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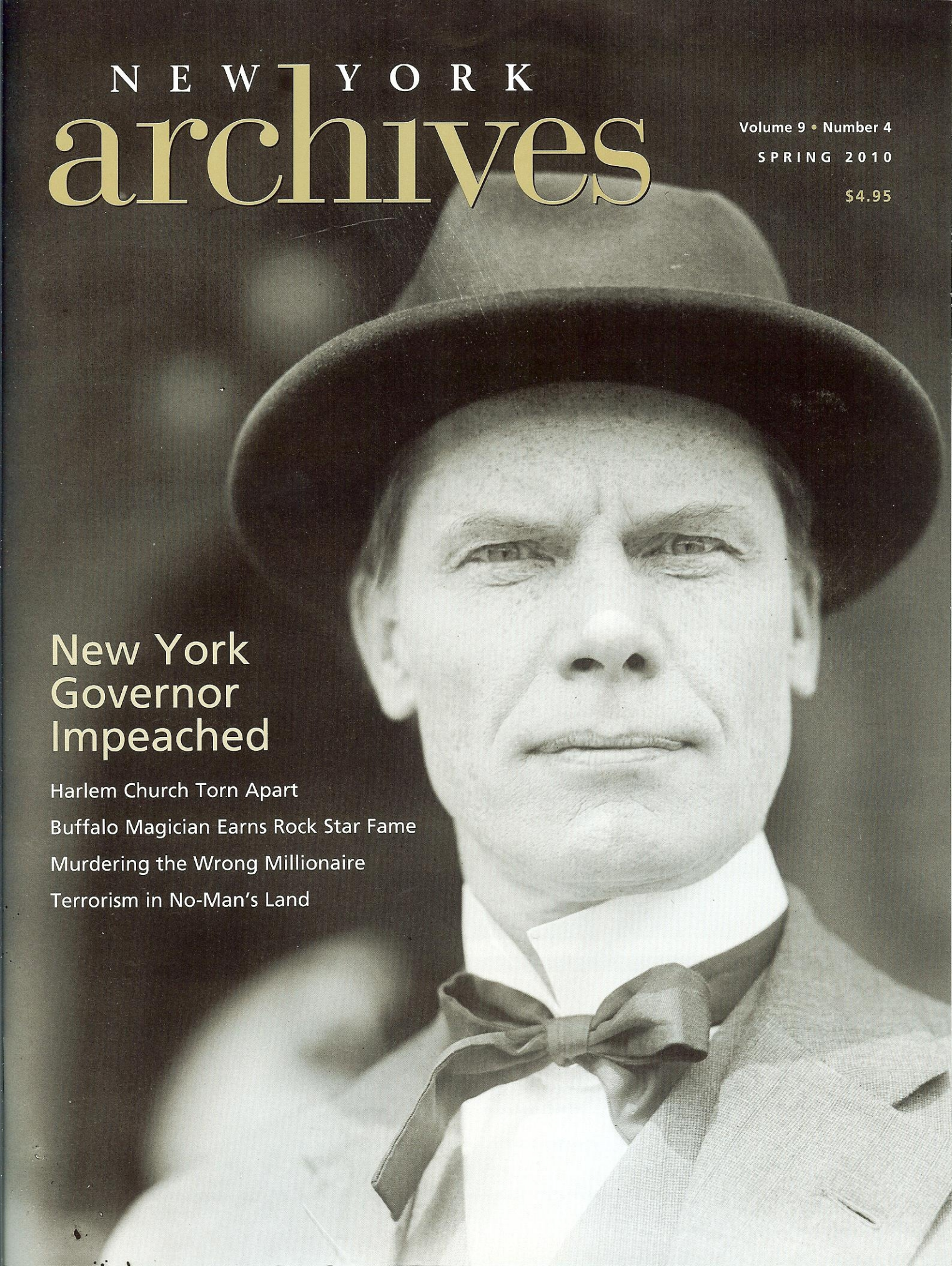
## New York Governor Impeached

