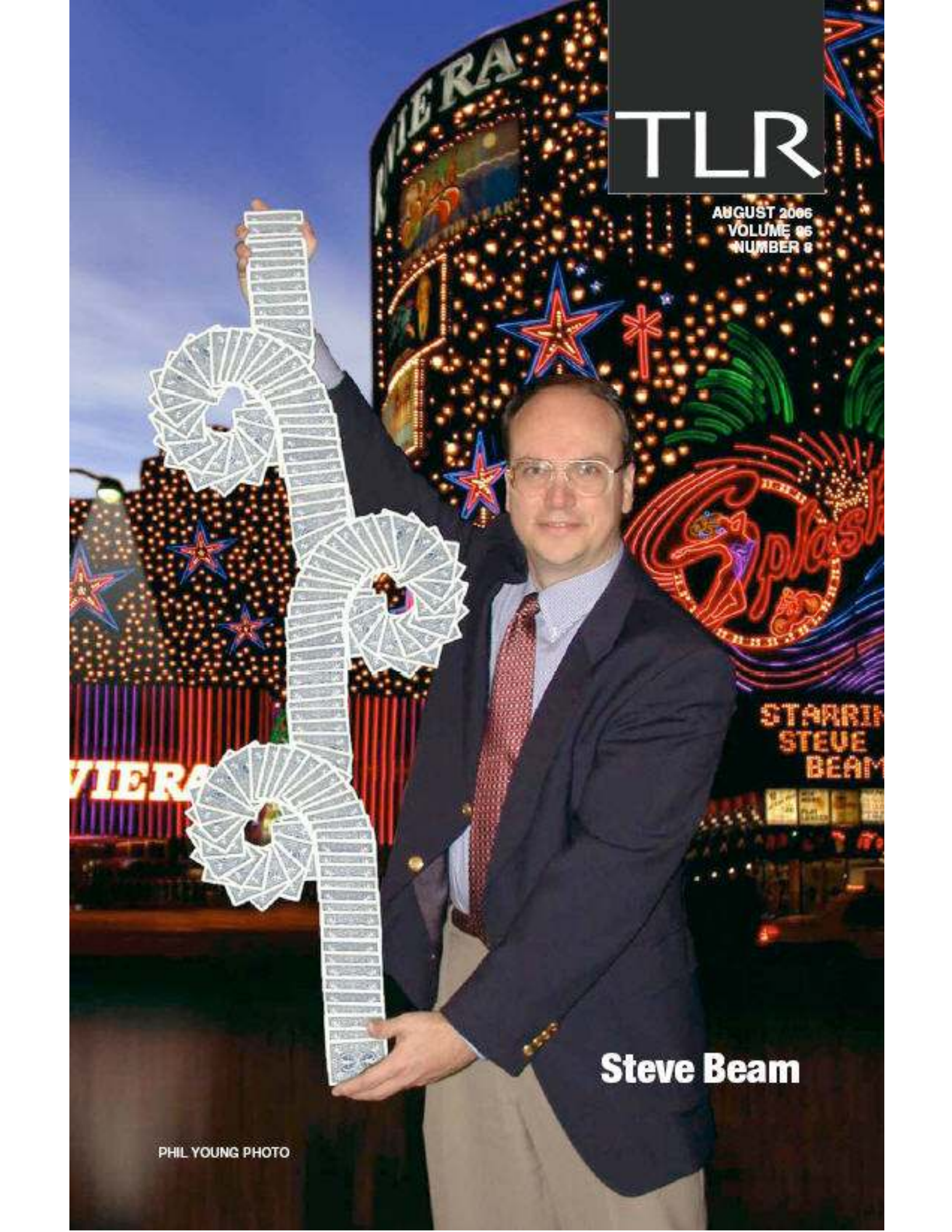


TLR

AUGUST 2006
VOLUME 95
NUMBER 8

Steve Beam

PHIL YOUNG PHOTO



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Saving Thurston:

The Fight to Preserve Green Lawn Abbey

By Robin Smith



Separated from the colorful booths featuring the paraphernalia of magic at the 75th Annual Magi-Fest Columbus, Ohio, 2006, a small space in the registration area features only a simple PowerPoint presentation, a brochure, and a large display of 2-1/4 picture-buttons for sale. Their subject? Howard Thurston, master magician of magic's Golden Age, and his final resting place, Green Lawn Abbey.

