

Introduction

*It's only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me.*

Lyrics by E.Y. Harburg and Billy Rose,
music by Harold Arlen, 1933.

This book is a collection of stories that perhaps should never have been committed to paper.

The tales begin in the 1940s, when a young magician named Marshall gets a job demonstrating at a magic shop in the Chicago Loop. He's soon performing in the sideshow at Riverview Park. By age 19, he's amazing night-clubbers as well as mobsters who frequent the Magic Lounge in Cicero. He headlines for five years as a stage hypnotist at Chicago's posh Cairo Supper Club. He pioneers the use of big-scale illusions on trade-show floors across America. For 27 years, he appears on WGN-TV's *Bozo Show* as the magical personality of Wizzo the Wizard. And, oh yes, along the way, Marshall Brodien goes on television and manages to pitch and sell millions of dollars worth of TV Magic Cards and TV Magic Sets, eventually becoming the undisputed leader in the mass marketing of magic to several generations of wannabe magicians.

So, why shouldn't the stories of what's obviously a show-business success saga be published? It's because most of Mr. Brodien's stories are unbelievable. When put to paper they read like a picturesque novel. Even when you hear the stories straight from his mouth they sound and seem phantasmagorical. But I have listened to them all, researched and substantiated them, and discovered that these true stories are indeed more astonishing than fiction.



"Not today," became a punch line of sorts that was bantered about while doing the interviews and gathering the stories for this book. Over the course of the two years that I listened to Marshall recount the hundreds of anecdotes about his unconventional life and fantastic career as a magician, that two-word retort often served as a useful on-the-spot editing tool.

I first heard Marshall's wife, Mary, utter, "Not today," in a restaurant one evening after dinner, just before Marshall launched into his story of how an

unsavory character once held him at gunpoint, demanding the secret of his vanishing birdcage trick. Naturally, being married to Marshall for over a decade, Mary had heard this story, as well as countless others, many, many times. Thus, when Marshall posed the question, “Did I ever tell you about the time I did the birdcage trick for this mob guy?” Mary’s witty response of, “Not today,” really meant, “*Yes, I’ve heard the story many times before and I’m going to hear it again and everybody’s going to be entertained and laugh a lot.*”

I had heard the birdcage story a half-dozen times, but that night there were two or three people at the table who hadn’t. So, once again, I listened, marveling at Marshall’s consummate storytelling skills and, of course, I was genuinely laughing, along with everyone else, as if it was the first time I’d heard the tale told.

From that evening on, whenever Marshall prefaced his telling of a particular story with a question — such as when he asked, “Have I told you the one about the time in the Army when I hypnotized a soldier and made him think he was stuck to a toilet seat for an hour?” — the standard answer was, “Not today.” But it was quickly followed up with, “Why don’t you tell me about it again?” That’s because a re-telling usually brought forth a couple of previously forgotten details that gave the piece a relevant place in the bigger jigsaw-puzzle-like story I was assembling.



The Magical Life of Marshall Brodien is a biography, and while Marshall has supplied the main narrative, some of what appears between quotation marks comes from his recollections of what others said at the time. And though the names of several persons featured in the book have been changed to protect their privacy, I still like to think of it as a work of believable nonfiction.

— John Moehring
July 2007

Chapter 1

Whatever Happened to Wizzo?

When the phone call came from WGN-TV, Marshall Brodien was at work in his home office in Geneva, Illinois, designing new tricks for the “Marshall Brodien 25 Trick Magic Sets” that would soon be on the shelves of Costco stores everywhere.

Jeff Hoover, segment producer for the Chicago superstation’s *WGN Morning News*, was on the phone. He wanted to tell Marshall about an unusual call the switchboard had received. A couple of mornings prior, the *Morning News* had carried a report on street magician David Blaine’s death-defying publicity stunt in London. Blaine, who’d previously been buried alive under a tank of water for a week and, on another occasion, frozen in a block of ice in New York’s Times Square, was now starving himself in a sealed Plexiglas box hanging above the River Thames.

The news update of Blaine’s bizarre stunt of October 2003, prompted an elderly sounding lady viewer to phone the station: “Watching that David Blaine do those strange things reminded me of the crazy magician who used to be on the *Bozo Show*. I was calling to ask whatever happened to Wizzo?” The operator was at a loss, but the lady on the line cared less. “Let me tell you something,” she said. “That Wizzo was weirder than Mr. Blaine could ever want to be.”

Marshall Brodien portrayed Wizzo the Wizard on WGN-TV’s *Bozo Show* for 26 years, retiring the mystical zany character in 1994. The highly popular children’s show ran another seven years before the plug was finally pulled. When the primetime special *Bozo: 40 Years of Fun* aired, Wizzo came back to join in the farewell fling. But after that show, Wizzo’s wacky magic had become but a flickering memory of a bygone era of fun-for-fun’s-sake children’s television.

Jeff Hoover told Marshall, “As soon as the guys on the news desk heard about that woman’s call, it got everybody talking about you. The cameramen, the floor crew, even people in the cafeteria were asking, ‘Whatever happened to Wizzo?’ Everybody down here wants to know what you’ve been up to since you left the station.”

Marshall, in his inimitable unassuming manner, mentioned to Jeff that the Society of American Magicians had recently honored him at their centennial celebration in New York City, where he gave a talk, recounting his show-business beginnings as the sideshow barker at Riverview Park... the years of doing tricks for the mob bosses in Cicero... his long-running hypnotic show at the Cairo Supper Club... the fun years of pitching millions of decks of TV Magic Cards and magic sets on television... the craziness of doing literally thousands of hours of magic skits on *Bozo’s Circus*, which became later known as the *Bozo Show*...

