

# Today in History - June 22

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## Houdini, King of Handcuffs

Legendary magician and escape artist Harry Houdini married Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner on **June 22, 1894**. When they were just a few years old. His father had been hired as the rabbi of a Jewish congregation there, but the job lasted only a few years. As the family struggled to make ends meet young Erich Weiss, as his name was now spelled, held a variety of low-skilled jobs and ran away from home at least once. Many stories, some of them fanciful, surround the early days of his performing career. In about 1890, in New York City, he adopted the name Harry Houdini as part of a Houdini Brothers magic act. The name was chosen to invoke the reputation of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the father of modern magic. In his solo performances as a magician, Houdini appeared in amusement parks, sideshows, and vaudeville. He also began to augment his act with handcuff tricks.

*"Houdini: houdinize, vt. To release or extricate oneself from confinement, bonds, or the like, as by wiggling out."*

Funk and Wagnall's New Dictionary as quoted on Houdini Letterhead. The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920.



Harry and Beatrice Houdini in Nice, France, full-length portrait, standing, facing front. 1913. The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

Born in Budapest, Hungary, as Ehrich Weisz in 1874, the future Houdini emigrated with his family to Appleton, Wisconsin, when he was just a few years old. His father had been hired as the rabbi of a Jewish congregation there, but the job lasted only a few years. As the family struggled to make ends meet young Erich Weiss, as his name was now spelled, held a variety of low-skilled jobs and ran away from home at least once. Many stories, some of them fanciful, surround the early days of his performing career. In about 1890, in New York City, he adopted the name Harry Houdini as part of a Houdini Brothers magic act. The name was chosen to invoke the reputation of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the father of modern magic. In his solo performances as a magician, Houdini appeared in amusement parks, sideshows, and vaudeville. He also began to augment his act with handcuff tricks.

In the early years of their marriage, with Beatrice as his assistant, Houdini advertised that he had "escaped out of more handcuffs, manacles, and leg shackles than any other human being living." By 1899, the "King of Handcuffs" had dropped magic from his act and left for a European tour, where he was acclaimed as a brilliant "escapologist."

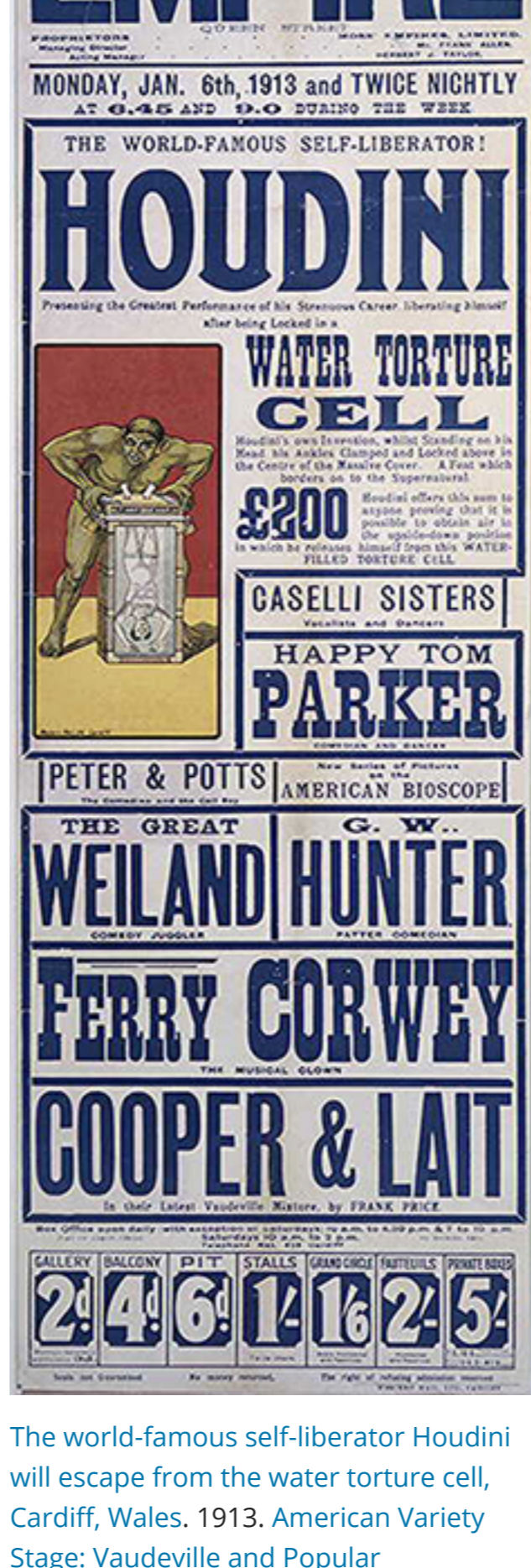


Houdini and the Water Torture Cell, ca. 1913. The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