The two people in the booth have a mission: They hope to raise funds to repair and preserve Green Lawn Abbey and with it, Thurston's crypt before it is lost to decay and vandalism. Janice Loebbaka is a volunteer for the Columbus Landmarks Foundation, an architectural preservation organization. She first fell under the spell of the Abbey a few years ago while visiting it on the Landmarks' annual Dead End Bus Tour of allegedly haunted sites. She was fascinated by the building, but also remembers the evidence of vandalism: "It stunk," she said. "It smelled like urine. They were burning incense to cover the smell for the tour."

In 2005, Loebbaka was one of the organizers of the Dead End Tour. Hoping to include the Abbey again, she called Chip Aschinger, trustee of the Columbus

Cemetery Association. He turned her down. "He said it was too dangerous for people to be walking around inside, that there were blood and bird droppings that were health hazards," said Loebbaka. Remembering the beauty of the building underneath the damage, she says she became a little obsessed with the Abbey. "It was like it took over my mind," she said. "I'd wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it. I think I was being called to do something for the place."

Knowing that Thurston the Magician was Green Lawn Abbey's most famous "resident," Loebbaka called on Columbus dentist Dr. Timothy Moore, her friend and a dedicated magician. Would he be willing to do a show at the Abbey for the bus tour? Moore said, "At first I thought it was kind of an odd place to do a show, but then I decided it would be a great way to honor Thurston's memory." Moore then contacted Rory Feldman, New York magician and the owner of the largest collection of Thurston memorabilia in the world. Feldman said, "I'd known about Green Lawn Abbey for many years through my interest in Thurston." When asked if he'd like to be involved in the show, his answer was simple: "Absolutely."

Loebbaka continued to work on Chip Aschinger. She knew some magicians who might be interested in contributing money to secure the place, she told him. Could she get inside to take some photos for them? Since the first floor doors had just been broken into again and were standing open anyway, Aschinger gave her permission to take photos. She called him again: The first floor wasn't so bad, she said. She thought she could find volunteers to clean it up for the Dead End Tour, and they could do a magic show to attract some attention and maybe solicit some donations. Aschinger gave Landmarks permission to add the Abbey to the tour itinerary.

While preparing for the show and tour,

Loebbaka, Moore and Feldman mulled over the idea of attempting to raise funds for the Abbey's preservation. Dr. Moore, having been a featured performer the previous year, suggested an appearance at Magi-Fest to publicize their quest. Loebbaka contacted executive director Jep Hostetler, who was happy to donate a booth at an already full convention. But what to display? With little time to prepare for the February event, Loebbaka, Moore and Feldman decided to keep it simple: a presentation of photos of the Abbey, a brochure detailing its grand history, and photo buttons using images from Feldman's Thurston collection, to be sold as a fundraiser.

Green Lawn Abbey:

Only the Finest In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, cities across the United States replaced their aging city burial grounds with new, rural "garden cemeteries." Their abundant space and high aesthetic standards helped spark a new interest in aboveground interment. Wealthy families built elaborately designed private mausoleums to house their remains in perpetuity. For those aspiring to this "cleaner," more "modern" way of death but lacking the funds for a privately built tomb, there were community mausoleums.

The Columbus Mausoleum Company built dozens of community mausoleums in central Ohio, mostly small to medium-size structures. In 1927 the company began erecting its ultimate showpiece, the two-story 654-crypt Green Lawn Abbey. The Abbey's rusticated gray granite exterior featured an arched stone entry on the first level and a portico with four solid granite columns on the second floor. The interior was sheathed in Vermont white marble and the floors tiled in Tennessee pink. Both floors were lit by finely wrought bronze light fixtures and featured a central foyer and chapel area with a marble lectern. Stained glass windows shimmered in the chapel areas, at the end of each hall or alcove, and in each upstairs family crypt space.