Jeff politely interrupted and said, “Marshall, I was calling to find out if we could get you down here for an interview on the *Morning News*.”

“Yeah, that might be fun,” Marshall said. “I could come on the show and do a few magic tricks...”

“As Wizzo?” Jeff asked.

“Oh, no. I don’t do him anymore,” Marshall said with a laugh. “Anyway, I think Wizzo left town a long time ago, took all his money and invested in condos in Arobia or somewhere far away.”

“Seriously, what would it take to get you to appear as Wizzo just one more time?” Hoover asked. “His fans are calling.”

“No. I don’t think so,” Marshall said. “I said I would never put the costume on again. However, I will come on the show as Marshall Brodien and talk about Wizzo.”

“Couldn’t Wizzo come on and talk about Marshall Brodien? Please, Marshall, you have to do it. Just say yes.”

“No,” Marshall said, “and Wizzo says no.”

But Hoover wouldn’t give in. “Tell me what it would take to get you to do Wizzo one last time? We’ll come out and pick you up in a limousine. Bring you down here. Roll out the red carpet. Whatever it takes. You know everybody loved Wizzo. I still crack up every time I think of the way he rolled his eyes and said, ‘Doody, doody, doo’ to make the magic happen. What a thrill it would be for everybody to see he’s alive and well and as funny as he always was.”

Reflecting back to that day, Marshall says, “Jeff Hoover was so enthusiastic and such a nice guy that I just couldn’t say ‘no’ to him any more, so I told him, ‘Let me think about it, and I’ll call you back.’” He hung up the phone and brooded it over for over 24 hours, and when he finally did call back, he said, “After giving it some serious consideration I’ve decided I’ll do it.”

Jeff couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “Wizzo lives!” he shouted. “This is great. We’ll put you in the exact same dressing room that Wizzo used to put on his makeup. The *Bozo Show* dressing room is still vacant. In fact, the old wardrobe trunk is still there and Bozo and Wizzo photos are still on the walls. Thank you, Marshall, this is going to be super!”

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“It was five o’clock in the morning when I sat down in the dressing room,” Marshall recalls. “As I started putting on the costume and the makeup, I looked in the mirror and asked myself, ‘Why am I doing this?’ But as soon as I got out on the set and starting doing some of the fun on-camera magic bits with entertainment critic Dean Richards and co-anchors Larry Potash and Roseanne Tellez, everything was fine. Basically, Jeff had told me to just go out there and be Wizzo... be crazy. ‘Have some fun,’ is what he said.”

Meteorologist Paul Konrad was midway through a weather update, standing in front of the chroma-keyed map of Chicagoland, when on strolled

Wizzo. He greeted Paul with a garbled “Doody, doody, doo,” then started pulling yards upon yards of bright colored streamers from his mouth. Konrad was laughing so hard he couldn’t finish the forecast. For the next two hours, Wizzo scurried about the studio, popping on camera when least expected, causing strange things to happen every time he uttered those nonsensical words, “Doody, doody, doo.”

The wacky Wizard knotted together a couple of silk scarves and stuffed them into the top of traffic reporter Robin Baumgarten’s blouse. He took a third scarf and made it disappear, telling her, “The hanky-poo will invisibly fly to the imaginary land of Arobia, then magically journey back here and appear between your two... hanky-poos, of course.” Robin giggled as Wizzo fished out two corners of her scarves and handed them to Konrad and sportscaster Mike Barz. They were instructed to give the scarves a tug, and when they did, they were amazed, but not nearly as astonished as Robin. Tied between the scarves was not the hanky-poo that had made the invisible roundtrip to Arobia, but instead, a silky white brassiere.

At the midpoint of the *WGN Morning News* program, which is watched every weekday by 450,000 Chicago-area households, Dean Richards walked over to Brodien and said, “You won’t believe the action on the switchboard. They just called back to say they’ve had over 40 calls. We don’t get that many calls when the politicians and home-run heroes show up.” For his finale that morning, Wizzo coaxed reporter Larry Potash into removing his birthday-present necktie for a laugh-filled presentation of the classic cut-and-*eventually*-restored necktie trick.

By the end of the three-hour program, the switchboard was blinking and beeping like an overheated NASA mission-control panel. The calls from Wizzo and *Bozo Show* fans and friends had swamped the automated answering system and continued even after the *Morning News* went off the air.

Later that afternoon, when Jeff Hoover called Brodien to again thank him for doing the show, he told Marshall that the WGN-TV switchboard had not been that jammed since the morning of 9/11.



The weekend after Marshall’s appearance on the *Morning News* program, the Wizard’s costume was given a cursory dry-cleaning and was carefully fitted back onto the mannequin in the basement of his home. The life-size mustachioed likeness of Wizzo stands next to a six-foot-high colorful cabinet that’s known among magicians as the Mismade Lady, a stage illusion where a female assistant is divided into four segments then miraculously put back together in a perplexing manner.

If you dared open one of the four hinged doors of the Mismade Lady cabinet and peeked inside, you’d find a few odd, foam-stuffed prop body parts

of Cooky the Clown, the loveable character created for the *Bozo Show* by Marshall's dear friend Roy Brown. That's because in the heyday of the comedy-magic act of Marshall Brodien & Cooky, it was Cooky who crawled into the box instead of a lovely young lady, which resulted in a whole lot of amusement along with the amazement.

While the description of how Brodien presented the Mismade illusion may sound like a museum guide's spiel, it's akin to what you might hear and see if you visited his home. You see, Marshall Brodien, a.k.a. Wizzo the Wizard, has magically transformed the spacious 1,000-square-foot lower level of his suburban home into a wondrous gallery of his show-business past and present.

