

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF MAGICIANS

or,

If We Had Known We Were Going To Survive This Long We Would Have Kept Better Records!

by
Claude Crowe

THIS MUCH IS CERTAIN, the Texas Association of Magicians was called into being shortly after 10:30 a.m. on September 1, 1946 in the Mural Room of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel in Austin, Texas.

The rest of the story isn't as clear.

Oddly enough, the man who could be considered the father of the T.A.O.M. was opposed to its founding. His name was Herman Yerger and he was a man of mystery. Many stories are told about Herman and little is known of him. Though various exotic locales have been given as his place of birth, he was actually born in not-unexotic Brooklyn, New York on March 22, 1894. He would be a mystery worker for almost all of his 68 years. Sometime around 1923 he suffered an accident that would cost him his mobility and, eventually, his life. The polite account of this tragedy was that he suffered a fall while performing as a tight-rope walker. Herman himself had no problem telling friends what actually happened. He was stabbed in the back of the neck by a husband jealous of his wife's attentions to Herman (though he would sometimes deny that the husband had reason to be jealous). Apparently he made a complete recovery from the attack but, as time passed, he began to lose the use of his legs and kidneys. Eventually, X-rays revealed that a piece of the knife blade had broken off in the attack and remained lodged in his spine. He was soon confined to a wheelchair as his condition continued to deteriorate.

Yet he continued to perform from the chair, playing throughout Texas and often performing a "Buried Alive" outdoor promotion with his first wife. Herman was a good performer with an aura of mysterioso that would stand him in good stead when he turned to crystal gazing (although Whitney the Magician with whom Herman often appeared, and father of Delora Whitney, said of his card work, "When he held a break it stood out like a valentine card in a pinochle deck").

By the late 1930's Herman, now retired from the road and settled in Austin with Emilie, his second wife, was operating a "Patent Medicine Drug Store" at 1011 Red River street in the sort of neighborhood that would today be characterized as "the 'hood." A Walgreen or Eckerd's this store was not! Occupying a small, wood frame building on a mixed-use thoroughfare of residences and small businesses, it's shelves held some bottles of various over-the-counter drugs. The predominate decor was stacks of wooden soft drink cases. Not being a pharmacist Herman could not dispense prescriptions. He sold herbs and potions. Toward the rear of the store was a small room with a crystal ball where he gave readings. There were living quarters beyond that.

A thriving, blue-collar community of mixed-ethnicity, Red River street had an active street life that flowed by, and in-and-out of, Herman's store. These were the customers that visited the

drug store, although it would not be unusual to encounter city officials, politicians or other prominent personages there, as well as any magician traveling through, all passing the time with Herman.

As a gregarious sort who found travel difficult, Herman found it expedient to have people come to him. One Saturday in May 1943 he remarked to Ray Santee, a San Antonio magician passing through, that if Ray would bring up some of the alamo City boys the next day he would barbecue some ham. They could bring the beer.

The next day ten magicians - six from San Antonio and four from Austin, all members of I.B.M. Ring 18 - convened in Herman's back yard for an afternoon of food and magic. A good time was had by all, they had a photo taken and decided they must do it again the following year. A more propitious date would have to be found, however. It was Mother's Day and the wives had not been included.

Following the Mother's Day party Herman built himself a retreat on Onion Creek, six miles south of Austin. Writing in the Linking Ring, Doc Mahendra described it as "Plenty of shade trees, a large club house with stage, outside barbecue pit, cement tables and benches and everything to make the place comfortable." A rabbit-in-hat motif decorated the shutters. Herman referred to it as his lodge. It was perfect for the gathering he had in mind.

Labor Day weekend was settled on as the date of the 1944 gathering, possibly because it provided the only extended weekend on the calendar at that time, and invitations were sent out by some of Herman's friends for "Herman's Magic Show and Picnic" on September 3 and 4, a Sunday and Monday.

Despite the travel restrictions imposed by the on-going war 169 persons showed-up, not all of them magicians. 71 were Herman's friends and customers from Red River street. As no hotel was used, out-of-town magicians were put up in near-by motels. There was no registration fee. Herman provided all the food and drink for two outdoor barbecues at his lodge and Dr. Carl Moore hosted a Monday morning breakfast for all at his lovely home. There was a show each afternoon, each arranged on-site, although there seemed no shortage of volunteers. Twenty-five magicians performed. All departed late Monday afternoon, most assuming that the event would be repeated the following year.