Harlem Church Torn Apart

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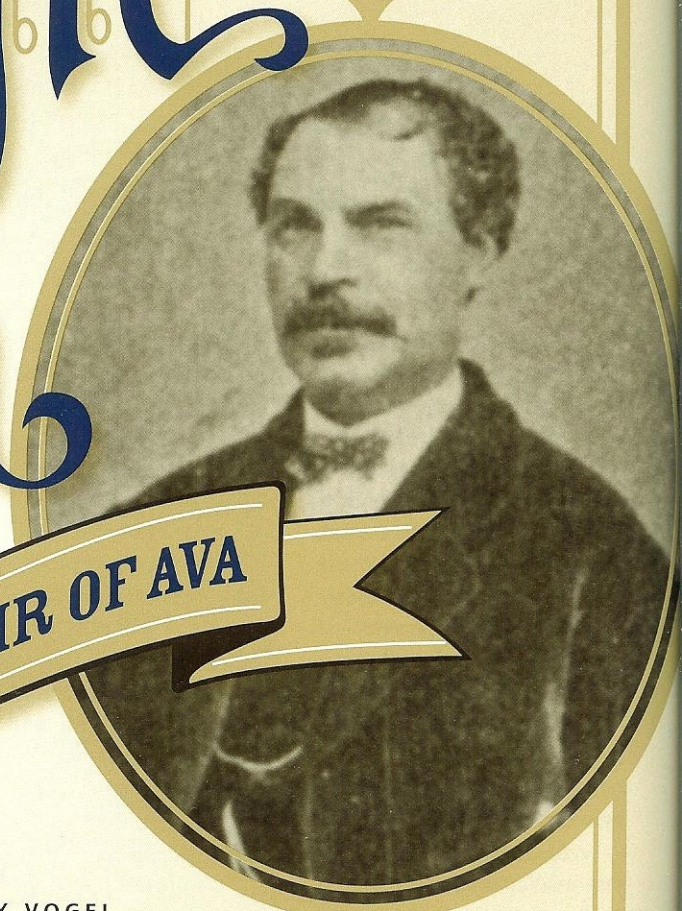
Murdering the Wrong Millionaire

Terrorism in No-Man's Land



# Magic Fakir

THE GENUINE FAKIR OF AVA



BY CHARITY VOGEL

Before David Copperfield, Harry Kellar, or Houdini, a magician who called himself the “Fakir of Ava” dazzled American audiences with eye-popping deceptions and grand illusions. His career ended in obscurity. But his flair for show business still seems modern.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE  
CONJURING ARTS RESEARCH  
CENTER, FROM “OUR MAIL BAG,”  
THE CONJURERS’ MONTHLY  
MAGAZINE, 1.11 (1907): 355

Nineteen-year-old J. Warner Erwin was flummoxed. Enticed by advertisements, he had made his way to a museum on 9th Street in Philadelphia on the evening of April 12, 1844 to see a performer billing himself as "the Genuine Fakir of Ava." Gazing up at the stage, Erwin watched as the cloaked magician strode to the footlights and asked one of the young ladies in the audience to surrender her shawl.

The young woman handed it over, and the Fakir placed the garment in prominent display on the stage.

Turning to the eager audience, the tall, muscular illusionist asked men and women to write down on slips of paper suggestions for where in the city they would like the shawl to be found. Gathering them up, he had a lady select a card: the "fire-proof in the United States Gazette office," it read. With a flourish, the Fakir called five men out of the crowd and sent them to check the safe at the newspaper office. The audience was informed that the safe had been locked earlier in the day, and the key was still with its owner.

Calmly, the Fakir tied up the shawl with tape, stuffed it into a tankard, and then removed the lid with a jerk. The shawl had vanished.

"Some ten minutes afterward," Erwin would write in his journal, "the Committee returned (making a great noise) with the shawl in their

possession done up in the same style as when passed away by the 'Fakir,' they having found it in the fireproof of the U.S. Gazette office."