Across from the Mismade Lady illusion is a glassed-in cabinet that's chock full of memorabilia from the *Bozo Show*, displaying even the sleek golden Emmy statue that Brodien was awarded for his contributions to the popular children's show. Filling the shelves of another lighted étagère are props that range from a chrome-plated 1960s automotive part that Marshall mysteriously levitated while performing trade shows for Bethlehem Steel; to an antiquarian birdcage trick that Harry Houdini gave to Marshall's mentor, stage and nightclub magician Jack Gwynne; to the still-sealed bottle of rare "Louis the 13th" cognac that was a gift for doing an evening of magic at mob boss Jackie Cerone's home; to one of the original decks of TV Magic Cards, the item that sold millions and forever made famous Brodien's sales slogan: "Most magic tricks are easy... once you know the secret."

Vintage posters of Thurston, "The World's Greatest Magician"; Kar-Mi, the mystic who "Swallows a Loaded Gun Barrel and Shoots a Cracker from a Man's Head"; Alexander, "The Man Who Knows"; and Carter the Great, Sorcar, Gwynne, and others cover one wall of a comfortable sitting area. The other two walls are lined with almost 100 framed eight-by-ten photographs that capture well over a half-century of Marshall Brodien's robust performing career. He's shown doing magic and drawing huge crowds in front of the sideshow at Chicago's Riverview Park. There are black-and-white photos of him at age 19, eating fire and performing card tricks at the Magic Lounge in the mafia-managed town of Cicero. While in the Army, he's pictured upside down, escaping from straitjackets, as well as doing a command performance for General Wyman, the Commanding General of the U.S. Continental Army. Scads of volunteers are performing crazy stunts during his hilarious nightclub shows of hypnotism. The aisles at trade shows are packed with buyers as he does his customized product pitches at trade shows. And countless are the photographs of Marshall with the politicians, celebrities, show-business folks, and magicians he's befriended and worked with over the years.

But the impact of the man's myriad accomplishments doesn't register until you start to wind your way through the aisles of magical merchandise that Brodien has created and marketed. Stacked from floor to ceiling, no

matter which way you turn, are all the different magic sets and packaged tricks that have sold at retail since 1970.

They begin with the huge variety of items pitched on television by TV Magic, Ltd. There are the many sets, kits, and tricks marketed by the Marshall Brodien Magic Company that were found in retail chains nationwide into the 1990s. There's a specialty set designed for Bill Bixby when he was *The Magician* on TV, another for Blackstone Jr., and there are the dozens upon dozens of products produced for Siegfried & Roy and Lance Burton in Las Vegas. A corner is filled with themed-magic products created for the Disney movies, *Aladdin*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *101 Dalmatians*. There are the custom magic sets designed for exclusive distribution in Target, K-Mart, Sam's Club, JC Penney, and other discount retailers. Even special sets were produced for numerous pitches on the Home Shopping Network and QVC. Rounding the final aisle of this remarkable collection, you discover the shelves of contemporary magical merchandise Brodien has designed and brought to market while serving as a consultant for Harmony Toy, which by the turn of the century was bought out by Cadaco. These diverse lines of magic product have often been responsible for generating \$5- to \$6-million worth of sales annually.

Marshall Brodien, with his overwhelming output of magical product during the last-half of the 20th century, has influenced more people to take up magic — either as a fascinating hobby or a rewarding profession — than any other magician in history. Robert Lund, the founder of the American Museum of Magic, once attributed Brodien's success to "his ability to perceive television as the most effective selling tool ever invented." Others insist that Brodien's achievements as a TV personality and successful pitchman of prestidigitation can be chalked up to a lifetime of lucky breaks, being in the right place at the right time. Marshall himself will simply smile and tell you, "It's easy, once you know the secret..."

But don't be fooled by that ingenious one-liner that captured the attention of millions and made millions. The true story of Marshall Brodien's road to success has been a long and arduous one — one that's been paved with both persistence and determination.

Chapter 6

Cicero, the Mob, and Beyond

“From the time I turned 19,” Marshall says, “I was making regular trips to the Magic Lounge on Cermak Road, in Cicero. I would go there after I got off work at the Treasure Chest, where I worked as a demonstrator. Sometimes I’d tag along with the other magicians who gathered at the magic counter near closing time. Since I was usually with an older crowd, the people at the lounge rarely questioned that I was underage. They believed my claim that I had just turned 21.”

The reason for Marshall’s frequent visits to the neighboring Mafia-run suburb of Cicero wasn’t because of its free-flowing booze, the striptease joints with women of negotiable affections, or the ubiquitous slot machines and card and dice games. It was to see Senator Crandall.

Clarke “The Senator” Crandall, a recalcitrant, bespectacled gentleman with an enormous handlebar mustache and a knack for mixing drinks with sardonic humor and devious deceptions, was the house magician at the Magic Lounge. The 100-seat saloon was established in 1946 by legendary Chicago bar-magician Johnny Paul. However, when piano-playing George Banning, a former police chief of a nearby suburb, bought the place in 1953, Crandall became the Magic Lounge’s main man of mystery and mirth. Johnny Paul moved around the corner to a snazzy bowling alley with a show-bar, where he continued his brand of trickery and tomfoolery until 1959, when the mob set him up as the resident magician at the Showboat in Las Vegas.

There was a stage over the back bar of the Magic Lounge, and once or twice a night, Senator Crandall would give the band a long break and perform stand-up comedy magic. But his forte was close-up magic, minor miracles that were executed right under the noses of patrons sitting at the tables or at the bar. Jay Marshall, a debonair, globetrotting wizard who four decades later would be appointed the Dean of the Society of American Magicians, says of Crandall, “Along with his deft sleight of hand, The Senator mumbled such a line of nonsense, non sequiturs, sheer truth, and gross exaggeration that people were known to forget the trick he was doing because they were guffawing at his humor.”

