



Old tricks: New Plymouth magicians of the 1940s ham it up for photographer Joseph Swainson.

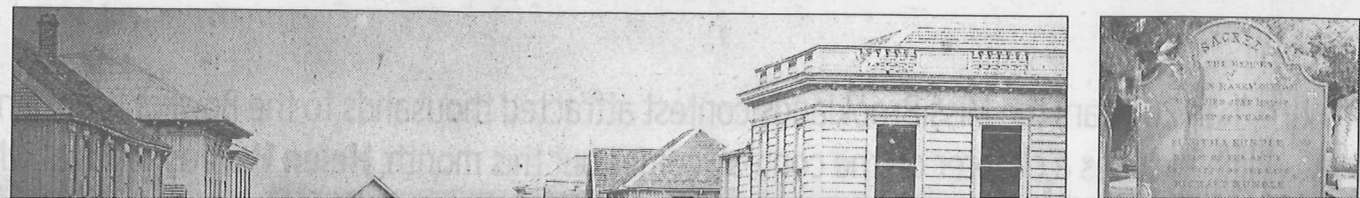
Houdin had them hoodwinked

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of this versatile entertainer's short life.

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He poured liquid from his "inexhaustible bottle" with a ceremonial flourish and, to the wonder of those present, could produce wine, liquor or even milk. He would tip the requested drink in to a glass and get the person to taste its authenticity.

Any amount or type of drink could come from the seemingly bottomless flask in this show-stopping trick.

A magical, musical jack-of-all-trades is how American magician Tom Interval described one of New Plymouth's more interesting characters of the 1860s. Known as "The Great Polynational Mimic", Houdin has become the subject of an e-book by Interval, who came across him after wondering if anyone else in history had had the name Harry Houdini, before "our self-liberating hero escaped from his mother's womb in 1874".

Harry Houdin was born years before the legendary Harry Houdini, whose escape antics still inspire illusionists and magicians today.

Interval had such a fascination with him that he produced his own website about Houdin, who was no relation to Houdini. When Interval first came across the name he thought it was a typo and was interested to find out more about this magician who called himself "The Great Polynational Mimic". After reading copious old newspaper articles, reviews and advertisements throughout Australia and New Zealand and with help from Puke Ariki's researcher Mike Gooch, Interval was able to build a picture of

this versatile entertainer's short life. Houdin was born Martin Harry Dignam in Ireland in 1830. His great claim, which Interval and others find doubtful, was that he was the nephew of the famed 19th century French conjurer named Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin.

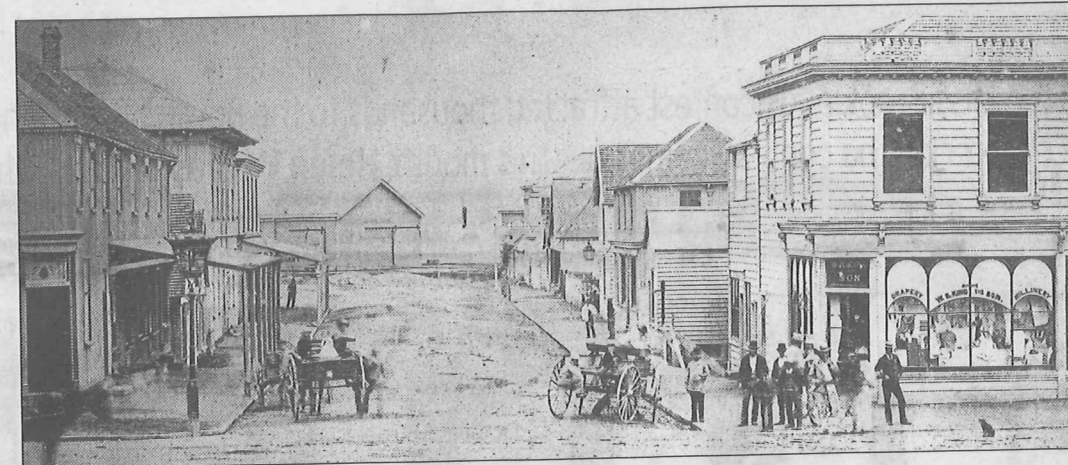
The inexhaustible bottle trick was first performed by him in 1847 and he was considered one of the great magicians of the time. With an international reputation, Houdin secured almost instant success by the claim he was Robert-Houdin's nephew and set about touring Australia and New Zealand during his short career in the early 1860s.

