

# Magic Beans

by Kerry Kistler

RAISING YOUR SHOW TO NEW HEIGHTS!

## Balancing the Ballyhoo: Does Our FCM Tent Need Some Patching?

True story – name has been changed.

Hank had already been studying magic for a couple of years when he first saw the billowing banner-line in front of the carnival sideshow. This young, fledgling performer stopped to stare at the banners and listen to the bally talker who was grinding away, pitching the show with perfect Barnum-esque cadence: “Thrills, chills and doctor bills! Your mind will refuse to believe what your eyes will see! Just one



dollar a seat – but you will only use the edge! If you’ve got the dough, we’ve got the show! It’s never out! It’s never over! The circus sideshow – that’s where they ALL go!”

Hank had never witnessed a sideshow in his young life but he was captivated by one of the garishly painted banners pictur-

ing a magician. He was determined to see the guy in action. Truth be told, he also secretly wanted to see the Seal Man, the Human Blockhead, Electra, Flamebini and everything else this 10-in-1 had to offer. Especially... the Headless Woman. It was only a buck and a short step off the midway so he plunged into the musty smelling canvas cave where a few bare bulbs strained to light the stage. Then the show began...

Did Hank enjoy the show which unfolded that day? Well, some of it was fun but many of the acts were also a disappointment. Some of it was legit but much of it seemed as bogus as a three dollar bill. The banners out front did NOT accurately depict what was on the inside – alive or not. For instance, he never expected the Human Blockhead to stick a screwdriver up his nose! But worse—magic secrets were being sold to any curious layman willing to part with another buck! He was appalled when the crowd was invited on stage to see the workings of the Blade Box illusion! The same thing happened after the Headless Woman illusion was presented behind a “blow-off” curtain! Again, people were invited to pull out their wallets! “Got another buck? Stick around and we’ll show you how it’s really done.”

But, there was a bigger kick in the head for Hank. He had been taking lessons from a local magic shop owner—investing everything he could afford and spending long hours practicing the craft. He had given lots of sweat to master a “Vernet,” and his slick handling of the prop with a silk had dropped plenty of jaws. Painfully, he watched the sideshow “magician” peddle the same gimmicks out of a cardboard box like cheap gumballs.

That day, Hank got an education. He learned what the term “ballyhoo” really meant.



Which brings me to the FCM. Are we guilty of pitching our own brand of ballyhoo over the years? If so, I am certain that it was sanctified by the pure intentions of our FCM leaders. Even so, after 50 years does our tent need a bit of patching up? Take a closer look at this curious collection of ballyhoo. You may be shocked! You may be amazed! Or you may only be gently amused. So, step right up! It's all alive—on the inside!

### **See The Crowning Mysteries Of Nature's Mistakes!**

The tone of this article is NOT accusatory nor is it an argument for returning the FCM to a "magicians only" club. But somehow we wandered away from our roots. We simply made some mistakes. On the eve of our 50<sup>th</sup> International Convention, it is wise to remember our heritage. Those first 16 men and women who gathered in Montrose, PA were principally magicians. Past President & member #1, Stan Adair made this observation when reflecting on that first FCM Convention in 1958: "Our original plan for a small local fellowship had been over-ruled by the Lord in order to establish a nationwide testimony of the power of God unto salvation THROUGH THE USE OF GOSPEL MAGIC" [emphasis mine].

Like it or not, in bygone days, the FCM was all about gospel MAGIC. It was originally conceived "of magicians, by magicians and for Christian magicians." Fact is, the original Constitution said this about our purpose for existing: "To organize and associate together Christian individuals interested in the use of... magic as a means of reaching souls for God and to aid in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ."

But, at some point, that focus shifted. Our current Constitution says something quite different: "To encourage... and advance the art of magic and other allied arts..."

Have we strayed too far? Consider that our upcoming International Convention has a Magic department... plus nine other departments. Face Painting was added several years ago and there is no evidence that we are finished yet. Coming soon—Western Arts! Whip cracking, rope spinning and knife throwing! Forgive the tongue-in-cheek but even our FCM website says, "One Convention to meet your needs for ALL the performing arts."

How did we quit making the main thing the

main thing? This gradual change was influenced by a creative crowd of Christian conventioners...

### **Cross That Canvas Threshold Into Another World!**

In the first few years of the FCM there was an agreement to invite ventriloquism to the fellowship table. After all, secular magic magazines in that day were already running "Vent Only" columns. But, here's the difference. The secular magic world made the decision to stop there. The FCM did not. So, over the decades, many more departments were added to our convention lineup and, in effect, we let the convention dictate our character. There were many reasons why this happened but, principally, we wanted to serve the membership (and figured it might also help us to grow).

We wanted our conventions to be family-friendly. So, we gradually created a unique sort of family-vacation-magic-convention hybrid. This approach led us to providing workshop options for non-magician conventioners. Because many of our magician-members' skills overlapped into these areas, they enjoyed dabbling around outside of magic and didn't mind this new diversity. As a result, many non-magic areas began to emerge within the FCM. It seemed like a win-win for everybody! After all, doesn't every organization change and evolve over time? Sure. But there was a dark side we had not anticipated: there was at least one major loser. Magic. Its methods and secrets began to take a major beating...

