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## Collecting Dell O'Dell

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## Collecting Dell O'Dell

It would be pretty cheeky to rank Dell O'Dell alongside John Henry Anderson, Houdini, Thurston, Blackstone, and Sorcar—that is, unless we're listing the great masters of publicity among magicians. I've always known that the Queen of Magic could sell herself with style, but while writing her biography, *Don't Fool Yourself*, I came to appreciate just how savvy Dell was at promotion, and just how well that talent paid off. She worked virtually non-stop for nearly three decades, even during the 1950s, when opportunities for magicians tapered off. In one week alone she once did 47 shows. Dell's success rested on a potent combination: her ability to deliver lively entertainment to just about any conceivable audience, her love of socializing with patrons to build rapport, and her tireless marketing machine. She was a driven, determined woman who thrived on applause, and her career in magic was nothing short of a whirlwind.

Fortunately for collectors, that whirlwind left behind quite a bit of tangible debris. Knowing full well that her quirky giveaways would be saved and remembered long after the show was over, Dell handed out pitch-books, loop pencils, paper dolls, puzzles, and other novelties by the tens of thousands. Her circle of creative magician friends included printers, writers, and artists, who all kept the advertising ideas coming. Together, their output was impressive. Even after twenty years of seeking mementoes of Dell's career, I still come across swag I've never seen before. For instance, I didn't know there was such a thing as "Dell O'Dell's Solitaire Peg Game" in the 1950s until I discovered one last year. And at the last LA Magic History Conference, my publisher gave me a small matchbox that rattles when shaken. Its label reads, "Presented with the compliments of Dell O'Dell, World's Leading Lady Magician." But the sliding box has a hole in the bottom, so when an unsuspecting person slides it open, dried beans spill everywhere. There may still be some beans in the carpet at the Beverly Garland Hotel, where I fell for this gag myself.

## Photos

Before getting too deep into her promotional repertoire and the options it presents for collectors, I should say something about collecting her photos, letters, and apparatus. Like most show business folk, Dell was in her glory in front of a camera, and admirers have an endless variety of photographs to seek. From the glamour shots by James Kriegsmann and Jack Kanel, to the interiors of her home by Irving Desfor, to the stills taken on her TV set at KABC, Dell left behind a rich photographic record of her career. And, yes, there are also the naughty burlesque poses from 1927 by Herbert Mitchell, with Dell in skin-tight shorts or less, sometimes with feather fans. Jay Marshall used to open Dell's scrapbooks at Magic Inc for folks to giggle over pictures of the Queen of Magic in her skivvies. Dell's teasing poses and flapper hairstyles are striking, and these images are quite scarce today. I acquired a few suggestive 11X14s from the estate of Doris Carrer (Charlie's second wife) after her death in 2011. Why she saved racy photos of her husband's first wife is beyond me, but I'm grateful that she did.

Dell was extremely social, so no matter what other magicians you collect, if they performed from the 1930s to the 1950s, there's a good chance Dell posed with them. Often snapped by her husband Charlie Carrer, the countless convention casuals and photos taken at her famous house parties feature a who's who of magic, including Al Baker, Cardini, Edgar Bergen, Tarbell, Mulholland, Gerrie Larsen, Okito, Blackstone, and so forth. And since Dell was generous with her autograph, signed photos are available and attainable, even for the collector on a tight budget.

### Letters

For the collector of magicians' letters, a Dell O'Dell is not a tough score, either. She was a prolific correspondent and constantly wrote to magician friends with updates of her life and tour schedule, always requesting the same from them. As a columnist for *Tops* for two years and *The Linking Ring* for eight, Dell devoured news and gossip like Walter Winchell. I can't guess where she found the stamina to bang out so many of those letters in her characteristic green ink and cursive typewriter font, but I do know that she and a secretary often worked late into the night on her days off catching up on the outgoing mail. For all this correspondence, she used postcards and a variety of notepaper. In addition to the very rare stationery from Della O'Dell's Circus and Menagerie circa 1925 (of which I've only seen one copy), Dell used at least eight different letterheads from the late 1930s to the late 1950s. One shows sketches of her magic apparatus beneath her portrait; another features a drawing of a glamorous woman in evening dress and tiara pointing with a wand at the name "Dell O'Dell, Queen of Magic." Yet another design promotes her short-lived magic shop on Sunset Boulevard.

The letters themselves are often revealing. In one I got from a Martinka auction, Dell is writing to a dress designer, asking to meet with him to go over some ideas. To give him an idea of what to expect, she explains the challenges of keeping her costumes immaculate with her very physical performing style: "I'm so hard on my evening clothes," she writes, "as you will recall the steel linking rings, shaking the big boxes around, etc. Can hardly use any sleeve at all, and of course the public is more mystified if I don't have sleeves. [With] the dresses dragging on the floors, the bottoms just rot through sometimes before they are even cleaned."

