

HOUDINI IN OAKLAND, 1915

On November 21, 1915 an advertisement appeared in the Oakland Tribune announcing that the Sheriff of Alameda County, Frank Barnet, had challenged Harry Houdini to escape from a straightjacket while suspended upside down from the upper level of the First National Bank building at the intersection Broadway and Fourteenth Streets, Oakland.

Oakland Tribune, November 21, 1915

OAKLAND Orpheum

FRANK BARNET Challenges HOUDINI

Mr. Harry Houdini,
Orpheum Theatre, Oakland, Cal.

Dear Sir:

Understanding that you are the originator of the so-called "Escape Performances" and the original handcuff king, I would like you to submit to a restraint which I believe to be beyond human power to get out of, and which has been used to secure the violently and murderously inclined insane.

I understand you have declared your ability to release yourself from a strait Jacket and that you have agreed with The Tribune to undertake such a release at noon next Tuesday in front of The Tribune Office at Fourteenth and Broadway.

I do not believe that any human being can escape, alone and unaided, from one of my strait jackets, while hanging head downward in mid-air, as you say you will try to do.

At the Tribune's request I ask that you allow me to put a strait jacket on you myself next Tuesday, so tight that there can be no trickery or deception in the matter.

If it is agreeable to you, I will adjust the strait jacket next Tuesday at 11:30 AM.

I hereby challenge you to submit to this test at my hands, but on the condition that no damages shall be charged to me if you fail to escape from the strait jacket while hanging by a rope from the roof of the First National Bank Building.

Yours truly,
Frank Barnet,
Sheriff of Alameda County

HOUDINI has accepted the above challenge and will permit the Sheriff to attach the strait jacket to him next Tuesday at noon, when HOUDINI agrees to hang from the roof of the First National Bank building, encased in the strait jacket in mid-air, head downward, and then attempt to release himself.

Houdini accepted Sheriff Barnet's challenge, of course. The "challenge" and the escape were routine publicity practice for him.

But things were not to go as usual on November 23, 1915.

It was raining that day; not the best of starts but the crowd was large in spite of that. According to the Tribune, 20,000 spectators were on hand to witness the event. Sheriff Barnet personally strapped Houdini into the straight jacket.

The difficulties began when a guide line slipped as Houdini was being raised from the street. As a result, the main rope supporting him swung rapidly toward the building. With his arms encased in the straightjacket, Houdini could do little to protect himself and his head hit hard against the structure. He appeared dazed but fortunately he remained conscious and continued with the escape.

Once free of the straightjacket, Houdini signaled his line tenders to lower him but the block and tackle above him had jammed during the escape, rendering his main support line immovable. Houdini was forced to hang there upside down for eight minutes until the problem could be solved.

His comment to The Tribune afterward:

The blow on the head I did not mind so much—one gets used to hard knocks—but the trouble with the ropes was different. The exertion of freeing myself so tightened the ropes that they stopped my circulation. My limbs were throbbing painfully, and one of them was bandaged from a previous accident at the time. I was a pretty sick man by the time they got that tackle working.

But the out of the ordinary occurrences didn't end there. Houdini's brother, Hardeen, was appearing at the Pantages Theater in Oakland at the same time Houdini was performing at the Oakland Orpheum. While Houdini was enduring the rain, the injury to his head and the effects of the tangled support line, Hardeen's people circulated through the crowd handing out cards that read, "Hardeen ... All This Week at the Pantages," leading many to credit Hardeen with the escape they were witnessing. According to Hardeen in a 1939 issue of The Sphinx, "It took Houdini years to think that was amusing."

Sheriff Barnet, the "initiator" of the challenge, is long gone but the First National Bank Building, now the Lionel J. Wilson Building, is still there. Damage to its facade, if any, resulting from Houdini's collision with it, unknown.

Oakland Tribune, Tuesday November 23, 1915

HARRY HOUDINI, THE HANDCUFF WIZARD, WHO PERFORMED HIS MOST NOTABLE FEAT TODAY IN MID-AIR.

