

A SKETCHBOOK OF SPIRITUALISTS AND MAGICIANS

The Work of *Cincinnati Post* Artist Manuel Rosenberg

BY ANITA ROSENBERG

In the 1920s, my great-uncle Manuel Rosenberg met, sketched, and befriended some of the most famous magicians and spiritualists of his time.

I learned this during a 2016 family tree deep dive, where I discovered that my Grandpa Simon's brother, Manuel Rosenberg (January 29, 1897 to April 28, 1967), worked as a newspaper illustrator, art editor, and journalist. I also found out that the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library preserves an archive of 300 of his drawings, manuscripts, and clippings. Among them, I found evidence of his friendships with magicians and spiritualists of the era: escape artist and anti-spiritualist Harry Houdini, mentalist Joseph Dunninger, and illusionist Howard Thurston, for whom Manuel created sketches and illustrations for his serialized biography. He also befriended Swami Yogananda, a spiritual celebrity of the day.

Of course, his interests were hardly surprising. The Roaring Twenties may have been remembered for flappers and jazz, but the decade also saw a public curiosity in spiritual awakening, enlightenment, and heightened intuition. Much like the New Age movement of recent years, magicians drew on these fashions in their performances, and newspapers eagerly covered them. Indian philosophies introduced many Americans to yoga and the idea of karma, while fortune-telling, tarot readings, séances, and Ouija boards became popular diversions. Fascination with life after death carried an especially poignant weight in the wake of World War I and the influenza pandemic.

Great Uncle Manuel might not have been surprised to discover that, two generations later, I've been interested in astrology and tarot cards, practice yoga, and meditate. Maybe I've inherited his fascination with these subjects.





At a Séance With HARRY HOUDINI

MANUEL FREQUENTLY TEAMED up with a fellow Jewish reporter at the *Cincinnati Post*, Alfred Segal. In April 1926, they were assigned to cover a story about a séance with Harry Houdini. The magician had been invited to visit a family who listened to “the spirit that writes books.” Mrs. Lois McGehan of Cincinnati held regular séances in which she claimed her mother’s spirit, Jewell Williams, visited her and dictated books, short stories, and letters. The family claimed that a bound book of several hundred pages “written” by her deceased mother described heaven and advised the family to buy a specific store, which later was sold for a profit. Speaking to her mother’s spirit

proved to be a profitable venture for Mrs. McGehan.

At the time of his visit to Cincinnati, Houdini was traveling the country with his show featuring spiritualism exposures, and he regularly offered cash prizes for evidence of genuine communication from beyond the grave. It was a perfect subject for the *Cincinnati Post*, with Houdini conducting the investigation, Segal writing the account, and Rosenberg providing drawings of the séance in action.

Invited to the McGehan home, the reporters arrived skeptical. Great Uncle Manuel, more accustomed to sketching celebrities—actors, opera singers, politicians, athletes—certainly enjoyed a good show, and Houdini, as the star of the séance, was ready to deliver one.

Mrs. Williams’ ghost supposedly spoke to her family through taps on a small table balanced on a larger one. Her daughter placed her hands on the table and slowly recited the alphabet while the spirit tapped, indicating a letter, to spell out messages—one letter at a time, an exhausting process.

After tapping out a few words for Houdini, Mrs. McGehan turned to him expectantly. “Are you convinced?”

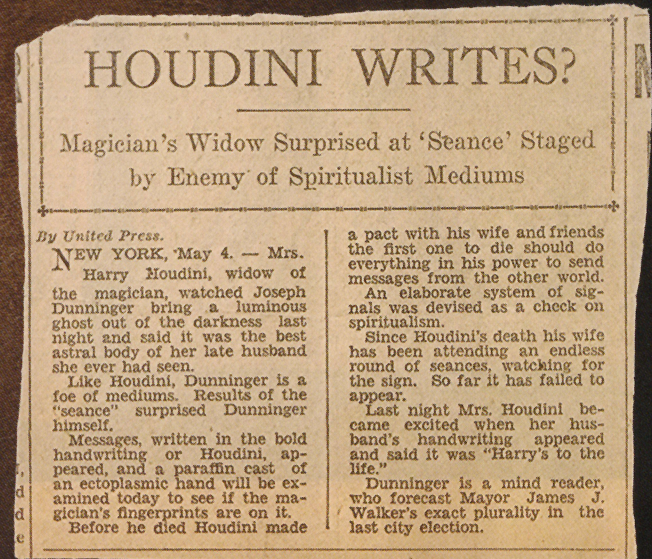
Houdini didn’t hesitate. “What I have seen is not evidential. There is no proof.” He then placed his hands firmly on the small table and asked Segal, the *Post* reporter, to call out the alphabet. A message was tapped out, beginning with “L”: *Lady is sincere, but there is nothing evidential. Lincoln.*

Houdini revealed the trick: He had moved the table himself, inventing the message.



OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Rosenberg with his ever-present sketchpad, a photo from the 1940s. RIGHT: In his portrait of Houdini, Rosenberg sketched the magician reading the newspaper. Houdini autographed the sketch for the artist.

THIS PAGE, LEFT: Sketches from the Post show the process of the séance. Houdini produced better results than the spirits. BELOW: Rosenberg clipped this article after Houdini's death, when Dunninger materialized Houdini's ghost for his widow.



McGehan protested, "But we receive as many as 1,500 words a day in this way."

"I don't doubt you," Houdini replied politely. "But most of the so-called spiritualistic phenomena I've seen can be reproduced by perfectly natural means."

Houdini left, his cash prize unawarded. Rosenberg and Segal returned to their desks to construct a hell of a story, complete with a careful account of the deception and a step-by-step visual account of the séance. Great Uncle Manuel's portrait of Houdini—which portrays the escape artist scanning a newspaper and makes him appear more business-like than most publicity drawings—was autographed by Houdini to the artist, along with his famous phrase, "My mind is the key that sets me free." It was a clever motto that combined his success at escapes with his scientific analysis of spiritualism.

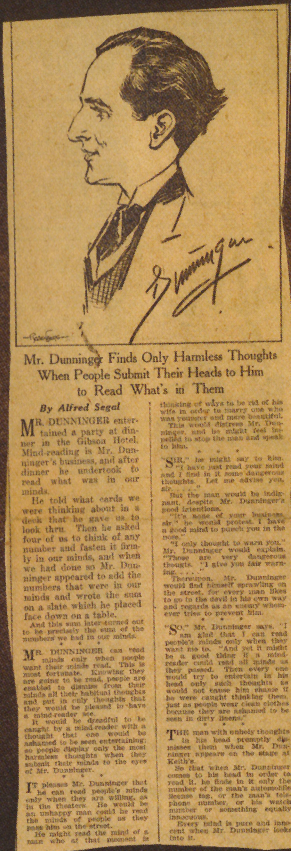
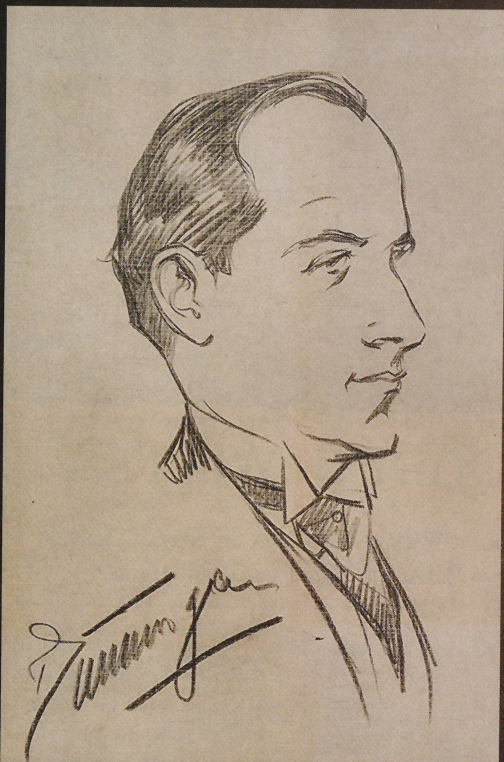
Houdini died the next year, in October 1926, after suffering a ruptured appendix. He had specialized in feats that seemed supernatural—The East Indian Needle Mystery, The Water Torture Cell, and Metamorphosis ("The Exchange of a Human Being in a Locked, Sealed and Corded Trunk").

