

Charles Fine was the Great Dank

By Carroll McMahan

While recovering from influenza young Charles Fine read an ad in a magazine, "Learn to be a Magician." Intrigued, he wrote to the world's most famous Magician, Harry Houdini, expressing his interest in magic escapes. The Great Houdini answered the letter and included two pictures along with information and words of encouragement.

Charles soon ordered a correspondence course from Harlen Tarbell School of Magic in Chicago, Illinois. He studied for almost three years. Accompanied by a family member or a friend, Charles made numerous trips back and forth to Chicago for tests. Simultaneously he was a student of ventriloquism, an art in which he excelled.

He crafted a dummy out of wood and named it Willie. Charles dressed Willie in a brown checked suit and high top lace- up shoes. The shirt, tie and socks came from the Fine family and the shoes had belonged to Glenn and Hugh Fox. Willie provided a lot of entertainment for neighbors and friends who visited the Fine home.

Born August 29, 1910, Charles Henry Fine was one of six sons of John Fine and Margaret Nine Fine of Middle Creek.

Charles was 22 years old when he was presented a diploma from Harlan Tarbell School of Magic. On November 4, 1932 he was admitted as a member in the Society of Americans Magicians. He was the first in Sevier County to be a member and reputedly Sevier County's first magician.

He met Joseph J. Kolar, an outstanding Escape Artist who had worked for Harry Houdini for twelve years. Charles took a course in escapes from Kolar and graduated as an expert escape artist. His ability to perform magic and escape was recognized by the Society of American Magicians and he was voted second best to Harry Houdini at the society's national conference in Chicago.

Before touring around the country, Charles wanted to entertain his friends in Sevier County and say thanks for their support while he was studying magic. His first show was at Middle Creek School where he had once been a student. He was greeted by a large crowd who was excited to see what this young magician could do.

During the show he did several tricks including making a canary and a rabbit disappear. Much to the astonishment of the homefolks, Charles was locked in chains and nailed inside a wooden box in which he escaped in less than three minutes. One man in the audience fainted when Lavanna McMahan screamed loudly as she was placed in a box and appeared to be sawed in half.

While assembling his magic show, Charles purchased a special built van for traveling and transporting his equipment. Accompanied by Buford Townsend and Conley Sims, he went to Ohio to pick up the van.

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Loren Thurman and Buford Townsend booked and advertised the shows. Conley Sims, along with two of Charles' brothers, George and Homer, served as set-up men.

Lavanna McMahan was Charles' stage assistant. On the day of the first show Lavanna married Conley Sims and the newlyweds traveled together to the show at Wearwood School in Wear's Valley, which was the outset of a tour around the southeastern states.

Charles Fine now using the name, The Great Dank, a name which was given to him as a child by a neighbor, gave a performance on Sunday afternoon, April 16, 1933 near his home at Middle Creek where he performed his own original grave escape.

A wooden coffin was constructed on the ground, piece by piece, out of 2x6 lumber and the corner post was of 2x4's put together with twenty penny nails. Constructed in full view of the audience, the sturdy coffin was subject to examination from anyone wishing to inspect the box. Charles was placed in the coffin and lowered into a 7-foot-deep grave. The lid had been securely nailed and two small holes were made in the lid for ventilation pipes.

Dirt estimated at 3,000 pounds was shoved on the coffin. Several individuals talked with Charles through the ventilation pipes after he was buried. Some even dropped small items such as pencils and coins for him to bring out to prove he was really in the coffin. The crowd was then moved back from the grave and a curtain was drawn around the grave. There was a hushed silence for about seven minutes until suddenly Charles appeared leaving no clue as to how he escaped. He then returned the items that were dropped through the pipes.

On March 10, 1934 at the Sevier County High School Auditorium, Charles was shackled and placed into a wooden box with a lid which was then placed in another wooden box and its lid nailed down to make both boxes secure. The curtain was dropped around the boxes. Many in the audience feared he would smother to death. Suddenly a loud bumping and rattling of the chains was heard and Charles appeared with only a slight wound on his head where a nail had grazed his head.

The Great Dank gave a free exhibition on August 5, 1933 in the west prong of the Little Pigeon River just off the road between the farms of Dr. John Ogle and Nelson Caton. An estimated crowd of 2,000 trampled down a corn field to watch. After handcuffs were placed on his wrists and shackles around his arms and a chain holding his arms securely, he was thrown in the river and made his escape and swam to safety in about 30 seconds.

Later that same day he was locked in 26 pounds of handcuffs, shackles and chains by Victor Allen and Postmaster L.E. Sarten, after which he was placed in a box the lid being nail on and the box lowered in the river. Seconds later, he appeared unscathed.

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One day while traveling around the country, Charles received a letter from his mother asking him to come home because she was not well. He continued on with the shows for a short time before deciding his family came first.

After returning home he met Marjorie Henderson of Pine Grove. Charles and Marjorie married on January 10, 1942. They had been married six months when he received his call for military service. While in the army, he began doing some watch repairing in the barracks. After his discharge from the army Charles repaired watches and clocks for friends and neighbors. In 1947 he began selling watches and doing repairs at Robertson Brothers Hardware Co. Within a few years he was operating Fine's Jewelry Store where he sold jewelry and repaired clocks and watches for over two decades.

After thirty years of marriage to Marjorie and rearing a son, Charles Henry Fine, Jr., The Great Dank passed away on November 2, 1971. He was 61 years old.

The daring escapes by The Great Dank in the 1930s left lasting impact on the citizens of Sevier County. Although Charles had not participated in a magic show in twenty years, one day in the late 1950s an elderly lady looked in the door of Fine's Jewelry Store and said; "That's that old hant Fine in thar."