

World of Wonder

The Past, Present and Future of Magic in the Merrimack Valley

by **Henri B. Marchand**

photos by **Kevin Harkins**

Magicians have long called the Merrimack Valley home. Lawrence Crane and Lowell natives Art Lyle and Louis Ackerman are three who mystified audiences well beyond the Valley beginning in the early 1900s.

Crane grew up in Lowell after his family immigrated to America in 1885. Billed as the “Irish Wizard,” he is reported to have begun his career at London’s Palace Theatre.

Lyle performed close-up magic and also toured a vaudeville stage act. After retiring as a performer, he contributed articles to magic publications and opened Joker’s Alley, a store that sold novelty and magic items.

Ackerman, stage name Ackero, had a colorful East Asian-themed show that he performed in casinos, on cruise ships and in nightclubs from the 1940s through the 1970s. He also appeared on “The Ed Sullivan Show.”

Crane died in 1950, Lyle in 1974 and Ackerman 10 years later. But their legacies remain as magicians continue to call the Valley home.

Among them is Bob Riordan, a Derry, N.H., resident who grew up in Lowell. He was first drawn to magic when he saw a magician on television. “A few years later,” he recalls, “I went to a birthday party and the kid got an A.C. Gilbert Co. “My Favorite Martian” magic kit for a gift. I hunkered down in a corner and played with the magic.” He was hooked.

Riordan, 53, frequented Joker’s Alley and eventually purchased his own magic kit.

“In seventh grade, I took a course in magic at Northern Essex Community College with Vinnie Lumenello,” Riordan says. “He was a fixture in the Valley magic scene.” In 1982, Riordan took a year off from the University of Lowell (now UMass Lowell) to sharpen his skills at the Chavez Studio of Magic in Colon, Mich.

During college he worked birthday parties and restaurants, and went on to perform at Benson’s Wild Animal Farm in Hudson, N.H. A full-time professional magician, Riordan is a regular at The Mystery Lounge in Cambridge and recently signed up for his first cruise ship gig. Riordan also collects antique posters of legendary magicians.

Downriver in Methuen, amateur magician Doug Rickenback’s magic man cave is neatly packed with 2,500 books, 350 DVDs and 500 decks of cards. Rickenback, 62, grew up in Michigan but moved to the Merrimack Valley 15 years ago.

Rickenback describes his start in magic as typical. “My grandfather worked for Ford and took us to a Christmas party,” he recalls. “There was a magician on the bill ... the first live magician I ever saw.”

Rickenback is “more interested in the art than in performing,” but says he puts on shows for “family and friends and neighborhood gatherings” and considers magic a “special gift” to be shared.

Retired from a career in computers, Rickenback attends several magic conventions each year and, despite knowing the secrets, retains his little boy sense of wonder. “There are some really special moments,” he says of live performances. “The magic happens between the performer and the audience. It’s like we’re never going to grow up, like we’re still little boys looking for real magic.”

Andover resident Jim Loscutoff (not to be confused with the former Boston Celtics player of the same name) credits his father for sparking his interest in magic. “Dad showed me a trick when I was a kid,” says Loscutoff, 58, who later spent time in California where he took lessons and performed bar magic. Today, his programs are eclectic—corporate programs and children’s shows, and Halloween-themed “wizard stuff.” At Christmastime he plays Santa Claus.

Although his full-time job is owner/operator of Camp Evergreen, a summer camp for children in Andover, magic remains a daily activity. “I use magic as a tool to enhance the camp experience,” he says, adding that tricks can cheer up children if they’re having a bad day.

“It’s a pleasure to do magic,” Loscutoff says.

At the mouth of the Merrimack, Debbie O’Carroll specializes in school and library shows, performing children’s magic with a sprightly energy. Originally from Syracuse, N.Y., O’Carroll, who preferred not to give her age, attended Emerson College in Boston, where she studied children’s theater before settling in Newburyport.



Louis Ackerman travelled the world performing an East Asian-themed show as Ackero and was recognized by the International Brotherhood of Magicians for his work. From the Lowell Historical Society’s Louis Ackerman Collection.



A colorful wizard from magician Doug Rickenbacker's collection might be casting a spell—or teaching a class at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.



Top left: "Debonair Deceiver" Bob Riordan of Derry, N.H., causes coins to appear and multiply with impish elegance. Top right: Debbie O'Carroll's high energy performances have enchanted children in shows from the mouth of the Merrimack to Montana. Bottom left: Surrounded by his collection of books, DVDs and magical tchotchkes, Methuen magician Doug Rickenbacker presents a classic magic trick, the cups and balls. Bottom right: Gravity is no match for Andover's Jim Loscutoff, a versatile conjurer who entertains everyone from summer campers to corporate execs.



Like Riordan, her interest in magic began with a borrowed magic kit. But that interest eventually hit a magical “glass ceiling” of sorts.

“I wanted to join the magic club in high school, but was told no girls allowed,” she says. Undeterred, she “bought books and made my own magic.”

In 1991, O’Carroll was welcomed into The International Brotherhood of Magicians and now serves as secretary for the local club and is territorial vice president for Massachusetts.

O’Carroll’s repertoire includes science-, reading-, geography-, Halloween- and Irish-themed shows, which she has performed from the Topsfield Fair to Jordan, Ireland and Montana.

“Magic is such a wonderful vehicle for children to learn,” she says. “It says to a child, ‘Your imagination can take you anywhere!’ ”

In a 1972 Lowell Sun interview, Art Lyle bemoaned what he perceived as declining opportunities for young magicians to develop their acts. But while vaudeville and other venues have vanished, Merrimack Valley magicians continue to create new opportunities to sustain the art, and the wonder, of magic. mvm

Editor’s Note: The writer of this article, Henri Marchand of Lowell, is also a magician. Look for his performances at special and charitable events.

For Further Information on Magic:

Resources:

Ray Goulet’s Magic Art Studio and
Ray Goulet’s Mini Museum of Magic
MagicArtStudio.com

Diamond’s Magic | DiamondsMagic.com

Clubs:

The International Brotherhood of Magicians, Ring 122
IBMRing122.000space.com

The Society of American Magicians Salem, Mass., Assembly 104
Sam104.com

Southern New Hampshire Assembly 118
Sam118.com



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