

HARRY HOUDINI



Harry Houdini was born Ehrich Weiss in Budapest in 1874. His father was a rabbi, and when Harry was four the family moved to Wisconsin so his father could start a congregation there. After his father's congregation broke apart, the family moved to New York to start over.

In New York, Harry became fascinated by the performing arts. New York was a performer's paradise back then, with theaters all over town. In order to help bring in extra money, he started a magic act with a friend. Calling themselves The Brothers Houdini, they began picking up shows. For the stage, he changed his name from Ehrich Weiss to Harry Houdini, or sometimes just 'Houdini.'

However, just as they were getting started, his friend left the act. Harry's brother took his place for a while, but he soon found another person, a singer and dancer named Beatrice, to become his partner both on stage and in life. They got married and she became the assistant in his act.

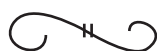
Harry and Beatrice booked many shows, but hardly ever headlined. Harry decided that they needed something really special to make people notice them. He began working on ways to escape from a pair of handcuffs, thinking that would be his ticket to stardom. One night, after doing his handcuff trick in Minnesota, a talent manager who had been in the audience asked to work with him. In just a few months, Houdini became one of the hottest vaudeville acts in the country. He toured the world for almost five years.

After spending so long performing with handcuffs, he wanted to try something new. He changed his act to include something called his "Open Challenge": he asked the public to try and invent a device that he could not break free from. When it came time to perform, people would come to see if he could escape. He always did.

Soon after that, he began performing a new act where he escaped from a giant can filled with water. It was so popular, he began doing underwater escapes. In his first big underwater act, he was lowered into the East River in a crate. He got out in less than a minute.

Houdini's next idea was his biggest challenge of all: trying to escape from a straitjacket...while hanging upside-down by his feet from the top of a skyscraper. It was an amazing feat, but as movies became popular, fewer and fewer people wanted to come out to see Houdini perform. He tried performing his acts on film, but they were no match for the popularity of the movies. He moved back to New York and continued to perform in theaters.

Houdini is remembered not only for being a great magician, but a great showman as well. He always made sure the audience was not only amazed by his tricks, but entertained by his presence. In a time before TV and cell phones, he was able to become one of the biggest celebrities of his time, and is still a famous name today.



1. Why do you think Houdini became such a popular entertainer? Do you think he would've become as famous if he were a singer or actor instead of an escape artist?

2. Do you enjoy watching magic acts or escape artists? Why or why not?