Marshall met Senator Crandall earlier in 1954, when they worked together on a show for a Society of American Magicians Convention in Chicago. And the more Marshall hung around the Magic Lounge, the more The Senator took a liking to him. It wasn’t long before the old-fartish cranky conjuror and the young-pup sideshow talker were sharing secrets.

One of the bar tricks that Marshall was quick to learn was dice stacking. The magician tosses four ordinary dice onto the bar and asks a customer to name any number they see on the top of any one of the spotted cubes. Inverting a leather dice cup, he then proceeds to sweep up the dice, one by

one, with the mouth of the upside-down cup. When the cup glides to a stop on the bar top and it's lifted, all four dice are precariously balanced one atop the other. On the face of the top die, staring at the perplexed patron is the very number of spots chosen.

Late that summer, when Crandall received an invitation to go to London for some television work in conjunction with the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the British Magical Society, he voted for Brodien to be his fill-in. "I can't stand this kid," Crandall said. "It's because he's a boy wonder. Somebody ought to think about hiring him."

"I was pretty excited about the possibility of working somewhere other than Riverview Park or the Treasure Chest," Marshall says. "George Banning asked me to get behind the bar and do a few tricks, an audition of sorts. He liked what I did. The people were laughing, shouting, 'Show us another one,' and they were ordering more rounds of drinks." Right there on the spot, Banning promised Brodien three months of work while Crandall went off to Great Britain.



Vice thrived with official indulgence in Cicero throughout the 1950s. Under blind eyes of the local police, several Cook County sheriffs, and selected politicians, it was the mob, or "The Outfit" as they preferred to be called, that controlled the town's rackets. Al Capone and his gangsters may have turned to legends, but the same saloons, strip shows, corrupt games, and much more were still there and reigned over by mob bosses, namely Sam Giancana and Joey Aiuppa.

"Across the street from the Magic Lounge was the Towne Hotel," Marshall remembers. "It was Capone's old headquarters, but became the home of the Turf Club, a swinging nightclub. Once inside, if you wanted to gamble, all you had to do was go through a side door and at the end of a long hallway was a huge casino with dice and card games of every sort." Another Cicero gambling establishment was the Rainbow Lounge, run by Al Capone's brother. Just about every bar on the streets of Cicero had slot machines, and most of them had dice games.

Also opposite the Magic Lounge was The 4811, a far-beyond-burlesque striptease club where the girls danced totally nude, then sat between shows and drank with the customers. Then one night, the Feds raided the joint, shutting it down for what many people thought was for good. But three nights later, the mob reopened the doors to the club. It was in the same exact location, but with the new name of The 4813.

Except for revenues from the slot machines that were regularly moved in and out of the backroom by the mob, George Banning's Magic Lounge made most of its money dispensing booze with music and magic. Every night, singing-bartender Jumping Joe Pistone and accordionist Manny Quartucci

joined Banning at the piano, and they kept the joint jiving till near dawn. The witty wizardry of Senator Crandall and Marshall at the Magic Lounge provided a certain comic relief from the various vices of sinful Cicero. Prominent members of the mob, including Joey Aiuppa, Frank “The Immune” Diamond, and Jackie “The Lackey” Cerone frequented the lounge because it was a genuinely fun place. But early on, Marshall learned that Mafia types could be a tough crowd.

“One slow night, not too long after Crandall had taken off for England,” Marshall remembers, “George Banning sent me over to do a trick for these three serious-looking men sitting at the end of the bar. I was prepared to do the Vanishing Birdcage, but decided I’d do it with a little different presentation for these guys.”

Holding the empty wire cage between his hands, Marshall approached the men. He singled out one of them — a short, round-faced man who wore a black suit, gray shirt and a black tie, and a black fedora with a gray band. He would later be introduced as “Gumpy.” Brodien told Gumpy, “Tap the little birdcage three times and a bird will appear.”

“Well, this guy rapped the cage three times, waited a couple of seconds, looked up at me and said, ‘There’s no friggin’ boid in dere.’”

Marshall asked him to try again. Gumpy slapped the side of the cage three more times. Nothing happened. “Hey! There’s still no boid in your cage.”

“Here, just hold it,” Marshall said. When Gumpy reached for the birdcage, it disappeared faster than a lightning bolt.

The three men were speechless. With mouths agape, they stared at Marshall’s empty hands. Gumpy turned to his friends and asked, “Where’s da friggin’ boidcage?”

“The kid’s a magician,” one of them said. “It’s magic.”

“Yeah, it might be magic,” the other said, “but Gump wants to know where the cage went to.”

“I can’t tell you,” Marshall said. “It’s a magic secret”

With that, Gumpy reached into his coat, slowly pulled out a large-caliber gun, clicked the hammer, and pointed it right between Brodien’s eyes. “Like I wuz sayin’... where’s dat friggin’ boidcage?”

“I made that birdcage come out of my sleeve faster than it ever went up there,” Marshall now says with a grin. Getting out of a pickle, even with the mob, was easy... once you knew the secret.



George Banning dismissed the disappearing-birdcage incident as “just a little Sicilian flare-up” and told Marshall, “Gump’s a real wacko. You might want to stay clear of him, especially when he’s had a drink.” But that was easier

said than done. Every time the pug-ugly gangster came into the lounge he'd have a drink or three.

"Hey, magish! Get over here. Show dis broad a trick." Gumpy was sitting at the bar next to a dynamite-looking blonde with a full balcony, and he was demanding a command performance from "my friend, the magish."