A few letters demonstrate her occasional fiery temper. Two days after my book came off the press, a 1956 letter turned up—in my publisher's booth at NEMCA!—in which Dell complains bitterly to Russ Walsh about the mistake of trying to operate a magic shop in Hollywood. Three years after being talked into buying the old Abbott's store and having struggled to re-brand it and keep it afloat, she called the experience "the worst thing we have ever got into in our lives." Dell even claimed she "would have been ten thousand dollars to the good had I never been into it." This after she had lambasted her partner Jack Schneider in another letter, an eleven-page rant from Casper Wyoming in 1954, accusing him neglecting her store. When Dell was mad, she typed in all caps. When she was really mad, she underlined the caps. Nevertheless, Dell often signed her letters—both the angry and the jovial—in cheery multi-colored pencil.

## Apparatus

Dell owned two houses side-by-side in Queens, and she filled one of them practically to the ceiling with her magic. Every magic dealer in America loved Dell. She bought just about any new trick on the market, and if an effect ended up in her act, she bought two more. Because she often performed at multiple venues on the same evening, Dell had at least three full sets of props, and assistants would be setting up at one night club or fraternal dinner while Dell was finishing her show somewhere else. Charlie, aside from being a fantastic juggler, was skilled as a mechanic. He redesigned some of her equipment, strengthened pieces to hold up under her mayhem, and repaired them often. Dell was rough on props. Her style was loud and brash, and she literally slammed things around, handling them the same way she treated her audiences—like pins in a bowling alley. She went through seven sets of linking rings in 1942 alone.

She had so many props that she filled the ballroom of the Park Central Hotel in 1942 with a display of her apparatus, rabbit collection, and giveaways. She organized this for the SAM Convention happening at the nearby Barbizon Plaza, so that her friends could gawk at her huge stash of equipment. Dell's souvenir booklets also featured photos of her stockpile, which was larger than three or four magic shops combined. Her taste for gaudy props was fitting for her time. While Dell's talent did not lie in knuckle-busting moves or edgy street stunts that would impress today's YouTube crowd, in her day she got plenty of entertainment mileage out of those endless chrome tubes and painted boxes. The magic was in her lively persona and witty rhyming patter, not in the props. Just the same, she left behind quite an array for collectors who want to own a relic from one of the most commercial magic acts of the era.

After Dell died in 1962, her husband Charlie asked his friend Fred Rickard to help put together lists of her apparatus to sell. Rickard told Jim Alfredson that Charlie was impossible to work with, crying over various props Dell had loved, refusing to sell them for reasonable prices. They ended up only getting one list out, and receiving only one order by mail. But between the local LA magicians and collectors, Charlie sold about half of Dell's magic. Much of the rest was purchased by Chuck Jones, the protégé who had worked with Dell for a couple of years in the late 1950s. Today, Dell's apparatus is scattered around in various collections. Chuck Jones still has some of it. Ken Klosterman has an entire room of his Whitehall Mansion dedicated to Dell. Sets of her rare P&L bird cage production are owned by Ray Goulet and David Copperfield (Incidentally, she didn't perform the effect often, as the prop was complicated and broke easily). A number of her props went to a wealthy LA-based collector Ed Smith. When Smith was murdered some years later, his collection was dispersed at auction. Among the items acquired then by John Gaughan was Dell's 1939 McElroy ventriloquist figure, Chester the Jester.

Today, various props owned by the Queen of Magic show up in auctions from time to time. Since Dell had so much apparatus, I sometimes wonder how many collectors own some of her pieces without realizing it. Perhaps some things have changed hands without their provenance being passed along. If Krinkle Chrome metal has been added to the edges of a wooden piece,

then that could be a clue, as it was one of Charlie's signature improvements. And as for Dell's notorious rhymed patter that gave life to her props, there are hundreds of pages of it in the collections of Chuck Jones, and in David Copperfield's International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts, which also houses Dell's extensive scrapbooks.

### Pitch Books

Dell O'Dell sold at least five different souvenir booklets during her career, most of which are easy to find. In fact, as I write this, four of them are currently for sale on eBay. The rare one is titled *Just Born*, and it sold for a quarter at her health and fitness lectures in 1932. The forty-page booklet says almost nothing about magic and instead mostly contains fitness anecdotes and health advice, illustrated with glamorous photos of Dell the burlesque star. Most interesting to me, Dell shares some childhood stories of how she learned to juggle from the performers in her father's circus, and those constitute some of the few stories from her youth that survive. Ads for Dell's exercise equipment and for Charlie's juggling act round out the book, which features a slim Dell with a feather fan on the cover. Before I found a copy in the estate of Doris Carrer, I knew the book existed but had never seen one. I have yet to hear of another. Perhaps I will soon after you read this.

