 1928

Container
1.18

Houdini with Others

Houdini and President Theodore Roosevelt. Edited print, 1914

Container
1.19

Houdini and actress Sarah Bernhardt. Print, 1917

Series VI. Personal and Professional, 1906-1933, undated

File box. Green metal printed with Estate of Harry Houdini. Contained the legal and financial documents listed below, circa 1926	Restricted Access by appointment
Financial	
Assets, income and expense statements, 1913-1916	Container 2.1
Bonds. Receipts, correspondence, 1912-1925	Container 2.2
Calculations, tabulations, and notes in safety deposit box, undated	Container 2.3
Casrah Corporation. Stock certificates, 1914	Container 2.4
Estate of Harry Houdini	
Bank book and statements, 1926-1933	Container 2.5
Cancelled checks, 1926-1933	Container 2.6
Grand Union Tea Company. General assignment document, 1913	Container 2.7
Income tax returns, 1914-1915	Container 2.8
Insurance. Policies, correspondence, 1910, 1925, undated	Container 2.9
Ocean Accident and Guarantee Corporation. Accident insurance policies for Houdini and Franz Kukol, correspondence, renewal receipts, 1912-1922	Container 2.10
Ontario Hummingbird Mining Co. Stock certificates, 1907	Container 2.11
Promissory notes, 1911	Container 2.12
Property. Insurance policies, tax receipts, electricity permits, 1916-1926	Container 2.13
Rahner, John. Contracts, stock certificates, power of attorney regarding Mystic Enterprises and Conjurers Monthly Magazine, 1906-1923	Container 2.14
Sachs, George M. (accountant). Correspondence, 1921, 1925	Container 2.15

Union Central Life Insurance Company. Correspondence, 1916-1917	Container 2.16
Wizard's Ltd. Stock certificates, 1914	Container 2.17
Legal	
Machphelah Cemetery plot indentures, undated	Container 2.18
Ernst, Fox & Cane (attorney). Correspondence (also regarding lawsuit against Octagon Films), 1922, 1925	Container 3.1
Fortune Telling; Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Judiciary of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, First Session on H. R. 8989 (February-May 1926). Photocopied testimony, undated	Container 3.2
Jennie Jacobs vs. Ehrich Weiss. General release agreement, May 1909	Container 3.3
Will, 1924	Container 3.4
Secret code. Explanation and message written by Bess Houdini regarding a secret code between she and Houdini, circa 1913-1926	Container 3.5
Society of American Magicians	
Photograph of banquet committee medal (1918), undated	Container 3.6
Unidentified	
Object that appears to be a seed, undated	Container 3.7

Series VII. Film Career, 1920-1927

Famous Players-Lasky Corporation

Terror Island (1920)

Lobby cards. Cards with music cues on back (Palace Theatre, Dallas), 1920

Container
osf 1

Film Developing Corporation / Weehawken Street Corporation

Ledger, bank statement, 1920, 1926

Container 3.8

Houdini Picture Corporation

Business and Administrations

Insurance policy, 1925

Container 3.9

Ledger, 1923-1927

Container 3.10

Receipt, 1922

Container 3.11

Stock certificates, receipt from Morris Greenbaum, 1922

Container
3.12

Films

The Man From Beyond (1922)

Script. Typed photocopy, undated

Container 3.13

Series VIII. Collected Material Related to Houdini, 1940-1985, undated

Subseries A. Publications

- Arouri, Lawrence. The Houdini Birth Research Committee's Report. Photocopied reprint, 1972 **Container**
3.14
- Carroll, Sidney. The Tantalizing Riddle of Harry Houdini (Pageant). Tearsheets, August 1953 **Container**
4.5
- Gibson, Walter B. Houdini's Escapes and Magic (Blue Ribbon Books). Dustjacket, 1930 **Container**
4.6
- Gibson, Walter B. and Morris N. Young (Eds.). Houdini on Magic (Dover). Dustjacket, 1953
- Library of Congress, Rare Books Division. A Guide to Its Collections and Services. Booklet (the Harry Houdini Library is discussed on page 50), 1950 **Container**
4.7
- Outagamie Museum (Appleton, Wisconsin). The Young Harry Houdini in Appleton. Pamphlet, 1985 **Container**
3.15
- Van Steenwyk, Elizabeth. #25. Two Great Magicians. Children's pamphlet, 1981 **Container**
3.16
- Wells, Anthony. The Mystery of Harry Houdini: The East Indian Needle Feat (M.U.M.). Photocopied article, January 1976 **Container**
3.17
- Wickware, Francis Sill. Hairbreadth Harry Houdini (Reader's Digest). Tearsheets, 1943 **Container**
3.18
- Unidentified. Houdini handwriting analysis report. Typed photocopy, undated **Container**
3.19

Subseries B. Memorialization

Houdini Club of Wisconsin

- Houdini-Gram newsletter. November 1959-June 1964 **Container**
3.20
- State convention. Programs, 1940, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1960, 1961 **Container**
4.1
- Houdini commemorative stamp. Correspondence, 1975 **Container** 4.2
- Houdini Museum (Niagara Falls, Canada). Brochure, circa 1970s **Container**
4.3

Subseries C. Visual Material

Houdini's Milk Can Escape. Clipping mounted on card (Houdini not pictured),
circa 1940s

Container
4.4

Index of Correspondents

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Index of Works

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