"I walked over to the bar where they were sitting," says Marshall. "I introduced myself to his date and started performing a routine with some sponge rabbits. Gumpy just turned and looked the other direction."

Some 30 seconds later, the lady was crying out, "How'd you do that? I don't believe it!" She swiveled around toward Gumpy, yanked on his coat sleeve, and asked, "How'd he do that? Tell me how he did it!"

"How you 'spect me to know? Huh? I'm not lookin' at what you're lookin' at." Gumpy then asked Marshall, "What's dis crazy broad talkin' about? Huh? I wuz lookin' over there, tryin' to talk to Carmie." Gumpy turned back to ask bartender Carmen Manno if he knew which horse won the ninth race at Sportman's Park. He told Marshall, "Magish, do another one for her. I tink she likes your tricks."

Marshall took out a pack of playing cards, asked the lady to choose one, remember what it was, then had her shuffle it back into the deck. Pointing out how high the ceiling of the lounge was, he hurled the pack of cards upward — an act that produced yet another scream of "How did you do that?" Stuck to the ceiling was the card she had selected. Again, she yelled at Gumpy, "Honey, please tell me how he does it." Without taking his eyes off the racing form he held in his hands, Gumpy said, "Magish, I tink it's time to leave us alone. Get da hell outta here."

"After that second experience with Gumpy," Marshall says, "every time I saw him coming in the front door of the club, I would head for the coffee shop across the street."

The Aloha Restaurant, a counter-and-booth hamburger joint where Marshall usually took his breaks, was distinctively different from most grab-a-bite-and-run restaurants. It had a doorman... of sorts. Vinnie "The Hat" always stood just inside the front door. He didn't have a uniform and he never helped patrons find a seat; instead, he nodded to those customers who seemed to have business in the backroom. Vinnie was the lookout for the Aloha's gambling operation.

"Vinnie was very interested in magic and, whenever I came in for a coffee or a sandwich, he always wanted me to show him a trick or two. One time, I didn't have any props on me, so I asked him if he had a deck of cards. He rushed out to the backroom to get one."

Brodien told the doorman to break the seal on the brand-new pack of cards, remove them from the box, and give them a thorough shuffle. As Marshall took back the mixed-up deck and spread them from hand to hand, he commented, "There's something funny about these cards... I'll show you what I mean. Just take out any one."

Vinnie took a card and before he could turn it over, Marshall said, "Seven of Diamonds." Vinnie stuck the Seven back in the deck and selected another card. And again, before he could peek at it, Marshall said, "That's the Five of Spades." Another one was picked. "The King of Diamonds." Vinnie threw the King on the table and reached for a card near the bottom of the deck. "Ace of Hearts," Marshall said.

"Jeeezus! How tha hell you doin' that?"

Marshall winked and said, "Marked cards." Actually, he had been forcing the cards on Vinnie, but thought he'd have some fun.

"Marked cards? What da hell?" Vinnie looked like Vesuvius about to erupt. "Holy shit! Marked cards! Somebody's cheatin' da friggin' house." He started for the backroom.

"I chased after him," Marshall says. "And stopped him just before he went through the door. I told him that I was just kidding. The cards weren't really marked. I was making him pick those cards. After he finally calmed down, I had to show him how the Classic Force worked." Each time the cards were spread and the spectator made what seemed like a free choice, it was in fact the magician who controlled the selection.

Although Marshall never reported to the Magic Lounge until after eight o'clock, one evening, because of the light traffic, he showed up in Cicero about an hour early. He decided to sit at the bar and have a cup of coffee with Carmie Manno.

"You don't have to worry about Gumpy giving you a hard time," Carmie said, as he brought the cream and sugar. "Last night, he was coming out of the 1000 Club in Chicago, when a car pulled up and he was shot."

Sensing it was something mob related, Marshall said, "Oh, really? I'm sort of sorry to hear that he might not be coming back for a while..."

"Trust me," Carmie said, "he's not coming back... he was shot eight times."

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In April of 1955 when Senator Crandall returned from England, the Magic Lounge threw a gala welcome-home party for him. Shaking hands with Brodien, The Senator quipped, "Don't worry, kid, I just came back to visit my material."

Marshall had already signed a summer-long contract to be the talker for a new daytime attraction at Riverview Park. However, George Banning was insistent that the "boy wonder" keep working nights at the club, sharing the spotlight with The Senator. If Marshall did as George desired, it meant that immediately after his six o'clock show at the amusement park, he would have to barrel through hectic Chicago traffic to get to the Magic Lounge by eight. But the ever-ambitious Mr. Brodien didn't care. He was young and eager to entertain. And, knowing the amount of money he'd be earning working the

two jobs, he went out and bought a ritzy white Ford Fairlane convertible. The drive from Riverview to Cicero would be a breeze.

The show at Riverview came about because of Marshall's connection with Al Szasz, a professional wrestler who owned a performing chimpanzee, a boxing kangaroo, and a wrestling bear. "Al had been approached by Al Dobritch, the booking agent for the *Super Circus* TV show who wanted to put together a tent show called *Super Circus Animal Acts*," Marshall explains. "In addition to showcasing his talented animals, Szasz's wife, Ada Ash, a wild young lady who dyed her hair bright pink and hyped herself as the 'World's Strongest Woman,' was going to wrestle alligators. They wanted me to be the talker for the show and more or less *bribed* me into doing it by telling me that I could perform some illusions later on, when they took the show on the road."

