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Houdini's most spectacular escape and possibly the most famous illusion of all time.

by Sidney Radner

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# WATER TORTURE CELL

In a letter to his friend Will Goldston, Houdini called the Water Torture Cell "without doubt the greatest spectacular thing ever witnessed on the stage" (from *Houdini, A Pictorial Life* by Milbourne Christopher, Crowell Company, 1976). This was written in 1912 when Houdini first presented his newest and greatest creation at Circus Büsch in Berlin. He had worked on this effect for approximately three years, having it constructed in England in 1911. He first performed it there for a very limited audience (possibly as few as one) for the purpose of copyrighting and registering it. Houdini had previously experienced legal problems, and patents were not possible because when filing for the patent the secret would be revealed. It was thus presented as a skit with a prepared script. His foresight proved wise as the copyright formed the basis of his winning a lawsuit preventing Undina, a female performer, from doing a similar trick.

The Water Torture Cell was willed to Theodore Hardeen, Houdini's brother and former partner, with the condition it was to be destroyed upon Hardeen's death. However, in June of 1942, I acquired the Cell along with many other Houdini effects. Obtaining more than just the apparatus, Hardeen taught me the never-revealed secrets of the "Escape Act," as I was doing a similar type of challenge presentation during that period.

The Water Torture Cell was shipped to me in five trunks and three crates with a total weight of 1,610 pounds. The custom-made trunks cost over \$500 in 1912, and are beautiful to behold to this date. One trunk held the top, a second the base, a third the two sides, and a fourth trunk held the rear section. Three crates held three front glass plates, as two were carried as spares. A final trunk carried all the necessary pulleys, hardware, ropes, etc.

From the time of Houdini's death in 1926 until it was shipped to me in 1942, the Cell



Houdini practicing the escape

Left: Houdini entering the Water Torture Cell





remained unseen. Once in my basement, it was viewed by only a small group of magicians including Hardeen, William Lindsay Gresham, Walter Gibson, and Milbourne Christopher (who related the experience in a 1943 *Linking Ring*).

Hardeen had planned to help me present the trick "after the war." His untimely death in 1945 prevented this from ever happening. At that time I was in the service stationed in India. It is interesting to note that in 1953 the famous magic collector, John McManus, requested that I ship my Houdini collection to the Museum of the American Circus in Sarasota, Florida, where it would be preserved. Fortunately, I turned the offer down.

In 1971 the Water Torture Cell was, along with other apparatus, shipped to Henry Muller's newly created Houdini Magical Hall of Fame in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. It remained there until a few months ago when Muller and I decided it was time to have the apparatus restored to its original condition. Since no one in the field of magic better possessed the necessary skills required to work on this unique apparatus, John Gaughan was selected to do the restoration. (John notes that the bottom and lower back took considerable reconstruction due to water damage caused by a leaking aquarium used in the display.)

Over the last 50 years I have read numerous explanations of the "U.S.D." as Houdini called it (for upside down). None have been correct. Christopher said it was just under three feet square and just under six feet tall, with one inch thick glass and lined with metal. Charles Reynolds also wrote it was "metal lined." Actually it's a small 26.5 inches wide and 59 inches tall. It is made of Honduras mahogany and steel, with brass fittings, many cast especially for the piece, but no metal liner. The glass is actually half inch thick. Houdini explained the glass front in a 1914 recording as follows:

"In front, you will notice a plate of glass placed there for self-protection. Should anything go wrong when I am locked up, and it's absolutely impossible to obtain air, my assistants, who are thoroughly trained and know how long it is possible for me to live without air, one of them watches through the curtains ready in case of emergency, with an axe to rush in, demolishing the glass, allowing the water to flow out in order to save my life. I positively and honestly do not expect any accident to happen, but we all know accidents will happen and when least expected."

John Gaughan noted that what impressed him most was the fine craftsmanship of the

piece, "It was built like a piece of furniture, rather than a stage prop—put together with such care." When filled with approximately 250 gallons of water and Houdini, the contents would exceed one ton.

There were different versions of the Water Torture Cell evolving into the one authentic cell that exists today. One of the changes made involved the use of safety bars to protect Houdini against broken glass in case of an emergency. The bars were built as a separate cage that was lowered into the Cell. The use of this cage was discontinued when Houdini discovered that without the bars, the audience had a better view.

One of the safety features not advertised were the two plugs located in the base of the Water Torture Cell. The plugs, five inches in diameter, could be unscrewed and removed from either the inside or the outside in case of an emergency. More often, they were removed from the outside as a method to empty the Cell.

Because Henry Muller agreed, we decided to allow the Water Torture Cell to stay in Los Angeles after John Gaughan's restoration. It will be exhibited for the first time in the United States since 1926 at the Conference on Magic History early November in North Hollywood, California. After which, it will be returned to the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame. Perhaps some day, at the right time and in the right situation, this "greatest spectacular thing ever witnessed on the stage" may once again be performed.

Middle: Moving the Cell to the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame in Niagara Falls, Canada  
Right: John Gaughan with the recently restored Cell and, from his private collection, one of Houdini's substitution trunks



In the late 30's, Sidney Radner became a protegee of Hardeen, and since then has amassed what many, including Milbourne Christopher and Hardeen himself, have called the world's finest collection of Houdini material. Here Hardeen and Radner look over the Water Torture Cell.