Houdini presented himself as a trickster, as President of the Society of American Magicians, debunking the frauds of spiritualism. Still, his weird abilities invited plenty of speculation after his death.

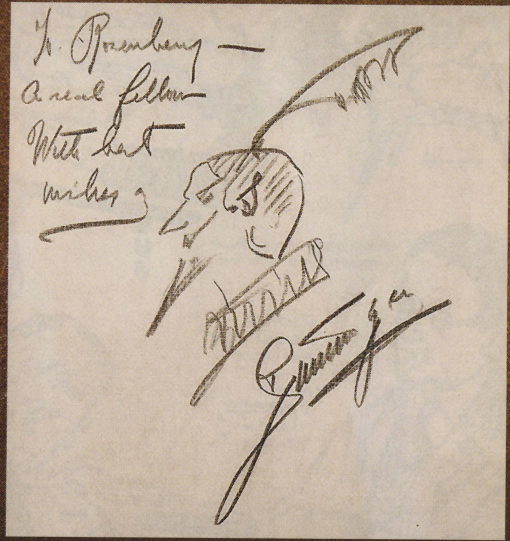
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the British writer and physician who created the character of Sherlock Holmes, was an ardent spiritualist and friend of Houdini. He believed that Houdini had concealed his supernatural abilities, and even called the magician, "One of the greatest spiritualists."

Not surprisingly, Great Uncle Manuel

clipped an article from the May 4, 1928 *Cincinnati Post* titled "Houdini Writes?" It must have reminded him of their séance with the McGehan family. It was an account of a séance held by Joseph Dunninger, the popular magician and mind reader, which had impressed Houdini's widow, Bess. The article described Bess as watching Dunninger "bring a luminous ghost out of the darkness" and said that Bess claimed his presentation "was the best astral body of her late husband she had seen." Bess spent 10 years seeking some proof of life after death, awaiting the return of her husband's spirit. But Dunninger's séance was apparently a publicity stunt designed to keep Houdini's name in the press and promote his own skills as a magician.



LEFT: A sketch of Dunninger, signed by the mind reader. CENTER: The article on Dunninger featured a different portrait by Rosenberg. BELOW: Dunninger drew his own picture, and signed it, for the artist at the end of their meeting.



Mind Reading by JOSEPH DUNNINGER

GREAT UNCLE MANUEL also knew Dunninger personally. In 1926, he interviewed the celebrated mentalist, who left him “mystified by his mind reading skills.”

Dunninger was born in New York City in 1892 to a family of impoverished German immigrants. He began his career as a stage illusionist and magician. Still, a clever agent advised him to improve his speech, wear sophisticated clothing, and eliminate the obvious tricks in favor of mind-reading feats. When Dunninger came through Cincinnati in December 1926 as a headliner at Keith’s Orpheum, he entertained a group of newspapermen at the newly built Gibson Hotel downtown. On assignment that night were the *Cincinnati Post* duo: Alfred Segal with his notebook, and Great Uncle Manuel with his sketchpad. Segal reported:

Mind reading is Dunninger’s business, and after dinner he undertook to read what was in our minds. Mr. Dunninger can read minds

only when people want their minds read. This is most fortunate. Knowing they are going to be read, people are enabled to dismiss from their minds all their habitual thoughts and put in only thoughts that they would be pleased to have a mind reader see.

He might read the mind of a man who at that moment is thinking of ways to be rid of his wife in order to marry one who was younger and more beautiful. This would distress Mr. Dunninger, and he might feel impelled to stop the man and speak to him.

Great Uncle Manuel was nervous about Dunninger reading his mind. He wrote about the experience in a manuscript:

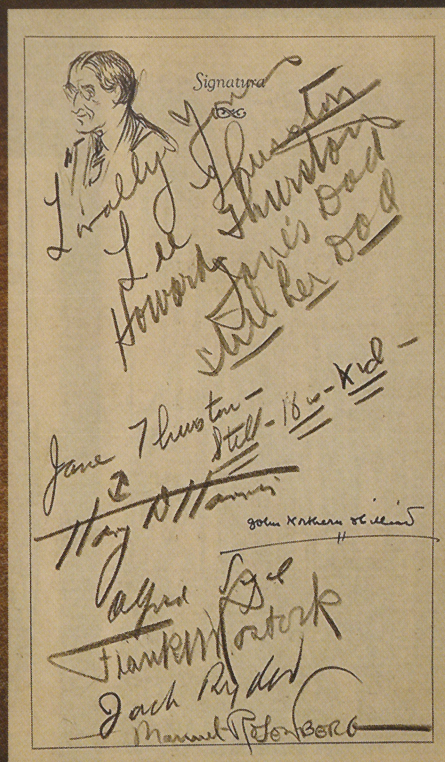
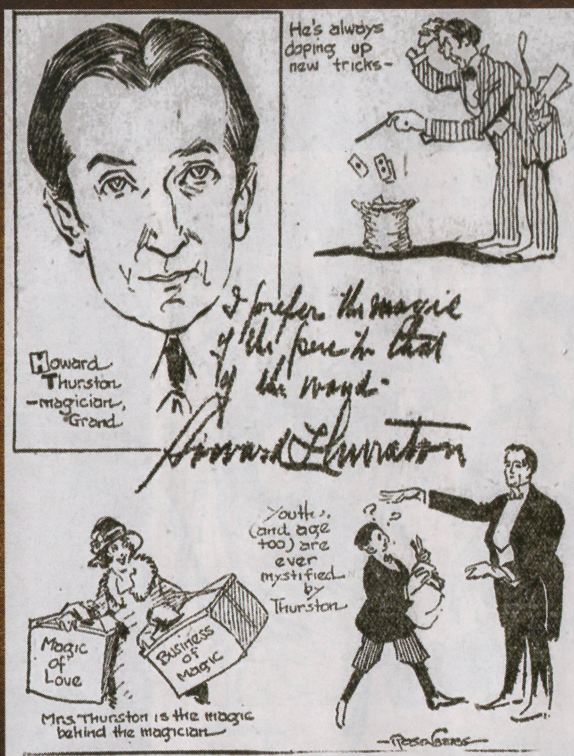
Joseph Dunninger’s specialty is expressing the thoughts and ideas of the thousands of men and women he meets or from part of his public audience. The great, near-great and every-day individuals look alike to him and day after day he startles and sometimes amazes the patrons of the larger Keith-Albee houses through the country. When asked how he accomplishes his wonderful mind-reading feats he replies, “Well, perhaps I have a radio receiving brain.”

He had been reading the minds of the rest of the newspaper men whom he was entertaining at dinner. I was certain he had read mine when

he turned to me and asked for a pencil: “Here’s an idea of what I can do with a pencil,” he said and forthwith set out to draw for me. Just what I had been wishing him to do! I was glad too, that I had not let my mind wander into goodness knows what fields as artists are prone to. It wouldn’t be safe around Joseph Dunninger!

That night, Dunninger gave Manuel a drawing of Mephistopheles—no doubt the image he wanted to leave in the minds of the fascinated reporters. In return, Manuel captured an accurate crayon sketch of the famed mentalist, which Dunninger signed. Both drawings survive in the Rosenberg archives, evidence of a memorable evening when artistry and “mind reading” met across the table at the Gibson Hotel.

Dunninger proved remarkably adaptable, moving from vaudeville stages to the airwaves and then to television. By the 1950s and ’60s, he had become such a cultural touchstone that comedians built characters around him—Johnny Carson’s “Amazing Dillinger” and Soupy Sales’ “Gunninger the Mentalist.” Even Lucille Ball name-checked him on *I Love Lucy*, bragging to Ricky, “Just call me Dunninger,” shorthand for having psychic powers. His influence lingered for



LEFT: Sketches of Thurston adorn a Post article about his show. Thurston signed the clipping to the artist: "I prefer the magic of the pencil to that of the wand." RIGHT: A menu includes a sketch of Thurston with autographs from the magician, his wife Lee, and daughter Jane, and John Northern Hilliard.

Backstage With HOWARD THURSTON

HOWARD THURSTON, born in 1869 in Columbus, Ohio, was America's most popular magician, touring with his impressive illusion show through the 1920s.

Great Uncle Manuel admired and respected the great magician, and the two Ohioans shared a long friendship. Their bond was rooted in humble beginnings; both had been ambitious newsboys on the streets of downtown Cincinnati. Thurston sold papers in 1878 at the busy corner of Fifth and Vine; 30 years later at age 11, Manuel sold the *Cincinnati Post*, where he would eventually be hired as art editor.