### **Watch The Great Howdini Reveal His Guarded Secrets!**

All members of the FCM must sign a list of ethical house rules. One of them states: "I will refrain from any form of exposure of how the magical effects are done." Our founders understood this and, like every other credible magic society of that day, built in a safeguard. Back in the day, an applicant could not become a member of the FCM unless they were endorsed by two active (magician) members. Our current by-laws encourage this but no longer require it. Here's the irony—you don't even have to be interested in magic to join the FCM.

So what? This shift created an obvious ethics paradox. Our current, guiding rule on exposure goes on to state: "Material taught in lectures... to members of the FCM or Student Magicians are not consid-

ered as exposure, but as a ‘teaching ministry.’” Clearly, this leaves the door wide open for abuse. In effect, ANY non-magic member of the FCM (even the merely curious) may attend magic lectures at our conventions and obtain magic secrets and methods. Is this what our founders envisioned? Unlikely. Did we think that our “hard-core” magicians would not mind? Of course they did. Most were just too polite to complain.

Many magicians have a difficult time forgiving careless exposure of secrets. Like Hank, they worked hard and paid lots of money to acquire such knowledge. They squirm when secrets are surrendered carelessly to those who have no business knowing. To a degree, this has tarnished our credibility within the greater magic community and slowly deflated their respect for us. Some have left our ranks over this fact. Others will not join because of it. Some members have become guarded when it comes to lecturing at our conferences or contributing to the *Conjuror*.

### **Come See “Lefty”—Our “Professional” Alligator Trainer!**

Up through the mid-80’s we were just about the only game in town. We were the one-stop-shop for Christian variety performers. Problem is, while our river became wider over time it didn’t get much deeper. By default, the FCM became the proverbial “jack of all trades but master of none.” Including magic. As diverse elements flooded into the FCM and diluted our magic concentration, a prevailing “amateur image” was reinforced. As if “professional performer” seemed incompatible with “virtuous ministry.”

With notable exceptions, the FCM found its niche as an entry-level portal for beginners—kind of a “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” for the Christian variety arts. And we seemed fairly content with that. In an effort to remain inclusive and encourage ministry, we purposely lowered the bar “for Jesus’ sake.” Naturally, this has long-term consequences.

After a few years in our ranks, many members start looking for a higher level of training and expertise. I have heard it too many times: “I cut my teeth in the FCM but now it doesn’t meet my needs—I need something more advanced, more professional.” The FCM does a very capable job of helping people get started, but everyone knows

that a steady diet of beginner material soon loses its flavor. As members graduate up the food chain, they start hungering for something more exquisite.

When we weren’t looking, the whole landscape changed. Market forces took over. The FCM adopted “generalist” thinking while “specialists” emerged and began to eclipse us. Are you looking for advanced, professional training in clowning, juggling, chalk art, ventriloquism, puppetry—whatever? Today, there is a “specialty” group (and magazine) looking for you. They are happy to court you, recruit you, and stretch you. Advanced Christian organizations exist for nearly every art we represent. Except magic. Where can our magicians supposed to go—back to the secular world? Indeed, some of our FCM friends still attend magic conventions every year—just not ours. When many of our advanced members move on, who can calculate the loss? But at least we still have our name...

### **We’re Going To Whirl You Way Into A Land Of Mirth, Magic & Mystery!**

Did we borrow a page from the playbook of ballyhoo king P.T. Barnum? He employed a rather clever ruse to boost revenue at his museum. On the inside of an obscure exit door he posted a sign that read, “To the Egress.” When patrons went through the door looking for some exotic creature, they found themselves locked out, standing in an empty alley. Suckered and embarrassed, the patrons would sheepishly pay to reenter the museum again.

Many magicians coming to the FCM face a confusing door that is labeled “Magic” but leads somewhere else. Our name suggests that the Fellowship of Christian Magicians is all about magic—which is misleading. When newcomers discover the large, non-magic side of the FCM, do some simply walk away? Perhaps most forgive the slippery misrepresentation on our sideshow banner because they believe the show is worth the price of admission. After all, this worked for P.T. Barnum. One author said: “If he rarely gave customers precisely what he’d promised, he always gave them their money’s worth in other stuff.”

Some view the FCM in a similar way. Remember Hank’s disappointment in the sideshow that day? Well, he later went on to see the main circus show. And he was captivated. It delivered far more than was promised. The circus proves that strength

and energy can flow from combining the allied arts together under one big tent. That should be our aim—more show and less blow.

Kif Anderson made this valuable point on the Magic Café website: “Anyone who goes [to the convention] just for the magic misses a lot. I take advantage of the week at the International Convention to sample many different arts. I don’t know of a conference anywhere that gives someone such an opportunity...” Guys like Ron Calhoun love the variety of options, abundance of selection and range of alternative workshops. And, believe it or not, I am not against diversity in the FCM either. My clan is something of a “poster family” for diversity: I do magic and chalk, my wife is a vent and clown, my kids do some magic, juggling, balloons, clowning and unicycling. We did lots of puppets at one time. Fact is, our programs are more variety shows than magic shows. And we have the influence of the FCM to thank for it! This describes scores of other FCMers who have multiple skills as well. That is why they attend. Without question, many feel the same way—even if our name is misleading.