Erwin became one of thousands in the mid-nineteenth century who first experienced magic entertainment through the Fakir's act. What's evident now is that the Fakir's unique blend of stagecraft and skill was so unusual that it has extended, through the lineage of the country's best magicians, into the twenty-first century.

Like David Copperfield today, to Victorian-era Americans the Fakir of Ava was a household name. In an age when renown spread far more slowly, there was one thing undeniably genuine about the Fakir: his fame. People followed his adventures from coast to coast. He was, before any such term existed, a rock star.

But it hadn't always been that way.

### On the Road to Stardom

The Fakir started life as the more mundane Isaiah Harris Hughes, son of working-class parents in Essex, England. Soon after Isaiah was born in 1810, his parents moved to New York City, where Hughes attended grammar school, then became a shoe salesman. Unsatisfied, he took to the road to earn his living in a uniquely nineteenth-century way: as a traveling salesman of patent medicines.

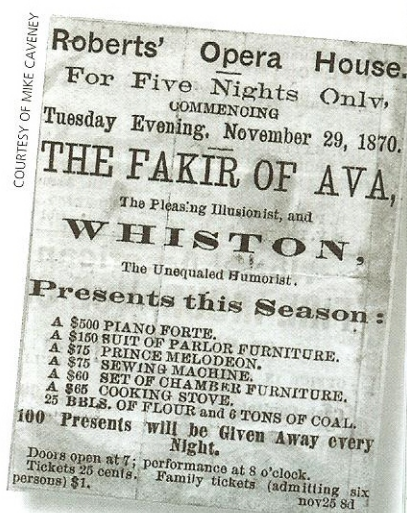
But Hughes soon learned he had more of a knack for the eye-catching card tricks

he used to attract customers than for selling snake oil. On a hunch, he decided to follow his strengths. He cooked up a name intended to evoke Eastern mysticism and lore—"Fakir" is a Hindu term used to describe a religious ascetic who does magical feats, "Ava" a place in Burma—and performed his earliest magic shows garbed in a flowing, gorgeously decorated robe.

The act worked. Crowds at his performances grew steadily. His show consisted of a string of dazzling, rapid-fire deceptions: silver coins that appeared and disappeared, paper shavings that turned into coffee and milk, pocket watches that were fired out of guns and put back together again, items of clothing, like the Philadelphia shawl, that disappeared and then surfaced somewhere else in town (the secret was a duplicate item obtained from a willing helper.)

Before long, the Fakir's appearances were front-page news in the towns and cities where he performed, and sellout audiences were the norm. All this made the Fakir a very rich man.

In Buffalo, where he lived for much of his life after his marriage to Sarah Stanfield, Hughes's standard of living and florid style continuously impressed residents. "Mr. Hughes was a man of fine presence, and wore the largest diamonds ever seen in Buffalo," noted one of the city's newspapers, the *Express*, in 1891. The paper went on to describe the Fakir's grand hobbies and habits: "His leisure hours

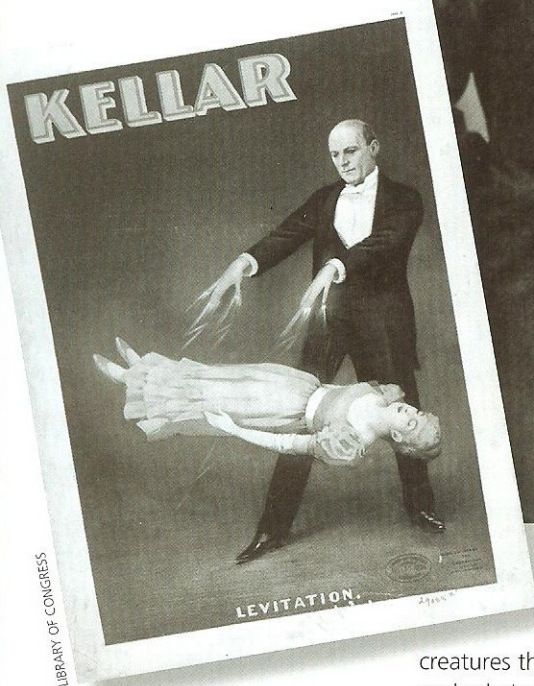


Gift giveaways, as well as the promise of magic, drew large audiences to the Fakir's shows.