In 1904, Houdini returned to America triumphant. Over the next fifteen years, he perfected a series of amazing acts including extricating himself from the jail cell of presidential assassin Charles Guiteau, escaping from a water-filled milk can, and performing his world famous water torture cell routine. By the 1910s, he returned to magic and was soon embraced as a master magician as well as a brilliant escape artist. In 1918, hundreds gasped as Houdini made a 10,000-pound elephant disappear on the brightly lit stage of New York City's Hippodrome Theater.

During the 1920s, Houdini dabbled in film, but primarily devoted himself to exposing fraudulent mediums—a campaign that resulted in a highly-publicized conflict with mystery writer and spiritualist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Ever the performer and self-promoter, Houdini brought his anti-spiritualist crusade to the stage. With hundreds watching, he revealed the techniques mediums used to "communicate" with the dead, and he authored a book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, in 1924.

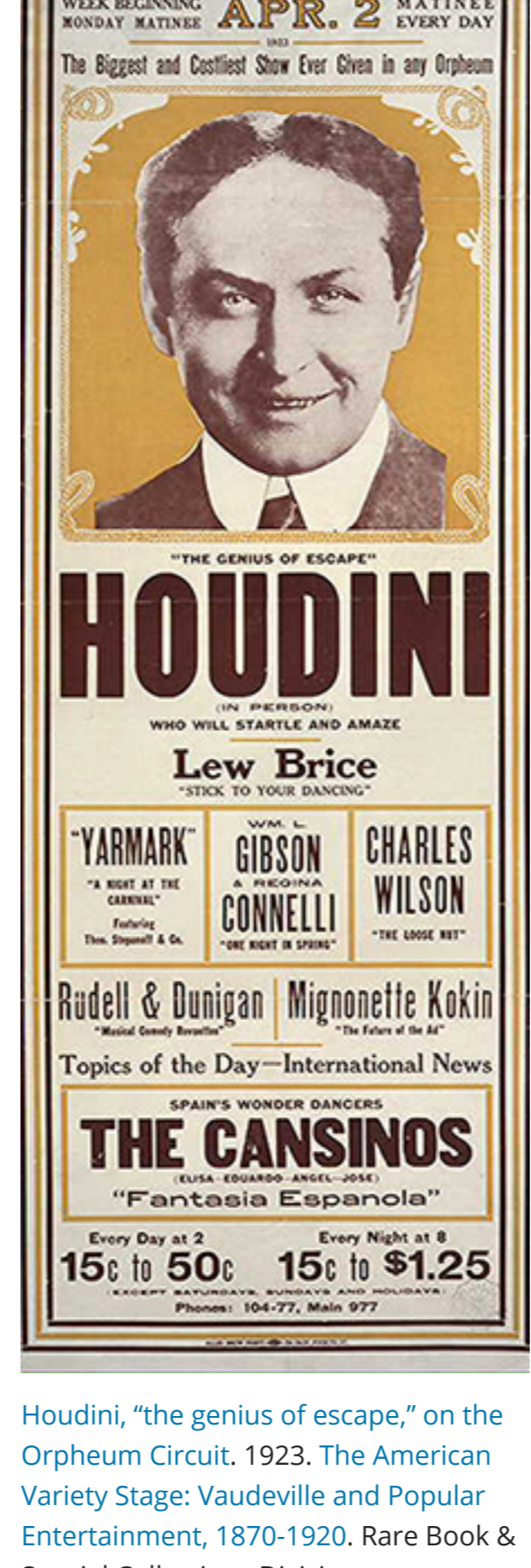
Wealthy and world famous, Beatrice and Harry Houdini celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary in 1914 on board the S.S. *Imperator* of the Hamburg-America Line. Fellow passenger Theodore Roosevelt was so amazed by Houdini's shipboard performance that he invited Houdini to meet his grandchildren. Five years later, the couple celebrated their silver anniversary with a formal dinner party at the Alexandria Hotel. Their marriage held strong until Houdini's sudden death on Halloween, October 31, 1926. The "Genius of Escape" was just fifty-two years old.