Would changing our name help? This idea was discussed at an International Convention and a majority believed we should keep it as is. Not that it really matters. Our people have been changing the name, unofficially, for a long time. Some of our chapters now call themselves the Fellowship of Christian Entertainers (FCE). In Malaysia the FCM chapter is known (locally) as the Fellowship of Creative Ministries. Etcetera. Apparently, some members believe our name should accurately reflect who we *are*...not who we *were*. Instead of changing our name why not change our thinking about this next bit of ballyhoo?

### **Come One, Come All! Anybody Can Be A Magician!**

Nope. Sorry. Not true. As Master Yoda might say, “A magician you are not, because a few tricks you can do.” I am not some snobby, magic purist who believes in guarding every single secret and method. Clearly, magic would die without fresh students learning the craft. But there is a big difference between taking a promising apprentice under your wing and giving non-magicians the keys to the magic shop. Why would we encourage curiosity-seekers to snoop behind the counter?

Yet, we allow this every year at our convention when non-magicians file into the magic lectures. If we really love and respect our craft, we will end this practice. We must find the will to change at least this much, or it’s time to vote on a different name, redesign the logo, and visit the printer for some new stationary. This is not a call to purge all non-magicians from our ranks. Such a reckless move would probably kill our International Convention. But here is the main point: if a member is not a magician, their “performing pedigree” should not earn them a free pass into the world of magic secrets. Period.

We can turn this ship around without calling for a mutiny. Here is one suggestion for helping our ship make that turn: Even while promoting unity within the FCM, why not restore a clear separation between the magic side of the FCM and the other side? It’s too late to turn back the clock, but we can tinker with it until it keeps better time. If we are going to continue calling ourselves the Fellowship of Christian Magicians, in good conscience, it is essential that we quit giving away the store. How can our “magic side” recapture some of its long-lost mystique? We can begin by instituting a simple hurdle system.

### **Crowd Up There! We’re Gonna Have A Free Show!**

Here is one possible solution: When someone claiming to be a magician wants to join the FCM (or register for our conventions), couldn’t we require some proof of that claim? Though we no longer require endorsement of new members, let’s at least require it for those people who desire to attend the magic lectures. (Endorsement means that another proven, magician-member vouches for the applicant’s status as a student of magic.) Even existing members should be subject to this one-time process. Consider the Magic Café website: it requires 50 legitimate posts before registered members are allowed to visit the secret areas of the site—no matter who you are.

Alternately, if an endorsement cannot be arranged, the applicant/registrant might: provide proof of membership in another magic organization (IBM, SAM, etc.) or show some history of performing magic as evidenced by one of the following: website, video recording, promo material/scrapbook or live audition. Naturally, this would require some sort of Evaluation Committee—perhaps the magician-members of our



Board. Any necessary live auditions would be handled at the discretion of The Evaluation Committee, ideally early in the convention week.

Once the Evaluation Committee has certified a magician, that status would be recorded in the FCM database and remain in effect for life (despite lapsed memberships), although it could be revoked for blatant exposure.

Then, once certified, a magic convention-er's name badge could bear a specific stamp, sticker or color authorizing them to attend any magic lectures. Without the identifying name badge, they would not be allowed into the magic lecture rooms, and volunteers could be used as doorkeepers. The chairman of the Late, Late Magic Show could also make an effort, as able, to enforce this policy, for obvious reasons.

What about the uncertified beginner who is just getting started? There always needs to be a place for open-access, entry-level "Magic 101" workshops for the novice. This could be a great opportunity for our vendors to help launch new magicians — and new customers. We all started with basic ropes, silks, sponge balls, etc. If a magician-wannabe is not willing to start with

the basic fundamentals, why should they be allowed access to more advanced material? Even dealers used to hold this line.

It is tempting to discuss how/if this should affect the content of the *Christian Conjurer* but that is another discussion for another day.

### Show's Over! This Way To The Egress!

Does anybody remember thirty years ago when Rev. Bill Baker taught the Magic College Classes at our conventions? They cost extra to attend, and registration was limited. If a person was able to secure a spot in the class they felt pretty lucky. The material was advanced and during the class an atmosphere of prestige and deep respect prevailed. I know we are not the Magic Castle, but somewhere along the way we lost this mystique. Does our FCM tent need some patching? I firmly believe—if we tore it...we can restore it.

See you down the road!

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## "Bonus Bean" Ambigram

Let me show you a **MAGIC TRICK...**



...or have you already seen this one!

*"MagicTrick" ambigram created by Mark Palmer © 2008. Printed here by permission. You may not reproduce this design without the permission of Mark. Visit his site at [www.wowtattoos.com](http://www.wowtattoos.com)*

*Sideshow talker cartoon by Nolan Harris. p.18*