

Houdini in San Diego

A vaudeville act that is without its equal in the world today has been secured for the Grand theater . . . Harry Houdini, the noted handcuff and jail breaker, will give exhibitions of his skill here.

--San Diego Union, Oct. 5, 1907

In the fall of 1907, Harry Houdini, soon to be known the world's greatest magician and escape artist, came to San Diego to display his skills before crowded theater audiences. It was the era of vaudeville in America and Houdini was a rising star in the popular variety entertainment field.



At age 33, Houdini was a show business veteran but fame had come slowly. After years of meager success as a magician in dime museums and circus sideshows he began experimenting with escape stunts in the late 1890s. After a triumphant tour of Europe in 1900 he returned to America as a proven escape artist, able to defeat any form of confinement including handcuffs, leg irons, jail cells, and straitjackets.

Touring with the popular Orpheum vaudeville circuit, Houdini came to Southern California in September 1907. A successful three-week tour in Los Angeles made him “the talk of the northern city.” A new act featured a challenge from the U.S. Postal Service. Mail officials secured Houdini in an oversized leather mail pouch, fastened with government padlocks. The escape artist quickly foiled the locks and escaped, in full view of the audience.

A more spectacular feat was performed outdoors before an estimated 5000 spectators. With his legs in chains and his hands manacled behind him, Houdini leaped from the roof of a pavilion into the reservoir of Westlake Park (known today as McArthur Park). After two minutes of suspense, Houdini bobbed to the surface free of his shackles.

A similar stunt was promised for San Diego, when the newspapers announced that “the Handcuff King” was coming to the city for a three-night engagement at the Grand Theatre on Fifth Street. Advertising proclaimed that Houdini, “absolutely the greatest act in vaudeville today,” would “dive, handcuffed, from top of Spreckels’ bunkers” into San Diego Bay at the foot of G Street.

The Houdini show at the Grand began on Monday night, October 7. In addition to the star attraction, the show offered “the usual good bill of vaudeville.” The warm-ups acts included a “clever monologist” who sang and told jokes; a “champion trumpeter” who drew applause for his patriotic numbers; and music and comedy from the Gilman sisters.

Following the other performers, Houdini took the stage for a one-hour performance. Before a sellout crowd, Houdini began his act by demonstrating how simple handcuff escapes were

performed. He then invited a committee of local police and county officials to take part in his show.

Police Chief William Neely and three of his officers, along with the District Attorney Lewis Kirby and several county officials, mounted the stage. Using San Diego police property “they manacled the magician hand and foot with cuffs, leg irons and shackles of every description then guarded the tiny cabinet in which he released himself.” It took Houdini six minutes to free himself of every shackle.

Houdini concluded his show with the “stellar act of the evening,” a straitjacket escape in full view of the theater audience. Four policemen strapped the jacket on and “exhorted themselves to the utmost in drawing up all of the buckles as tight as they could be drawn.” As the audience shouted “he’ll never get out of that” and “they’ve got him now,” Houdini writhed and twisted until he managed to raise his hands above his head and unfasten the buckles. “An uproar of applause greeted him as he threw the jacket from him.”

For the final night of the engagement, Houdini invited four employees of Marston’s department store to nail him in a shipping case and then nail ropes around it. As usual, the magician escaped with apparent ease.

Regrettably, Houdini left town without performing the advertised underwater escape in San Diego Bay. For reasons unknown (or at least unreported), the plan for a handcuffed Houdini to jump from the Spreckels wharf into the bay never occurred.

In the next few years, the fame of Harry Houdini grew quickly as his escape acts became more challenging and “death-defying.” He became the highest paid act in vaudeville and eventually created his own, hugely successful evening show. Houdini never performed again in San Diego and died on Halloween in 1926, of acute peritonitis, at age 52.

THE GRAND THEATRE
Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday,
OCT. 7, 8 and 9,
HARRY HOUDINI
King of Handcuff
and Jail Breakers
Absolutely the greatest act in vaudeville today. Direct from Orpheum circuit.
Will dive, handcuffed, from top of Spreckels' bunkers Monday afternoon at 4 o'clock.
Prices—50c, 75c, \$1.00 and \$1.50.

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), pgs. 134-136.

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