

# World-renowned magician Ralph Adams pioneered the magic of illusion on television

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Ralph Adams, the youngest of 12 children, was born April 18, 1910 in Ross Fork, Mont., a stage coach stop where travelers were fed in the Grandma Adams' home, and came to Santa Maria by way of Oregon in 1922.

Always being somewhat interested in the illusion of magic, after buying a little pocket trick from a street vendor, he sent away for \$2.65 worth of tricks.

He volunteered as a magician at the Main Street School, and although he didn't know any tricks, he bought a book, gave the show and, as he said, "I was a big shot around the school for a few days."

He wasn't about to rest on his laurels, though. Working as a dishwasher at the France Café for \$3.50 per week while attending school, and \$7.50 during vacations, he saved \$65 and sent away for the Tarbell Mail Order Course in Magic. The course, written in 1926 by Dr. Harlan Tarbell, is said to have been the greatest thing that has ever happened in the teaching of magic.

"A magician is not a magician because he knows tricks, but because he knows magic – its principles and fundamentals."

It took years for Adams to develop his sleight-of-hand shakes.

But he didn't stop there. Adams was an accomplished lapidary artist (making polished tables that remain pieces of art), and operated the Ralph Adams Photography Studio for 35 years, first on West Main Street in Santa Maria, and later at 617 S. Broadway.

During the 1930s, while running his photography studio, he was also busy performing magic at local lodges. Eventually, his hobby became his profession.

For many years he took school pictures and years later took these same children's wedding pictures. People have often told of how he mesmerized the children, as they were lined up to have their pictures taken, with his magic tricks. The kids reverently spoke of him as "The Magic Man."

Adams was a high priest in the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, served as branch president and also directed the building of the Mormon Church on the corner of Miller and Cook Streets — now the home of the Salvation Army.

After watching Ed Sullivan's "Show of Shows" on television and seeing guest magicians doing the same old tricks, Adams began creating tricks of his own.

When the nine Adams children were small, he included them in his act as "acting assistants," as they curled into small spaces as parts of his acts.

After retiring from his photography business, he was able to devote more time to his magic acts, and it wasn't long before he received recognition from illusionists throughout the world as "the man who put entertainment into magic."

Adams worked hundreds of stages throughout the country in such prestigious entertainment palaces as Radio City Musical Hall in New York, The Astrodome in Texas and Radio City in Ohio, where a one-night stint lasted four years.

He pioneered the magic of illusion on television and created and built all of his own equipment, thereby saving hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Adams' dancing handkerchiefs, probably his greatest achievement, is known all over the world of magic.

On his 85th birthday, Adams was honored by Lance Burton and David Copperfield during their show in Las Vegas.

He was also the first magician to have his name in lights in the glitzy city.

After he retired for good, he and Hilda put on magic shows for 65 people at a time in the garage of their home in Orcutt. Admission for the children was a note from their parents saying that they were “good kids,” while parents needed similar notes from their children.

There were two doorbells on their front porch, one for solicitors and salesmen, but it didn’t work. The one set below that bell was for friends and relatives. It was deliberately set low so that children could reach it.

The City of Santa Maria, in recognizing the achievements of the couple, designated May 7, 1997 as “Ralph and Hilda Adams Day.”

Only family members knew the magic secrets of Ralph Adams. When asked how he did his “dancing handkerchiefs,” he’d smile and reply, “very well.”

He was known to climb a free-standing rope and disappear in front of the audience only to reappear a few moments later. When asked how he did this trick, he’d smile and reply, “It’s magic.”

I visited Mr. and Mrs. Adams at their home at 250 Pacific in Orcutt in July of 1998. Since I pressed the appropriate doorbell, Mrs. Adams came to the door and ushered me inside.

Although I had never met Mr. Adams, I could see that age had taken its toll.

However, with his twinkling blue eyes and two snow white tufts of hair sticking out on both sides of his head, I expected handkerchiefs to start floating around the room.

Although it was clear that those days had passed, his mind was clear as he told me story after story of his days as a magician. When I finally realized that I might be taxing his energy, I went over to shake his hand and thank him for a wonderful afternoon, he replied, “The pleasure was mine. I just wish that I knew what you looked like, but I’m blind.”

I was astounded as, throughout my visit, he looked me straight in my eyes, with no indication that he couldn’t see.

A few days later Ralph Adams was a patient in Marian Medical Center and passed away on July 8, 1998. Both he and Hilda, who passed away in October of 2009, are buried in the Santa Maria Cemetery.

The story of Ralph Adams can be summed up by his daughter, Maxine, who said that “Dad did many things for all of his children, and for his church, as well as for the community that he loved. His devotion was never questioned. He was honest and his dealings were full of integrity.”

Note: Many thanks to the many people who stepped up to help me with this story.

You know who you are and I shall never forget you.

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