by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

If you believe all the stories about who performed at Piper's Opera House, virtually every entertainer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries found his or her way to Virginia City's premier theater. In fact, there are billboards kept at Piper's listing all the great and near-great performers who supposedly graced its stage beginning with the first opera house in 1867.

A front-page news story promoting a Nevada Shakespeare Festival at Piper's claimed "[t]he old Opera House has also played host to some of the best theatrical talent in the history books. . . ." Among those entertainers named in the story was the world-famous escape-artist and magician Harry Houdini, born Ehrich Weiss in 1874 in Budapest, Hungary. His father, Rabbi Meyer Weiss, brought his wife and children to America in 1876. While they lived in various locations in the country, the family considered Appleton, Wisconsin, their home.

Young Houdini began his magic act in 1891, a time when the great Comstock mines were in decline. According to the U.S. Decennial Census for 1890, Virginia City's population included

some 8,500 residents. While still the largest town in Nevada, the "Queen of the Comstock" was only a shadow of its former self. Over the next ten years thousands would leave for greener pastures, some to nearby Reno which replaced Virginia City as the state's principal population center. In 1900, only about 2,700 people remained. Big-name performers did not include Piper's Opera House on their tours after the turn-of-the-century.

In reading *Houdini!!!,* a comprehensive biography of the career of Ehrich Weiss, it appears he played virtually every sizeable community in the country (for example, Houdini first appeared at San Francisco's Orpheum in June 1899). However, there is no mention of him visiting Piper's Opera House. A check of Virginia City and Reno newspapers turned up nothing. Curator Kim Louagie of the Houdini Historical Center in Appleton, Wisconsin, told me after examining all its records of where Houdini performed that there is no indication the great prestidigitator, illusionist, and escape artist ever played anywhere in Nevada (http://foxvalleyhistory.org).

Houdini's only association with the Silver State seems to be when he crossed Nevada by train to get to and from California! However, there are persons associated with Piper's who claim Houdini did "appear" at the Opera House because he was featured in motion picture productions. If we entertain that logic, then every place with a motion picture screen may have had Houdini "appear" in their community. Maybe his greatest feat following his untimely death in 1926 would have been all his worldwide "appearances" in the newsreels recounting his colorful and controversial career.

In fact, the reporter assigned the story was lead to believe that Houdini actually appeared in person at Piper's. Most newspaper journalists are under very short deadlines to complete their stories. They seldom have time to check historical facts or try to corroborate an informant's claim before the article is printed, generally on the next day. Only some have any training in the history field. If a mistake is brought to the attention of the editors, a correction is run on a subsequent day. Few people read the correction primarily because of its placement in the newspaper. The initial story may be used later in a school classroom by a teacher or student; cited by an author writing a paper, article, or book; or retrieved by another reporter from a morgue file or website and the mistake printed again, and again, and again!

Whether a story be folklore, fakelore, or just an error, it becomes "fact" through repetition, an oral or written mantra if you will. And so it goes.

For a comprehensive biography of Harry Houdini, see Houdini!!!: *The Career of Ehrich Weiss: American Self Liberator, Europe's Eclipsing Sensation, World's Handcuff King & Prison Breaker* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) by Kenneth Silverman.

Photo: Houdini poses in restraints for a publicity photo, circa 1918 after achieving worldwide fame with his death-defying escapes. Courtesy of the Sidney H. Radner Collection, Houdini Historical Center, Appleton, WI.

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