The prospect of expanding his performing capabilities to include more big-scale tricks was motivation enough for Marshall to start building an illusion he always wanted to own — the Blade Box. "Basically, I took a pattern of the configuration of the Blade Box at Riverview Park — something I had traced on a large sheet of paper during my last season with the sideshow — and with the help of a girlfriend, I improved the design. I had her lie on her side on the plywood bottom panel and, using wood cutouts for the blades, figured out a more deceptive pattern for the slots where the metal blades pass through the box. They were much closer together."

After lugging sheets of plywood and building supplies up the three flights of stairs to the back porch of his house on North Avenue, Marshall began construction of his Blade Box. "My mother got all kinds of complaints from the neighbors over the non-stop sawing and hammering noises." A plumber's shop cut and threaded the lengths of one-inch-diameter steel pipe, which were flanged and attached to the box as legs. The end product was a bit cumbersome, because the pieces wouldn't come apart. "To this day, I can't remember how I got it down the back steps and over to a friend's warehouse, where it was painted."

While the Blade Box was being artistically painted with a colorful Chinese dragon bearing scales, claws, and fangs of fiery red, emerald green, and imperial gold, Marshall began construction of his second illusion — a death-defying Electric Chair. This illusion was an imposing device that allowed the magician to pass thousands of volts of electricity through a young lady's body, enabling her to illuminate light bulbs with her fingertips. She would be able to take the torches that Marshall used in his fire-eating act and set them aflame with the tip of her tongue. Once these two illusions were completed, Marshall would possess a pair of mysteries that would not only amaze audiences wherever he traveled, they would also totally baffle a couple of the best minds in magic, namely Okito and the great Jack Gwynne.

But for now, at least until Labor Day rolled around, his afternoons would be spent at Riverview Park, hyping the wonders of the *Super Circus Animal Acts* show, announcing the wrestling matches with a big brown bear,

refereeing boxing bouts with a kangaroo named Pogo, and helping Ada Ash corral her alligator, a lackadaisical reptile that preferred sunning on the bank of the nearby Chicago River to the rigors of show business.



Out at the Magic Lounge that summer, Brodien was creating a sensation as “The Human Torch.” He had added fire eating to his stand-up act and his behind-the-bar stunt of transforming himself into the “Human Cigarette Lighter” — performing the daredevil bits he’d learned from sideshow-worker Ogee O’Saturday — was garnering raves from the Windy City show-biz and night-life columnists. “Flame-dousing Brodien pleases patrons at Lounge,” proclaimed a headline in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. “Magician lights up the night,” said another.

One night, a night that George Banning just happened to have taken off, a well-dressed stranger who simply identified himself as “Tony B” showed up to have a talk with Marshall B. “Basically, this guy came in to offer me the nightclub,” Marshall says.

Tony B. said, “We can change da name of the place to Marshall Brodien’s Magic Lounge. Nice, huh? You run it like you wanna. We take care of da books. Everybody looks at it like it’s your joint. Whatta you think?”

Not knowing what to do, Brodien told the mobster he needed a little time to think about it. He said that he was about to be drafted and couldn’t let them know anything until he heard from the draft board. In the meantime, Marshall gave his good friend, the “Mayor of Randolph Street,” a call. Bobby Baer, who’d long been involved with the mingling of politics and the ways and means of the mob, whether it be within the Chicago Loop or on the streets of Cicero, told Marshall, “Don’t do it. If your name is on the place, and if there is any trouble or anyone ever gets shot there, and the police or FBI finds out your name’s on any of the licenses, you will be the one who goes to jail.”

Brodien never had to worry about giving a decision to Mr. B. A couple of nights later, actually a slow night when Senator Crandall was off, a creepy looking man dressed more like a street thug than a mobster showed up at the bar. He asked Carmie if George Banning was around. Carmie seemed to know the man and was a little uneasy when he left the bar and went to the office to tell George he had a visitor. Accordionist Manny Quartucci must have also sensed trouble; he stopped playing, put his accordion down, and stepped off the stage.

When George came to the bar, there was neither a hello nor a handshake. The man simply said, “I’m here for the money.”

As soon as George told him, “I don’t have it,” the guy started toward him, yelling, “It’s Sunday! You said you’d have it tonight. I need the freakin’ money, and I need it right now!”

George ran to the cash register, where a chrome-plated revolver was kept under the cash drawer. “When we saw him going for the gun,” says Marshall, “Manny and I went sailing over the bar and headed for the door. The guy kicked George to the floor before he could get to the gun. He grabbed a bottle of Schenley’s — I’ll never forget the brand of whisky — and smashed it on the edge of the back bar, then shoved the jagged-glass bottleneck right up to George’s throat. That was when Carmie yelled, ‘Jimmy, don’t do it!’”

Jimmy must have been the thug’s name, because he heeded Carmie’s cry. He dropped the broken bottleneck to the floor, and took a step back. “Okay, you lucky scumbag,” he told George. “I’ll be back tomorrow. And you better have every freakin’ nickel of da money.”

Marshall never heard anything more about Jimmy and never knew if he showed up again. However, in less than a week, when Rose Paul was in the club one evening, she approached Marshall and told him that she was taking over — real soon. She asked if Crandall and Brodien wanted to stay around and work for her. They both said yes.

With the same ease that the mob shuffled jukeboxes and slot machines around the joints in Cicero, they discarded George Manning and turned the place over to the ex Mrs. Paul, who as it turned out was an extremely close friend of mob king pin, Joey “O’Brien” Aiuppia.

When Brodien and Crandall reported to work the next night, a new neon sign out front let it be known that they were at Rose’s *Original Magic Lounge*.