And right they were! The next year invitations went out for a "Magician's Labor Day Conclave" at Herman's Lodge on September 2 and 3, 1945, again a Sunday and Monday. Word-of-mouth on the previous year's "Picnic" had been very positive and R.S.V.P.'s to the invitations were good. A small fee of \$5.00 was instituted and there were 112 registrations (magicians), plus a sizable group of Herman's guests from Red River street. Now a hotel was necessary and the Stephen F. Austin was chosen. With everyone in the same hotel a spontaneous night-before party became possible and, in fact, inevitable. There were three shows this time (one provided by the nascent Magigals of Texas club - organizing was in the air) with some of the acts having been lined-up before their arrival! Many of the performers had appeared on the previous year's programs. Two sumptuous barbecues were again provided by Herman and Dr. Moore once more set out Monday morning breakfast for the conclavers. And now there were dealers, two of them, Moreno from Fort worth and Delbert Douglas of Dallas. The mood was festive. V-J Day, the end of World War II, had been only a few weeks before!

On Sunday afternoon several of the group gathered informally and began discussing the possibility of forming a Texas-wide organization of magicians, among these were Ren Clark, Ralph DeShong, Ed DeWees, Doc Mahendra and Dr. Moore. Actually, the idea of forming such an organization had come up the year before. Herman, however, was opposed to the idea, feeling strongly that it was his party and he would like to keep it that way and the idea was

dropped. While all those now in the huddle favored a state-wide organization and Ren Clark urged going ahead with the planning, some, such as DeWees and Mahendra remained reluctant to risk offending their annual host. The final decision was to talk about it some more the next day.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that this Labor Day event was going to continue to grow in size and while Herman, by no means a man of means, had been happy to pick up the tab both years there was a question about how much he could reasonably be expected to do. And there was another argument in favor of a more formal organization.

In both 1944 and 45 Herman had, in effect, issued a blanket invitation to his barbecue to anyone in his Red River neighborhood. Often free beer, food and entertainment can attract the wrong sort of people and some of these guests had become obstreperous after drinking intemperately and others of the demi-monde had sought to combine business with pleasure by soliciting some of the magicians. Not surprisingly, the wives objected to this.

As the little group began congregating on Sunday they were approached by a few of the wives and told that unless steps were taken to eliminate the undesirable element they would not attend any future conclaves. Although the last thing anyone wanted was to hurt Herman, it now seemed that the only way the event could be continued was under sponsorship of a formal organization. Doc Mahendra was asked to serve as presiding officer of any organizational meetings and Ren Clark, with his attorney Sproesser Wynn, volunteered to draft a constitution and by-laws to be presented at the following year's conclave. Ed DeWees was to come up with a slate of officers to be voted on at the same time. Henry Schmidt served as acting secretary. Herman was not aware of these plans. During the coming year DeWees and Mahendra were to attempt to obtain Herman's approval for embryonic organization and relinquish his sponsorship of the Labor Day event. No small task!

In the ensuing months the pair journeyed to Austin several times, eventually persuading Herman that the interests of magic in Texas would best be served by a formal organization. He was then asked if he would serve as it's first president. Flattered, he eventually agreed and gave the new society his blessing. Now the organizational efforts could be continued openly.

The 1946 event was titled "Texas Magician's Conclave" and was sponsored by San Antonio Ring 18 of the International Brotherhood of Magicians. There was a registration fee of \$5.00 and 95 people attended (all magicians!) and, as it had become a three-day affair, the format began to approach that of more recent conventions. A number of new faces appeared on the bills, mostly magicians who had been in the military the previous year. Again the Stephen F. Austin hotel was used and again Herman planned a barbecue at his lodge. Rain forced a change in plans and the 'cue was transported to the hotel and served there.

Following the original and informal 1945 discussion a few others had become involved in the planning, notably Jim Bowling and Tommy Beardon, and when the several members of this de facto organizing committee arrived in Austin on Saturday they immediately huddled over Ren Clark's proposed constitution. The name of the organization was to be The Texas Association of Magicians. A few revisions were suggested and incorporated by Sproesser Wynn. The following morning, at a meeting presided over by Doc Mahendra, the revised constitution and by-laws were presented to the assembled magicians. They voted for adoption and the Texas Association of Magicians was reality. They then adjourned, leaving further business to a second business meeting the following day.

Membership in the T.A.O.M. required that one already be a member of a "recognized" Texas magic club, i.e., the San Antonio, Fort Worth, Houston or Amarillo I.B.M. Rings or the Society of American Magicians (S.A.M.) Assemblies in Dallas or Houston. The business of the

Association would be conducted by a Board of Governors made up of a representative of each of the recognized clubs. The first Board was made up of Bob White, Sr., (Dallas S.A.M.), Jim Bowling (Houston S. A. M.), Ren Clark (I.B.M. Fort Worth), Herman Yerger (I.B.M. San Antonio), Harvey Gaddis (I.B.M. Amarillo) and John Dunlop (I.B.M. Houston). In the Monday morning business meeting the Board elected Herman Yerger to be the first president of the T.A.O.M. Ralph DeShong was elected Vice-President. Doc Mahendra and Glenn Y. Davidson were chosen Secretary and Treasurer, respectively. Before standing adjourned, the Board requested bids for the 1947 convention. Fort Worth was eventually selected for this honor.