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Above, right: Harry Kellar (standing) with his mentor, Isaiah Hughes.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CONJURING ARTS RESEARCH CENTER, FROM "KELLAR'S WONDERS" BY MIKE CAVENEY AND BILL MIESEL

Hughes took Kellar under his wing and tutored him in the practice of illusions like the disappearing coin and the "growth of roses."

were devoted to a museum of feathered creatures that was the wonder and admiration of the town... [Within] a huge wire cage nearly a hundred feet long, 20 feet wide and 10 feet high...were many varieties of fancy fowls, golden [and] silver pheasants, beautiful plumaged birds from tropical forests, magpies, ducks, chickens of various fancy breeds, and last, but not least, a drove of peacocks."

#### Success Is Contagious

Drawn by his success, acolytes and apprentices approached the Fakir, seeking to soak in his patented blend of careful magicianship and showbiz glitz. One of the aspiring magicians was a young man from Erie, Pennsylvania named Harry Kellar (born Heinrich Keller), who first saw the Fakir perform as a boy in Penn Yan and who later looked up the Fakir in Buffalo and applied for the chance to be his assistant. Hughes took Kellar under his wing and tutored

him in the practice of illusions like the disappearing coin and the "growth of roses." "I was for a number of years assistant to the Fakir," Kellar would later write in *Conjurers' Monthly* magazine, "and afterwards took his place on the stage and gave the show under his direction." Kellar, who went on to become the "king of American magic," also was widely known as the man who mentored and inspired Henry Houdini, the most famous American magician ever.

Today, magicians like Hughes who used Eastern and Middle Eastern tropes in their stage shows are spoken of dismissively, if at all. The magician Teller wrote in the *New York Times* in 2005 of "white conjurers" who "smeared on brown grease-paint to perform under such names as 'The Fakir of Ava, Chief of Staff of Conjurers to His Sublime Greatness the Nanka of Arisaphael!'" But eyewitness accounts and newspaper stories from the time do not mention grease-

paint when describing the Fakir's act. In fact, these later accounts make it clear that Hughes's career was, in some ways, strikingly modern.

#### A Genius for Marketing

The modernity lay in the ways Hughes created and marketed his image. As the Fakir, Hughes may have had magic in his heart, but public relations was on his mind. He knew instinctively how to work the media—usually newspaper reporters in places where he planned to perform. He would drop in on newsrooms unannounced, greet the men lounging about, then perform a few flashy tricks like pulling coins or vegetables out of their ears or pockets, virtually assuring good coverage in the next day's paper. "On Saturday last, the Fakir, happening to be in our office, mentioned a trick he had played upon a New Jersey Preacher, by drawing a pack of cards from his bosom," began one of these accounts in a Maryland paper in 1847. The Fakir performed the trick—and got the coverage he wanted.

There were other techniques. Sometimes Hughes would pick a public place, such as a farmer's market, to make a splashy entrance as the "Genuine Fakir." (The very name, rolled out tantalizingly before a credulous public, made him seem even more exotic, as if there were plenty of fake Fakirs, but only one real one.) In Pittsburgh in 1846, Hughes, in his distinctive cloak, strode through a

market where citizens were buying produce and meat. Motioning to one merchant, Hughes inquired in a grave tone whether the eggs offered for sale were fresh. Before the unsuspecting farmer could answer—and to the utter amazement of bystanders—the eggs in their basket began “chirping like a thousand crickets,” after which they danced and capered. “The Devil must be in that box of eggs!” one onlooker gasped. But Hughes was far from done. Picking a woman carrying a basket of poultry, the Fakir pointed to the scrawniest of the birds. “Good woman,” he asked, “is this a young turkey?” The woman nodded, swearing that it was a year old. What happened next made the newspapers: the turkey raised its head, “somewhat after the fashion of a snake,” and cracked, “You lie, you jade, I’m five years old and past!”

