

'The Great Reno'

He was the
Harry Houdini
of Southbridge

By **JOE CAPILLO**
News Staff

SOUTHBRIDGE - The sturdy young man, clad in acrobatic tights, stood on the wall above River Street and looked down at the rushing waters of the Quinebaug.

It was Fourth of July, 1910, and half of Southbridge turned out to witness this amazing feat.

The man, securely bound in handcuffs and chains, was "The Great Reno," the stage name of Frank Renaud, Southbridge's most famous escape artist of his day.

It was an era of Harry Houdini, who thrilled audiences worldwide with his unbelievable feats. Several months before, Houdini, manacled in chains, jumped in the Charles River in Boston and within minutes emerged smiling and free of bondage.

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'The Great Reno,' (with head in chopping block below, and right) a.k.a. Frank Renaud of Southbridge, modeled himself after escape artist Harry Houdini.

The Great Reno



Today's Houdini seance has Southbridge ties

By **JOE CAPILLO**
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SOUTHBRIDGE - Early this morning, when most Halloween ghosts and goblins were just getting ready to go out on the town, a mysterious seance was under way in New York City.

A group of Harry Houdini devotees gathered at the Players Club at the stroke of midnight in an effort to contact the legendary magician on the 70th anniversary of his death.

A 76-year old Holyoke man, Sidney Radner, who was a disciple of the great Houdini, and

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Now it was Reno's turn.
He plunged into the river.
The crowd hushed.

He couldn't swim

Reno bobbed to the surface quickly. He smiled and raised his hands in the air as a boat stood by to pick him up. He freed himself in seven seconds. The amazing part of the entire stunt was that The Great Reno couldn't swim.

He admitted after:

"I had the boat standing by in the river below because I couldn't swim a stroke. And, imagine my thoughts later, when I found out the guy in the boat couldn't swim, either."

The river jump was a well-planned advertisement to Reno's performance later that night at The Tremont Theater in Southbridge where he wrestled himself free from a straight jacket and made an escape from the Chinese Torture Chamber, one of his specialties.

Within several years, he became Southbridge's most famous entertainers.

Frank Renaud as the Great Reno spent years on the vaudeville circuit, performing his feats of magic, strength and escapism. He patterned himself



With a large crowd watching, The Great Reno (Frank Renaud), tightly bound and handcuffed, jumped from the River Street bridge in 1910.

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after Houdini and for many years corresponded with Houdini's brother, Hardeen, who obtained numerous cuffs, chains and manacles for Reno's ever expanding collection.

At the time of his death in 1964 he had amassed one of the world's largest collection of restraining devices.

Adept at other tricks

Frank Renaud was born in Southbridge on July 29, 1890 and by the time he was 16, he was a performing in vaudeville as a strong man and acrobat. He was adept at card tricks, magic and rope ties and a visit to Boston to see the Great Houdini perform changed his life.

"I was there when he jumped off the bridge and later asked him if he would show me how to do some of his tricks. At first, he was reluctant but I finally convinced him to show me a few tricks. Houdini showed me five in all and from then on, he sent me lessons by mail," said Reno in a 1986 newspaper interview.

Renaud (Reno) went on the vaudeville and carnival circuits throughout the United States and Canada.

"It's a great life and there's money to be made and I love the crowds, the stunts, the excitement," he told his family.

Befriended Hardeen

He later befriended Houdini's brother, Hardeen,

Reno told family members he had an opportunity to buy a good portion of Hardeen's collection, which contained numerous escape mechanisms owned by Houdini.

"I regret I didn't buy all Hardeen had to offer. He offered me the entire collection for \$100, and I was a nut not to borrow the money and buy it," said Reno.

Harry and Hardeen Houdini were stage names. Harry's real name was Eric Weiss and Hardeen's was Theodore.

Frank Renaud was born on July 29, 1890, the son of Frank X. and Sophie (Lamothe) Renaud. He married Eva Gendron in 1914 and this union produced 13 children. Among those living are Albert of Texas, Leo of Biloxi, Miss., and Irene Morin, of Southbridge.



Reno was one of Southbridge's most famous entertainers.

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None followed their father into show business.

The sword trick

A granddaughter, June Renaud of Southbridge, came close.

"When I was six years old, he put me in a wooden box, told me to sit a certain way, and then he would shove swords through the box. I was so scared because I trusted him but I never could figure out how he did it. All I remember were sword blades whizzing past my ears," she said with a laugh.

"I remember the Great Reno as a wonderful grandfather and a great prankster. He used to carry a small rubber ball everywhere he went and when he saw a little kid, he would make the ball disappear," she related.

The Great Reno was an avid weightlifter and physical fitness buff, long before it was in vogue. He used to walk five to six miles every morning and selected a careful food regimen.

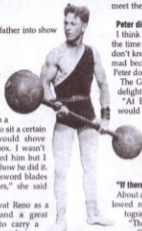
"He used to do hundreds of push-ups at a stretch," said his granddaughter, "and every day, a set of breathing exercises," she said.

Renaud died in 1964, at the age of 74, a number of years after his final stage performances.

June added, "I remember when he died, the doctor told us the autopsy report showed he was a man who had great lungs and had taken care of himself."

The Renaud family growing up knew their grandfather was famous.

"I remember going to New Haven for a vaudeville act and I took him to Holyoke several times to



The Great Reno was an avid weightlifter and a physical fitness buff.

meet the Radnar the Great," June said.

Peter disappears

I think the scariest thing that ever happened was the time he made my brother, Peter, disappear. We don't know how he did it but our grandmother was mad because it was a while before Peter returned. Peter doesn't remember much of how it happened."

The Great Reno dabbled in hypnosis and would delight the family by hypnotizing animals. "At Easter, when we lived on Paige Hill, he would hypnotize a rabbit. I saw it with my own eyes. The rabbit was out cold," laughed June.

Reno's massive handcuff and chain collection, believed to be worth thousands, was sold by his wife after his death.

"If there's a way"

About all the family has for memories are a few yellowed newspaper press clippings, several photographs, and each a set of his handcuffs.

"There's no magic left, it was sold to a man in California, supposedly for a museum, but we haven't been able to locate the collection," said June.

Does June think there is a chance, like

Houdini followers believe, that her grandfather will come back from the dead?

"I remember hearing him tell us that 'if there is a way to come back, I will.'"

She added, softly, "And, he said this quite a few times."

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an excellent escape artist in his own right, helped planned today's program.

Radner, who appeared on stage billed as The Great Radner, had ties to Frank Renaud of Southbridge, this town's famous escape artist.

"I remember The Great Reno very well. We knew each other and were familiar with each other's escape techniques. We also both knew Hardeen, Houdini's brother. Reno was a very successful performer and if I remember, he had a magnificent collection of handcuffs and locks," said Radner.

What will be the outcome of today's seance?

"Who knows, we have a lot of interesting people here for the seance," he said yesterday, "and who can tell what will happen?"



The Great Reno takes the plunge, shackles and all.