Houdin's success wasn't just because of his name, however. His one-man show proved his versatility and ability to thoroughly entertain his audience. He received excellent reviews most of the time, although he had his critics.

While one reviewer said "as a magician, Mr Houdin is perhaps superior to any person who has ever before appeared before a Wellington audience", another wrote: "Rapidity of utterance, combined with clearness, is not the forte of Mr Houdin."

It wasn't always his performance that inspired comment, but rather his piano accompaniment: "We would suggest as an improvement, the using for half an hour before the next performance of a tuning hammer on the pianoforte. Last night the unfortunate instrument uttered sounds sufficiently doleful to disturb the spirit of the late Mr Broadwood, whose name we noticed was affixed to the instrument."

Houdin's shows were performed in three parts, with the magic tricks in the first part capturing the imagination of his audience. As well as card tricks and the famed inexhaustible bottle trick, he pulled items out of a hat, such as large



Early days: Harry Houdin spent his last years living in a house in lower Brougham St, New Plymouth.

feathers and a large ball and made a burnt handkerchief appear new again. This part of the show was called drawing-room magic.

Interval says the magic tricks were really a warm-up for parts two and three of the show. After a 10-minute break, Houdin once again took the stage and began the polynational mimic performances. These were imitations of fictional characters from various countries and involved quick changes of costumes as well as the appropriate accents and characterisations. As he played each character in quick succession, Houdin imitated mannerisms, songs and dances of each one, accompanied by a musician on the piano, to the great hilarity of those watching.

In his advertisement, Houdin stated that his polynational mimicry, was "to the astonishment and admiration of every person. His identity defies the strictest scrutiny". He played characters typical of the day: Old Father Time, Mademoiselle Schwingrubber (a Swiss broom girl), Fim Fum (a Chinese professional singer), Monsieur Baudin (a teacher of the Terpaichorean Art who sang in French) and Sam Slick (the original

Yankee pedlar) among others. He danced and sang with quick changes of costume to amaze his audience.

Part three of the show included more mimicry entertainment then concluded with "Brother Bones", a black character who sang songs such as *Negro's Delight* and *Root Hog or Die*. He played various instruments such as the tin whistle, guitar, concertina and piano. At the end of some of his shows, Houdin would take on an audience member at a dance challenge, set before a panel of judges, with the winner being awarded a prize.

An incident off the New Plymouth coast occurred near the end of Houdin's magical career in 1863. He was a passenger in the Lady Bird steamboat and in rough weather was in a surf boat carrying a group of people to the shore. It capsized and one man, 52-year-old Alexander King, was drowned. Houdin survived along with all the others.

Houdin went on to perform more shows throughout the country before retiring from show business altogether. Interval could find no evidence that he moved to Australia, as was once reported he intended, to teach music, singing and dancing

there. He did move to New Plymouth and, with his wife Martha, settled in a house in Brougham St. It is possible that after his retirement as a magician and entertainer, he was a barber, a photographer and vocalist tutor.

But the quiet life wasn't to last for Houdin. In 1865, he was admitted to hospital and later released with the newspaper reporting him "a confirmed lunatic and not safe to be at large". He spent the last three or four years of his life paralysed and destitute and possibly institutionalised. Harry Houdin died, aged 39, and is buried in New Plymouth's Te Henui cemetery.

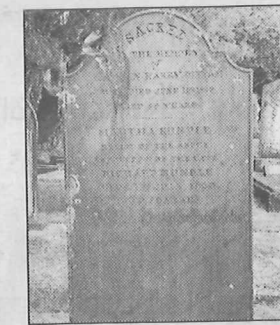
Tom Interval says while Houdin never made a name for himself beyond Australia and NZ, he "planted smiles on the faces of people" and, given that his performances in New Plymouth were during the early years of the Land Wars in Taranaki, his efforts would have been greatly appreciated.

References:
<http://www.smashwords.com/extreader/read/240984/13/harry-houdin-the-great-polynational-mimic>
<http://www.miraclefactory.net/mpt/view.php?id=197&type=articles>
Thanks also to Mike Gooch at Puke Ariki's Research Centre.



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Resting place: Harry Houdin's headstone, which he shares with his wife, Martha, in Te Henui Cemetery.

Photo: MIKE GOOCH