Great Uncle Manuel first sketched Thurston for the *Post* in 1924, when he was 27 and Thurston, then 55, was already world-famous. They became close and remained so until Thurston's death, with Manuel welcomed into the magician's inner circle alongside his wife, Lee, and daughter, Jane, who followed her father into magic. Whenever Thurston's family visited Cincinnati,

they dined with Manuel. He saved menus and playful dinner sketches, now preserved in the Columbia archives.

Newspaper reviews of Thurston's shows in Cincinnati were filled with rapturous accounts of his latest magic. "The Wonder Show of the Universe" was so large that it needed eight train cars to transport the menagerie of colorful costumes, illusions, and the large cast of talented assistants.

Thurston made a horse disappear from a platform high over the stage; he made an automobile vanish, produced dozens of dancing girls, and sawed a lady in half. He was also famous for his flawless manipulation of playing cards, and performed his card act at every performance for over 40 years. In 1928, *Post* reviewer Amy Porter painted a scene of pure enchantment:

A shadowy stage. A rope flies up and takes root in the air. A naked slave glides up the rope. A puff of incense, and—the slave has vanished. The Arabian Nights haven't a corner on magic thrills, for Thurston is putting them to shame daily in his performance at the Grand. Thurston has added a number of new tricks such as The Elastic Lady, The Flight of Time, and The Mystic Follies, but he still depends chiefly on

decades: In an episode of *Columbo*, villain Jack Cassidy quips, "It's an old standby... Dunninger used it in his act." And in 1953, he even advised on *Houdini*, the biopic of his friend, starring Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh.

In Great Uncle Manuel's gray box of files, alongside autographed drawings and news clippings, I found another wrinkled article about Dunninger. Manuel clearly valued the encounter—enough to save this scrap of newsprint. The piece, almost certainly planted by Dunninger himself, described his appearance in New York traffic court for a parking violation. Even there, the judge and spectators couldn't resist challenging him to read their minds:

"Occupation?" said the clerk. "Mind reader," said Dunninger. Magistrate Macrery, "I wonder if you can tell me what sentence I am about to impose on you?" "Concentrate, please," said Dunninger, "and I will do my best."

Magistrate Macrery concentrated and wrote something on a slip of paper. "I have it," Dunninger said finally. "Five dollars or two days in jail." "You're right," said Magistrate Macrery.

The clerks, deputy sheriff, and traffic cops stood open-mouthed as Dunninger paid the fine and left the courtroom.



LEFT: Rosenberg's sketch of Thurston's show from backstage. The magician is onstage standing in front of the lion cage before the animal disappears. BELOW: An illustration from Thurston's autobiography shows the trick that mystified Herrmann.



what his audience demands in the way of floating princesses, returning spirits, and vanishing flesh-and-blood girls.

That enchantment took a lot of work; nowhere was busier than Thurston's backstage. Stagehands darted in and out, curtains billowed, props shifted into place, all in preparation for the show's illusions. From his vantage point backstage, Manuel had a view of the chaos and choreography the audience never saw. His drawing captures the famous lion trick, not from the plush seats of the theater, but from the secret world just behind the curtain.

Thurston's popularity in Cincinnati was reflected in a steady stream of *Post* features—each one illustrated by Great Uncle Manuel.

Reporters followed him through the streets as he spoke with sympathy about using magic to repair broken lives: to give sight to the blind, or restore a legless man. He offered advice to the lovelorn, touted a new diet that he claimed restored his health and youth, and even lectured in a local church, where he recalled comforting a dying man with the tools of showmanship.

In 1928, Thurston also hosted a "Hindu

dinner" (his term for Indian cuisine) for Cincinnati newspapermen at the Cincinnati Club. A photo shows Thurston front and center with Great Uncle Manuel in the back row, next to a gentleman wearing a turban. During his speech, Thurston paid high tribute to Cincinnati newspapers.

Great Uncle Manuel's artistry earned him a special assignment when Thurston's autobiography, *My Magic Life*, was serialized in the *Cincinnati Post* in early 1931.

Over 20 chapters, each installment featured one of Manuel's dramatic illustrations—cleverly drawn to show the older Thurston reenacting scenes from his early career. Readers saw him perform the Rising Cards for Leon Herrmann or face down a snake charmer in India.