Besides a serene resting place for the dead, Green Lawn Abbey offered the finest amenities for the living: restroom facilities, central heat, and the comfort of thick Oriental carpets and carved wood benches and chairs for visiting mourners. Unfortunately, Green Lawn Abbey's fledgling perpetual care fund did not survive the disastrous stock market crash of 1929 and the depression that followed. As the number of crypts for sale dwindled and the families of its inhabitants died or left Columbus, the Abbey's maintenance funds disappeared with them. The Columbus Cemetery Association was formed in 1928 to care for the mausoleum and its future needs, but by the 1960s maintenance funds were nearly nonexistent and the building slowly began to deteriorate.

Howard Thurston, Grand Master of the Royal Dynasty of Magic

Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1870, Howard Thurston discovered magic at an early age, becoming well known for his skill with cards. Though he briefly studied for the ministry, magic won out and he began touring the U.S. with a small act. A successful turn on the European vaudeville circuit enabled him to develop larger illusions and undertake a world tour, during which he perfected his commanding stage presence.

Thurston accompanied the reigning king of magic, Harry Kellar, on his farewell tour in 1908. At the end of the tour, Kellar sold Thurston his show and passed his wand to Thurston as his appointed successor, beginning the Royal Dynasty of Magic which continues to this day: Harry Kellar-Howard Thurston-Dante (Harry Jansen)-Lee Grable-Lance Burton.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Thurston toured the United States and Europe with a lavish show, keeping a few of Kellar's tricks and adding his own repertoire, including his famous East Indian Rope Trick, a vanishing Willys-Overland automobile, elaborate levitation illusions, and the Million Dollar Mystery.

The Great Depression and the rising popularity of moving pictures ended the era of large stage shows. After his last full theatrical show in 1931, Thurston adapted some of his most elaborate illusions to shorter, faster-paced shows in movie theaters. The pace was stressful for a man in his sixties and possibly contributed to a cerebral hemorrhage suffered onstage in 1935. Thurston was planning his return to the stage when he suffered a second stroke in March of 1936, from which he never recovered.

After Thurston's death on April 13,



1936, at his home in Florida, his remains were returned to his hometown for interment in Green Lawn Abbey, a prestigious final resting place for Columbus's famous son. Howard Thurston was one of the giants of his day, the contemporary and equal of Houdini and Harry Blackstone Sr. and the heir to the great Harry Kellar. Yet in speaking to visitors at Magi-Fest in 2006, magician and Thurston collector Rory Feldman was surprised at how few of today's young magicians were familiar with Thurston's legacy.

Feldman plans to continue working to save Thurston's burial place at Green Lawn Abbey, and to encourage the involvement of his fellow magicians. For more information on Howard Thurston, visit Rory Feldman's Thurston site, www.ThurstonMasterMagician.com.

The Thurston Legend

Howard Thurston, like many of his contemporaries, took an interest in spiritualism. Thurston made pacts with Houdini, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and others, planning to attempt communication from the afterlife. As Houdini and Doyle preceded him in death, it was Thurston's friend and business associate Claude Noble who came to the Green Lawn Abbey crypt on the anniversary of the magician's death, carrying a magician's wand. If Thurston's spirit were able, it would fulfill the pact by knocking the wand to the floor.

At 12:30 p.m. on April 13, 1937, one year to the minute after Thurston's death, Claude Noble knelt before the crypt holding a wand, recited the Lord's Prayer and said, "Howard, Claude is here to carry out your pact, God willing." Nothing happened, and a disappointed Noble vowed to return the following year. Claude Noble kept his word to his life-long friend, returning yearly until his own death.

Noble's attempts to raise the spirit of Thurston became a part of Columbus lore and may have later contributed to Green Lawn Abbey's troubles. The Abbey took on an air of mystery that drew the curious to make their own attempts at spirit communication. Several local magicians own up to having broken into the Abbey in their youth looking for the tomb of the great Thurston. A Broken Wand ceremony performed at the crypt only increased the fascination, and over the years Green Lawn Abbey became a popular target for curious vandals.