The “gift show,” another twist on stagecraft and self-promotion, was uniquely Hughes’s: realizing that audiences would come even more readily if he gave them two reasons to do so, Hughes seasoned his performances with gift giveaways, contests in which each ticket-holder had a chance to win a prize of some sort, from trifling tokens to sizeable items. One newspaper described the prizes to be awarded at an upcoming show: \$500 piano forte, \$150 suit of furniture, \$75 Prince melodeon, \$75 sewing machine, and \$60 set of chamber furniture.” Kellar,

among others, recognized the genius in this audience appeal: “He was the first to introduce the gift business in conjunction with a magic show and made a big fortune, as he had the reputation of being an honest man who always gave a square deal.”

### The Conjuror’s Stone

The Fakir slowed down after the Civil War. Late in his career he finally discarded his flowing “Oriental robes” for the sober black evening clothes that had become the unofficial magician’s uniform. By the 1870s, Hughes had largely retired, and he spent his time enjoying the profits of his career and the company of his two sons, Frank Fakir and Harry Ava. But money dwindled over the decades, and by the end of his life Hughes was living in a small hotel in Olean, largely in obscurity. Upon his death from complications of pneumonia on May 24, 1891, the *New York Times* described him in a brief front-page obituary as “...a somewhat noted conjurer and magician” who “was once reputed quite wealthy.” He was buried at Forest Lawn cemetery in Buffalo, repository of the city’s most prominent citizens, with both of his names, I.H. Hughes and Fakir of Ava, inscribed at the base of his elegant stone obelisk. A showman to the end, he made sure the Fakir—whose title is carved in bigger and more prominent letters—got top billing. ■

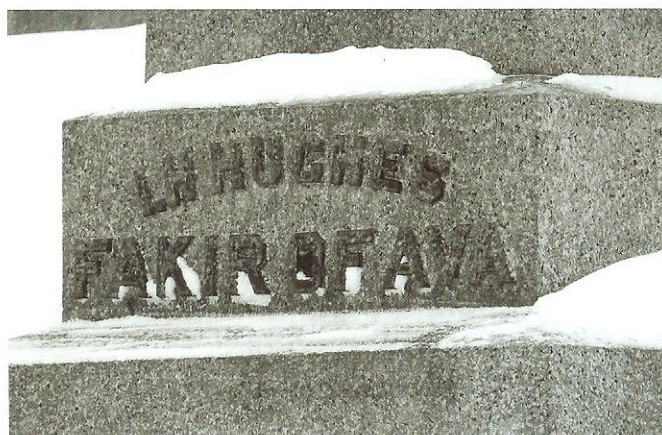
## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

This story started with a walk through Buffalo’s Forest Lawn cemetery with Edward Dibble, a close friend and an authority on people buried there. Together we marveled at the formidable obelisk that marks the grave of Isaiah H. Hughes. As a writer with a passion for history, I was first amused, then fascinated by the fact that Hughes had chosen to include his performing name on the stone.

Determined to learn more, I set off on a paper trail that led me from one end of the state to the other. In Buffalo, cemetery and public records provided the date, cause, and place of Hughes’s death. Some digging into newspaper clippings and microfilm at the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society and Buffalo & Erie County

Public Library showed that the Fakir, a prodigiously rich man at the height of his career, had lost much of his money before his death.

Historical society staffers in Olean, and clerks in Cattaraugus County Court, helped me understand Hughes’s later years. To better understand his professional career, however, I sought out the Conjuring Arts Research Center on West 30th Street in New York City, where experts on research into the magical arts found textual material from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that showed Hughes’s place at the head of a “founding family” of great magicians that includes the likes of Harry Kellar and Harry Houdini. The Research Center also produced a rare find: a surviving image of the Fakir.



The Fakir’s tombstone in Buffalo’s Forest Lawn cemetery.

T.J. RIGANARO