The world-famous self-liberator Houdini will escape from the water torture cell, Cardiff, Wales, 1913. American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. Rare Book & Special Collections Division



Houdini at the Wintergarten, Berlin, 1903. The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. Rare Book & Special Collections Division



Houdini, "the genius of escape," on the Orpheum Circuit, 1923. The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

### Learn More

- Explore the Library of Congress' [Houdini](#) collection, held in the [Rare Book & Special Collections Division](#) and online as part of [American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920](#), which includes photographs and related items of personal memorabilia documenting Houdini's life and career. Learn more about Houdini in the [Biographical Chronology](#) of his life.
- Read [Today in History](#) features about other twentieth-century entertainers including composer George M. Cohan, impresario Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., singer Sophie Tucker, and legendary dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.
- Learn some of Houdini's stage secrets in "Folklore of Stage People," an interview text in [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#), pages five and six of the second interview in this set.

## Bull Moose Party Born

On the evening of **June 22, 1912**, former President Theodore Roosevelt asked his supporters to leave the floor of the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Republican progressives reconvened in Chicago's Orchestra Hall and endorsed the formation of a national progressive party. When formally launched later that summer, the new Progressive Party chose Roosevelt as its presidential nominee. Questioned by reporters, Roosevelt said he felt as strong as a "bull moose." Thenceforth known as the "Bull Moose Party," the Progressives promised to increase federal regulation and protect the welfare of ordinary people.



Theodore Roosevelt...Rockwood Photo Co., cFeb. 24, 1903. Prints & Photographs Division

Roosevelt maintained that President William Howard Taft had allowed fraudulent seating of delegates in order to capture the presidential nomination from progressive forces within the party. However, the rift between the progressive and conservative wings of the Republican Party was apparent even before Roosevelt left office. Roosevelt's support of government regulation, his groundbreaking efforts in conservation and consumer protection, and his willingness to work with organized labor alienated pro-business party members. When Roosevelt tapped Taft as his successor in 1908, he had assumed that Taft would continue to support his agenda. Although Taft's record suggested a leader sympathetic to reform, the former jurist's quiet demeanor and attention to the letter of the law irritated Roosevelt and disappointed Republican progressives.



President Taft Speaking at Manassas Court House, November 10, 1911. Prints & Photographs Division

Roosevelt ran for a third term in 1912—in a presidential campaign that was bitterly fought and easily won. With the Republican Party divided, progressive Democrat Woodrow Wilson captured the presidency handily. Although he failed to become chief executive again, Roosevelt succeeded in his vendetta against Taft who received just twenty-three percent of the popular vote compared to Roosevelt's twenty-seven percent.

Despite an impressive showing in 1912, the Bull Moose Party failed to establish itself as a viable third party. Still active on the state level, Progressives did not put forward a presidential candidate again until Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette's run in 1924.

Satirizing presidents and presidential hopefuls is an American tradition.

*I discovered the Bull Moose Party. I alone discovered the Moose—and it would have been a great party if the people hadn't discovered the Bull... But you must admit that the Bull Moose Party during its short but eventful life served this country well. If it wasn't for us and mostly me—you wouldn't have Woodrow Wilson as your president to-day. Suppose I hadn't taken the stand I did in Chicago? Where would we be now? I had no feeling against Mr. Taft. He's a brilliant man—honorable—the highest type of intellectual American but he had one unpardonable fault—he wouldn't do a damn thing I said.*

*My Policies*, Part 3, Aaron Hoffman [with added material by Lew Dockstader], 1915, p. 6-7. [Rare Book Selections](#). Rare Book & Special Collections Division

The first decades of the twentieth century were marked by unprecedented efforts at social and governmental reform.

### Learn More

- Read [Today in History](#) features on Progressive Era figures including reformer Grace Abbott, politician William Jennings Bryan, and Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld. [Search Today in History](#) on the names Roosevelt, Wilson, and Taft to learn more about the careers of these Progressive Era presidents.
- When Roosevelt decided to run on the Progressive Party ticket, he pushed aside prominent Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette. La Follette discusses the formation of the Progressive Party in *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* available through the collection [Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910](#).
- The following collections contain a wealth of images from the period 1900-20:
  - [Digital Horizons: Life on the Northern Great Plains](#)
  - [Panoramic Photographs](#)
  - [Detroit Publishing Company](#)
  - [Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920](#)
- [Theodore Roosevelt: His Life and Times on Film](#) contains 104 motion pictures relating to the life and times of the former president as well as four sound recordings.

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