Vandalism and the desecration of the graves of the famous are a common problem, but overtones of mystery and the supernatural make the graves of well-known magicians particular targets. From modest beginnings in the 1960s, break-ins were a serious problem by the 1980s. No longer merely a target for Thurston seek-

ers, the Abbey attracts urban "explorers," ghost hunters, fringe occult groups, and many who are just looking for a place to party.

The Columbus Cemetery Association installed iron security gates and covered the stained glass windows with steel bars and mesh. Determined vandals squeezed over the gates to push the broken bronze doors open. Once inside, they damaged more windows, attempted to break into crypts, smashed statuary and benches, and left piles of broken beer bottles. In one recent incident an intruder left a trail of blood across the second floor after cutting himself while breaking in. Finally, the openings allow birds and small animals to enter the Abbey to build nests and foul the beautiful bronze and marble fixtures with their droppings.

Carmine Menduni, who has watched the destruction accelerate over the years, is clearly angered by the situation. "It's frustrating," he said. "We've tried to secure the place, and it just seems like it's a challenge to [the vandals]. We've had them pull the iron gates completely off. Those are solid iron gates up there!"

Whatever the original source of Green Lawn Abbey's problems, all parties involved with the structure agree that its rescue is becoming a now-or-never proposition. Under Ohio law, an abandoned, deteriorating cemetery is turned over to the township in which it stands. Eventually the township could choose to condemn and demolish the Abbey, moving the remains encrypted there to a common grave elsewhere – a fate that has already befallen the nearby Delaware Mausoleum.

The immediate need is to secure the building and prevent further damage by vandals. A family member of one of the Abbey's residents has recently donated money to clear concealing brush from the



Rory Feldman, Dr. Timothy Moore, and Janice Loebbaka in Columbus, Ohio.

property. Another local donor is willing to contribute substantially for a security system. But before a system can be installed, repairs must be made to the doors and windows.

After security issues, classical architect William Heyer, who has worked with the Columbus Landmarks Association in the past said, "The roof is the big thing. Some of the Spanish tiles on the gabled section need to be replaced, but the main problem is water penetration on the flat areas of the roof." Water leaks around the edges of the rubber roof membrane and improperly installed flashing has allowed water to seep into the interior, heavily damaging the plaster ceilings, sections of which have fallen.

Heyer believes the building is basically solid, and well worth saving even aside from its status as the burial place of Howard Thurston and more than 600 oth-

ers. "It's definitely worthy of being preserved. I'd say the same thing even if it weren't a mausoleum. It's a great example of the Palladian style – I don't know of another building in the region like it."

One ray of hope for Green Lawn Abbey's future is the involvement of the Columbus Landmarks Foundation. With a solid thirty-year record of success working for the preservation of central Ohio's historic structures, the Landmarks Foundation can provide fundraising help and community resources that have been lacking in previous efforts on the Abbey's behalf (see sidebar, The Columbus Landmarks Foundation).

Work has begun in small but significant ways. With technical assistance from Rory Feldman, volunteers have created a Green Lawn Abbey web site at www.greenlawn-abbey.com that provides a history of the structure, information on Howard Thurs-



Thurston Tomb at Green Lawn Abbey.

ton's legacy of magic, and a link to the Columbus Landmarks Foundation for those who wish to make donations earmarked for Green Lawn Abbey. Volunteers hope to begin searching for family members of Abbey residents to let them know of the Abbey's needs. Janice Loebbaka is working to have the Abbey placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Loebbaka is also working to organize cleanup crews for the Abbey and its grounds. Timothy Moore and Rory Feldman intend to continue their efforts to seek support from the magic community. Moore thinks it is vital to save the Abbey

"because Howard [Thurston] is there. For Columbus to be the birthplace and the final resting place of such a highly esteemed magician is incredible." Moore acknowledges some possible hesitation on the part of magicians stemming from the number of requests they have received to save the graves of other legends of magic but he has faith that his brother and sister magicians will respond. Referring to the Columbus Landmarks Foundation, he said, "Once magicians see there's a legitimate group working here, they'll step forward."

We hope so, too. Please think about what you can do - and do it.



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