Chapter 7

Trouping with an Alligator

The Senator agreed to hold down the fort at the Magic Lounge for six weeks, while Brodien took his act on the road. As promised, Al Szasz had lined up a string of fair and carnival dates for his under-canvas trained-animal show, and Marshall would be the talker in addition to having a spot for doing some magic and illusions. They planned to hook up with Gem City Shows out of East St. Louis. The first date on the route card was a five-day run at the Mississippi Valley Fair in Davenport, Iowa.

“I spent most of the afternoon packing my illusions and loading the equipment needed for the show,” Marshall says. “The sun was setting as Al and Ada went over the final checklist. Then Al tossed me a ring full of keys and said, ‘Here, you can drive the truck with Pogo. We’ll take the station wagon and pull the trailer with the alligator.’”

Marshall couldn’t exactly put his finger on the clause in his contract that specified he had to chauffeur a boxing kangaroo cross-country, but then again, his contract with Al was little more than a friendly handshake.

As Ada coaxed her reprehensible reptile into the trailer, Marshall crawled into the cab of the truck loaded with Pogo. He adjusted the rearview mirror, started the engine and turned on the headlights, then peered through the little screen window over his shoulder to see if the kangaroo was ready to roll. “It was dark and quiet back there... so quiet I figured that Pogo might sleep the whole trip.”

Marshall clicked on the radio and was surprised it worked. Searching for a music station, he came across a weather forecast. Temperatures in the lower 40s were expected for most of the Midwest that evening. He clicked on the heater, which naturally, didn’t work.

Szasz’s ’52 Ford gator wagon pulled around the side of the truck, and Ada rolled down her window and shouted, “Drive carefully! See you at the fairgrounds about midnight!” As Al shot out the driveway and onto the blacktop highway, he gave the steering wheel a tap for a farewell toot.

To Pogo, that honk of the horn was like the sound of the bell for round one. He was up and sparring, throwing punches. “It was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Chicago to Davenport,” Marshall says, “and for three of those hours, that kangaroo did nothing but bounce up and down, back and forth, and all over the walls of that rickety old truck.”

As Marshall drove through Moline, Illinois, just before crossing the Mississippi River bridge over to Iowa, Pogo’s wild-’n’-crazy, bouncing-and-boxing spree suddenly ceased. Marshall slowed down, sensing something was wrong. “Then I smelled it. It was absolutely terrible. Pogo had dropped a load. And the stench made the Chicago stockyards seem like a garden of roses.” Marshall couldn’t roll down the windows because it was near freezing outside. He pressed on, figuring he only had a few more miles to go. But the

putrid odor was overwhelming. Tears welled up in his eyes. Then, something miraculous happened. Right there on the westbound stretch of Interstate Highway 32 leading into Davenport, Brodien had a vision. He saw the exit sign for the Mississippi Valley Fairgrounds. Hallelujah!

He swerved to the right, put the pedal to the metal and sailed down the exit ramp. He pulled off the access road and onto the gravel right of way, where he parked the truck. Throwing open the door, he jumped into the chilly-but-gloriously-fresh air. Marshall walked the rest of the distance to the fairgrounds.

Al Szasz had been there for at least an hour. He'd already rounded up a crew of gazonies (itinerant carnival laborers), and the canvas was unfolded and spread over the frosty grass. They had the corners staked and were almost ready to raise the tent when Marshall appeared.

Al laughed at Marshall's tale of woe. Al's oft-used retort of "shit happens" had particular relevance that morning. He sent one of his roustabouts back to the highway to drive the truck back to their spot on the midway, where Pogo and the rest of the rather rank cargo were unloaded.



By daybreak, Al and his crew were adding the final touches to the façade of the show tent, hanging the colorfully painted bally panels and banners. A young man with a PRESS card pinned to his Chicago Cubs baseball cap wandered up. He was from WOC-TV, a station that covered the Quad Cities of Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa, and Moline and Rock Island in Illinois. He told Al he was scouting for interesting news stories to publicize the fair, and the "Pogo the Boxing Kangaroo" banner had caught his eye. The reporter asked Al, "What would you think about having Pogo on the five o'clock news tonight? It would be a great plug for your show, and it would get some crowds out here over the weekend. All you have to do is get the kangaroo over to the station, which is only a couple of miles away."

With the unpleasant Pogo-in-the-truck experience still lingering on his mind (and noses of some folks), Al wasn't too eager to transport that kangaroo anywhere anytime soon. "You know what might be even better?" he suggested to the TV newsman. "This year, we are traveling with one of the world's greatest magicians, Marshall Brodien, and he has two new astonishing illusions that have never been exhibited west of the Mississippi. What if Mr. Brodien came over to the station and premiered these illusions on WOC-TV?"

The reporter liked the idea, they packed up the Blade Box, and Marshall drove over to the station in time for the five o'clock news. A girl was placed in the coffin-like box and 15 steel blades were plunged through it — each blade only inches from the other — leaving no imaginable way for her to be inside. When it came time for the "blow off" (the moment in a sideshow where an

extra quarter is charged “to see the strange and unusual position of the girl”), Marshall went into a little different spiel. Speaking directly into the camera, he said, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to discover how this young lady twists around the blades and shapes her body into that of a serpent, you must see Al Szasz’s *All-Star Animal Show* at the Mississippi Valley Fair this weekend. You’ll see Pogo the Boxing Kangaroo, direct from Australia. You’ll witness the lovely Ada Ash wrestle an Amazonian alligator. And, as a special added attraction, you’ll not only see my show of magic and illusions, you’ll learn the secret of Serpentina, the lovely lady in the Blade Box of Mystery.” Of course, what Brodien neglected to tell the folks out there in TV-land was that there was an extra charge to take a gander at the pseudo-reptilian lady lying in his brand-new Blade Box.