The first magician's convention in Texas was held in Dallas in 1932. Sponsored by the Dallas Magic Circle, it was styled "the First Annual SOUTHWEST MAGICIANS CONVENTION" and scheduled for October 14 and 15 to coincide with the popular State Fair of Texas. Advance publicity promised a first day "Magic Spectacle presented before 75,000 children in the huge State Fair stadium" (as the Cotton Bowl was sometimes known prior to 1936. It's seating capacity was then 46,400). Dai Vernon was invited but did not attend. Despite a public show emceed by Dorny at the Melba Theatre (in conjunction with the Edmond Lowe film Chandu the Magician) the attendance was disappointing and the convention was not attempted again.

A decade later, in 1942, Fort Worth was the site of the national convention of the International Brotherhood of Magicians.

There has never been a consensus on which T.A.O.M. convention was numero uno. The Labor Day events of 1944, 1945, 1946, and 1947 have all been called the "first convention" by someone at sometime. It would seem difficult, however, to characterize the 1944 and 1945 affairs as T.A.O.M. conventions as that term was unknown before 1946. Prior to the 1947 convention the Fort Worth club distributed a mimeographed flyer inviting all to "the 1st Annual T.A.O.M. Convention." Writing later in the T.A.O.M. Bulletin (vol. 1, #4, Nov. 1947) Ed DeWees stated in his financial report "Our first convention was held over Labor Day at Austin", however he went on to admit "It was more or less unofficial." The same issue referred to the recently completed Fort Worth convention as the "2nd Annual." Curiously, the reports of the Fort Worth convention, by Ralph DeShong in the Bat and Doc Mahendra in the Linking Ring, did not number the convention at all and the official convention program carried no number.

The convention went to Houston in 1948 and Frank Werner reported on it for the most prestigious of magic journals, the Sphinx (October 1948), calling it the "T.A.O.M. Second Annual Conclave", which would make Fort Worth the first. The following year, 1949, Dallas hosted the convention and Werner again reviewed it for the Sphinx (October 1949), this time calling it the "4th Annual Conclave." This suggested that his addition went awry or that he now considered the 1946 event in Austin to be the first convention. In 1957 the convention returned to Fort Worth. The convention program identified it as the "12th Annual", making Austin '46 the first. When the convention again returned to Fort Worth in 1978 the convention program carried Ren Clark's account of the founding of the T.A.O.M. In it he identified the 1947 event as the first ever convention. The cover of the convention program, however, proclaimed it to be the "T.A.O.M. 33rd Annual Convention", which would make the 1946 Austin affair the first.

A perusal of the various T.A.O.M. convention programs and magazine reports would reveal many more of these discrepancies. This continuing pattern of random inconsistencies seems to indicate, not that anyone feels strongly about this question, but just the opposite. Most are indifferent to the ordinal number on the cover of their convention program. Just make sure there is another one next year! (Indeed, at all of the conventions this writer has been involved in planning research into this question has been a matter of looking at the previous year's convention program and adding one.)

1946 of 1947? There are arguments for both. Although, frankly, the "Texas Magicians Conclave" of 1946 seems more of transitional event, neither one of Herman's barbecues nor a T.A.O.M. convention. Those in attendance had never heard the term "Texas Association of Magicians" before they arrived. (suppose they had rejected the proposed constitution and sent the organizing committee home to try again the next year?) It was administered by a Ring of the I.B.M. who made a small profit - \$7.01, very small - and contributed it to the new T.A.O.M.

Even so, identifying numero uno can remain a personal choice. Just make sure there is another one next year! -CC

NOTES: Sincere thanks to all those who, by their valued assistance, helped in the preparation of this article: Walter Blaney, Bob Blau, Bev Bergeron, O'Quinn Cairo III, Bruce Chadwick, Kent Cummins, Jacques Darrouzet, Ed DeWees, Ramon Galindo, Max Hapner, Doug and Donny Kornegay, Jim Magus, Jay Marshall, John Moehring, Ray Santee, Dr. C. T. Silver and Ed Watkins. Deepest apologies to any who have been overlooked. We are still grateful.

The only accounts of the creation of the T.A.O.M. written by any of the founders are Ren Clark's in the aforementioned 1978 T.A.O.M. convention program and Ed DeWees' letter to Col. J.C.L. Beamon of October 7, 1975. Each was written more than a quarter century after the event. Both were consulted for this article. There is surprisingly little written about Herman Yerger in the literature of magic and much of that is suspect. Research continues.

(This is a revised version of an article which first appeared in the TEXAS MAGIC COLLECTOR'S NEWSLETTER, Summer 1996).

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END NOTE: To settle the ambiguity of the convention number sequence, the 1997 TAOM Board of Directors voted to officially recognize the 1946 Austin picnic as the first convention of the Texas Association of Magicians. This convention numbering sequence follows the pattern established by the late Doc M. S. Mahendra, the first Secretary of the TAOM organization.