Hangs by Heels, Then Escapes Torture Jacket

Fate is with Houdini.

Swinging from a rope like a pendulum, and slowly wriggling himself free from a copper riveted-torture suit, strapped, on him by Sheriff Frank Barnet and a picked committee of newspaper men and deputies, the master-illusionist and Orpheum star today at noon thrilled a great crowd of 20,000 people who blocked the corner of Fourteenth and Broadway.

The spectacle was by far the most sensational ever seen in Oakland. The illusionist was hoisted, head downward, from the top of the First National Bank Building, from The Tribune branch office. Two stories in the air he swung as every man, woman and child in the enormous crowd held his breath. Then occurred the first accident. The rope, which had become twisted, began to unroll. The illusionist was unable to move as his head struck smartly against the granite cornice of the building. Again he swung, but by that time the sailors hauling the rope saw the peril and hauled him past the cornice by a bare fraction of an inch. It was thought that the illusionist had been knocked senseless, until he smiled. The facial movement, the only one of which he was capable, reassured them.

ANSWERS CHALLENGE.

Houdini's answer to the challenge of Sheriff Barnet and The Tribune was success. He did what he was dared to do—despite accidents that neither he or the official could foresee. He scored another brilliant triumph in his long list of wonderful and educational achievements. Again he has gambled his life against fame—and won.

The remarkable spectacle, staged for the general public under the auspices of The Tribune, drew a roar of cheers from thousands of throats. The achievement is the talk of Oakland.

Long before the illusionist, accompanied by George Ebey, manager of the Orpheum, and a number of newspaper men arrived, the crowd was so dense that street cars were only able to pass in lanes opened for them by the police. When the illus-

ionist stood in his automobile cheers rose from the crowds. Every window and every roof within sight was lined with spectators.

GREETED BY CHEERS.

As Sheriff Barnet began to strap the adventurous marvel into the punishment suit a thin drizzle of rain developed into a persistent, cold shower. Not a person in the crowd noticed it, so engrossed were the spectators in the sight before them. Despite rain they remained.

Several times the sailors tested the ropes to take out the twists. They thought all were out when they started hoisting Houdini into the air, but one twist was overlooked. This was the cause of his perilous plight a moment later.

Houdini freed himself in a remarkably short time. Painfully he worked his suit until one arm was forced level with his head, and a moment later it came over. Then the other arm came out. A moment later the illusionist began to unfasten his buckles, and in almost less time than it takes to write it the punishment jacket was off.

ANOTHER MISHAP.

Houdini stretched his arms and drew his first deep breath since his torture-jacket had been adjusted. The noise of the cheering drowned his voice as he shouted to his assistants to lower him. He hung in midair. The crowd did not know it, but he could not be lowered. A pulley had stuck. The ropes were cutting deep into his flesh. His face was suffused with blood. His lips writhed in agony.

Then several quick jerks freed the obstruction. Down he came, triumphant but exhausted.

"It was the most remarkable thing I have ever seen in my entire life," declared the sheriff. "When I challenged Houdini I thought I had proposed the impossible. I firmly believe no other man could have done it."

"I believe no ill effects will follow," declared the illusionist. "Although, the way I feel now, I wouldn't do it again for a good deal. It was a most unforeseen accident, the rope sticking. The blow on the head I did not mind so much—one gets used to hard knocks—but the trouble with the ropes was different. The exertion of freeing myself so tightened the ropes that they stopped circulation. My limbs were throbbing painfully, and one of them was bandaged from a previous accident at the time. I was a pretty sick man by the time they got the tackle working. I don't blame the men, of course they were not used to the thing, but I'm mighty glad I am free again."

(continued on next page)

Photos of advertising for the simultaneous Houdini/Hardeen Oakland appearances. Found in Hardeen's scrapbook and published in the Conjurers' Magazine for July 1945.



According to Hardeen, they were taken by either Jim Collins or Jim Vickery. Exact location of the billboards is unknown.