After a weekend at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, the formidable team of Al, Ada, and Marshall played their show at a half-dozen smaller county fairs and carnivals across Missouri and Illinois. Because bad weather caused the cancellation of a date in Kankakee, Illinois, they returned home to Chicago a few days earlier than scheduled. Unfortunately, this provided Al and Ada with the opportunity to send Marshall on another animal-transport mission.



At the end of each season, the Ash’s alligator was taken to the zoo in Columbus, Ohio, where it was boarded for the winter.

Because the truck with the water-tank trailer was in the shop for repairs, Al asked Marshall if he’d do him a favor and drive the reptile over to the zoo. Marshall said yes, but with one condition. Ada had to accompany him and help with some of the driving. It was a 350-mile trip. They taped the alligator’s jaws shut for safety’s sake and gingerly placed him in the spacious trunk of Marshall’s convertible.

“It was past midnight when we left town,” Marshall says. “I had volunteered to drive first while Ada slept in the backseat. I remember wondering what I was going to say if a copper stopped us. Ada’s dyed-pink hair was rolled up in bright-green plastic curlers, and it was a pretty freaky sight.

“About two hours into the trip, I heard what I thought was Ada snoring. It was annoying because it kept getting louder and louder.” The snoring he heard was actually ripping and tearing noises. The alligator had freed its mouth and was chomping his way through the upholstery and springs of the backseat.

“Hey, wake up!” Marshall shouted, looking in the rear-view mirror. “The alligator’s getting out! He’s coming through the backseat of my car!”

“You sonnovabitch!” Ada yelled. She put a halt to the creature’s aggressiveness by punching him squarely between his beady eyes. “Get your

scaly ass back in the trunk!" The gator hissed and sluggishly backtracked, as Ada said, "I think we better stop and tape his mouth again."

"We were on the outskirts of Fort Wayne, Indiana," Marshall remembers, "and I pulled into this little all-night gas station. I got out, stretched my legs, and told the guy on duty to fill it up. Ada walked toward the rear of the car and I told her, 'When I open trunk, you hold him still and I'll tape his mouth shut.' I glanced over at the attendant, realizing he was probably thinking we were a couple of kidnappers."

When Marshall did open the trunk, the alligator, dazzled by the bright lights, lunged forward and hissed. The attendant's eyes popped wide open. He dropped the gas nozzle and started screaming, "Hey, man! That's some kind of he-ist-tor-i-cal monster you got there! I best go call the police."

Marshall eventually calmed the attendant, convincing him that the monster was merely a trained alligator being returned to the zoo. After wrapping about a yard of duct tape around the reptile's jaws, Marshall slipped the attendant a \$20-bill, and they were on their way.

"We laughed like crazy for the next hour, making up these crazy scenarios of how that poor fellow was going to tell his boss about this one." After all, it's not too often that a mild-mannered guy driving a shiny white convertible with a pink-haired chick in the backseat and a hissing prehistoric-looking creature in the trunk stops at your service station at two o'clock in the morning.



Once he had settled back into the nightly grind of doing bar magic at the Magic Lounge, Brodien tried to persuade Rose Paul to let him perform an illusion or two during his stand-up act. "I remembered there was this trapdoor in the stage that would be great to use with illusions. When Johnny Paul, Rose's ex, owned the place, he did a trick where he'd cover Rose with a cloth and she'd disappear. Then a minute or so later, usually in the middle of one of Johnny's jokes, she'd come busting in the front door."

Rose had to remind Marshall that the trapdoor was "more than less out of commission" because of something Senator Crandall had done.

Not long after Johnny moved out and opened his new place a few blocks away, Crandall came up with an absurd piece of shtick (a comic vaudeville bit) utilizing the trap. In the middle of The Senator's long-and-involved cut-and-restored rope routine, a waiter from The 4811, a striptease club across the street, holding a large round tray full of drinks, would rise through the trapdoor. He'd look out at the audience and ask, "Where are all the girls?" Then he'd look over toward The Senator, shake his head and say, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I must be in the wrong place."

In his inimitable deadpan style, Senator Crandall would mumble, "Yeah, The 4811 is on the other side of the street," as he continued with his rope

trick. The waiter shrugged his shoulders and slowly descended through the hole in the stage.

Johnny Paul heard about Crandall's bit and was peeved. Not because it was a funny gag, but because patrons knew about the elevator and the secret trapdoor — his old vanishing-lady stunt was being exposed. Early one morning, after the lounge closed down for the night, Johnny broke in, tore out the motor, welded shut the trapdoor, and brought an end to The Senator's clever piece of nonsense.

Despite the fact there was no longer a trap, and even though everybody felt the stage was too small for big illusions, Marshall still pushed to include the Blade Box and the Electric Chair in his show. The big stuff drew crowds at the fairs and carnivals. Why couldn't it do the same at the Magic Lounge? Then, just about the time he'd convinced Rose to let him start trying out the illusions, the Outfit let it be known they had designs on doing something different at the Magic Lounge.

Late one night, after everyone had left the club and they were about to lock the doors, a well-dressed tough guy walked in, spotted Marshall and asked, "You're that magician, right?" When he said yes, Marshall was informed, "This is your last night, 'cause you're not working here no more. You take your magishing stuff wit you tonight. And don't come back. Comprendre?"

Within 24 hours, the place was completely transformed into a full-blown strip joint, where the girls danced totally nude. While the City of Chicago may have had ordinances that prohibited exotic dancers from going beyond pasties and g-strings, in Cicero anything and everything went. The place was still called Rose Paul's Original Magic Lounge, but Mrs. Paul was nowhere to be seen. Mob kingpin Joey Aiupia had planted his friend Rose somewhere else. Magicians were "no more" at the Magic Lounge, and the tricks onstage were of a totally different nature.

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