The 1929 book version of Thurston's biography included only a handful of photographs, but the *Post*'s series came alive with Great Uncle Manuel's oversized drawings—no doubt attracting new readers to the magician's exploits.

Thurston returned to Cincinnati year after year, until his retirement in 1935.

A Professional Yogi: SWAMI YOGANANDA

ONE OF THE most unusual figures Great Uncle Manuel encountered was Paramahansa Yogananda, the Indian guru who helped bring yoga to the United States. Born Mukunda Lal Ghosh in 1893, Yogananda arrived in America in 1920 and launched a lecture tour that drew thousands.

When he appeared in Cincinnati in 1926—long dark hair flowing, draped in orange robes—his presence was dramatic. Even my worldly Great Uncle Manuel had never before met someone of Indian descent. The "East Meets West" theme fascinated the public, and Manuel captured Yogananda in a series of portraits. In return, the yogi sent him a self-portrait.

Yogananda's fame grew quickly, attracting celebrity followers, including soprano Amelita Galli-Curci and Clara Clemens Gabrielowitsch, the daughter of Mark Twain. Hollywood stars like Greta Garbo and Clara Bow flocked to hear him speak.

He was the first prominent Indian to be hosted in the White House by President



LEFT: Rosenberg's portrait of Yogananda displays the quality of "spirituality" that impressed the artist. RIGHT: His cartoon for the Post shows a different impression of the swami as he's interviewed by its reporter.

Calvin Coolidge in 1927. His early acclaim led to him being dubbed "the 20th century's first superstar guru" by the *Los Angeles Times*. In an unpublished manuscript, Great Uncle Manuel wrote:

Swami Yoganada is a man indifferent to the details of a formal biography. His myriad of admirers and students attest to the efficiency of his message and his methods of teaching. In his orange colored robes, with his long black hair, he seemed very, very foreign. Only the spirituality of his face was familiar to me. I had seen that look before. There are many good men in the world, I find.

He posed for me graciously and then said: "I will be pleased to make a drawing of myself for you." I was not at all surprised. But when a few days later his secretary punctiliously sent me the accompanying drawing, I was, I admit agreeable so.

He had said modestly that it would not be as good as mine, but actually it looks like the Swami... indeed in some ways more than my impression does.

One of Yogananda's goals was to establish yoga centers across the country, and he courted wealthy society women at luncheons to help finance the effort. American

audiences—especially women—were captivated by the Indian guru's promises of happiness, his teachings on conserving energy, and even his luxuriant, flowing hair.

Great Uncle Manuel and Segal weren't completely charmed by the mystic. When they reported on his free "Everlasting Youth" Cincinnati lecture, they slipped into the back row of the theater, where Segal observed a crowd of stout women with high blood pressure, tired businessmen with too much money and indigestion, and others with gray hair trying to stay awake because the late hour was past their early bedtimes:

Most of those present had passed 40 and looked back with sad eyes upon their departed youth: it was only the other day they were young... Once we could stay up all night and be fresh for work the next day and go to the show the following evening. But now we fell asleep while awaiting the swami to tell us how to be young again.

He did not reveal the technique by which these things are done. We learned that the price for a special course in which the technique was disclosed is \$25 [\$450 in 2025 dollars] for one person or \$40 [\$700 today] for a couple. Then we went home.

Swami Yogananda's growing prominence in America was not without controversy. From 1926 to 1937, he was placed under FBI surveillance and accused of illicit affairs with followers. Yet the scrutiny did little to diminish his impact.

His *Autobiography of a Yogi*, published in 1946, became both a critical and commercial success—ultimately selling more than 4 million copies and earning a place among the "100 Best Spiritual Books of the 20th Century" by publisher HarperCollins and a group of spiritual authors.

Decades later, his influence reached Silicon Valley: Steve Jobs arranged for 500 copies to be distributed to mourners at his memorial.

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**THROUGHOUT HISTORY**, tricksters and hoaxers have purveyed the mystical arts, some professing magic to be mere diversion and some misrepresenting their abilities. Those soothsayers and magicians passing through Cincinnati shared their gifts with the city's willing believers, and Great Uncle Manuel's artistry left behind a uniquely personal account of these visits. (9)