Seven years after she sold her first pitchbook, Dell printed her second. *Magical Moments* is spiral-bound with sixty-pages, including a pop-up bunny and four pages of punch-out tricks and puzzles. Dell put some serious time and money into this promo. The binding alone cost \$475, and the pop-ups had to be assembled by hand. Inside she revealed a number of magic tricks, complete with rhyming patter, and even tipped the secret to her notorious loop pencils. A sanitized biography and photographs of her home in Queens give a backstage look for her fans. Magicians who attended the 1939 IBM Convention in Battle Creek, Michigan were among the first to see this new souvenir, which sold for a dollar. In a review published in *The Linking Ring*, Tom Bowyer perfectly captured the dual image Dell was going for: "the illustrations include about thirty photos depicting her as somebody in a dance floor show but a homebody at heart."

Her domestic side was on full display on the cover of her 1946 pitchbook, *Dell O'Dell on Both Sides of the Footlights*, which showed a split-image drawing of two Dells by an artist named Beck. On the left the magician is spotlighted onstage in an evening gown doing a trick. On the right the homemaker wears an apron in her kitchen, stirring a pot of sauce. Throughout the 32 pages, Dell tries to tone down her rowdy stage persona with a firm domestic message: "Dell loves to cook, and when she is home, you will always find her in the kitchen concocting something new in her role as housewife, which she plays just as well, or even better, than that of magician." Actually, the claim was true. Dell did love keeping house in between shows.

Dell published two other souvenir booklets. In 1943, members of her Dell O'Dell Friends of Magic Club received her newest souvenir book, titled *Everybody's Fun*. Unlike *Magical Moments*, this 32-page red-covered booklet contained no biography, no glowing praise of Dell

O'Dell, and no list of famous clients. Instead, readers were treated to dozens of easy-to-perform tricks, puzzles, and party stunts. The author and artist was a Minneapolis cartoonist named Harry Bjorklund, who was a master of “turnover” cartoons, in which one picture can be turned into another by adding details and turning it upside down. So *Everybody's Fun* includes plenty of amusing drawing tricks, such as how to take a cartoon profile of a thin man and add onto it so that the man becomes an overweight police officer, or how to turn a bare foot into a hillbilly. Only one page is devoted to Dell and her magic. But she gave the books out to her fans anyway.

The next year Dell released another publication titled *A Book of Entertainment*. The yellow cover features a cartoon rabbit under the number 77370-0-77370—written in just such a way that, upside-down, it spells out the name Dell O'Dell. Harry Bjorklund had given her some new material, though most of the 32 pages were recycled from *Magical Moments*. This booklet was available to her fan club for 25 cents. The club's 10,000 members also received autographed membership cards, a booklet of By-Laws, and a small coin holder to promote saving.

### **Dell's Printer**

One of her nicest promotional brochures came out in 1942. The artwork on the cover showed Dell performing the linking rings in the spotlight, with roses tossed at her feet. The artist was Paul Carlton, who had attracted no small notoriety among magicians in back in 1933. While working as a demonstrator for Max Holden, he published a series of cartoon exposures of magic illusions in ads for Camel cigarettes. The nationwide “It's Fun to Be Fooled” ads angered magicians, who were shocked to see methods for “Shooting Thru a Woman” and “The Disappearing Elephant” revealed in the funny pages or *The Saturday Evening Post*. Though Max Holden had quietly provided information for the series, Carlton assumed all responsibility for the exposure. The tempest eventually subsided, and Dell was happy to have him design her new ten-page brochure, which featured Paul's nicely written essay about Dell's creative process, her rehearsal methods, and her loving care for animals. The back page listed her upper-crust clients, with the Duke of Windsor prominently highlighted.

Right before paper rationing went into effect during the War, Dell ordered 75,000 of these brochures from her printer, Eastern Advertising of Philadelphia. The company was run by Charles Hopkins, an amateur magician who was one of Dell's biggest fans. Until his death in 1948 at the age of 49, Hopkins printed her brochures, Christmas cards, novelty puzzles, even her phony money. At least, he printed various denominations of “Dell-ars” until Dell got a not-so-friendly visit from the US Treasury Department.

Collectors of magic-themed Christmas cards love Dell, as she sent unique cards out each year for a couple of decades. The later ones aren't terribly rare, since at one point, she had 20,000 people on her mailing list (which Robert Lund once described as “the size of a telephone book”). Fortunately, Charles Hopkins located an addressograph machine to help process the bulk mailing. Each December Dell seemed to outdo herself with a new card. One year she sent a hold-

to-the-light card made of special paper. Another years' greeting included a specially printed Christmas pencil. Yet another came complete with a roll of Dell's stage money. Compared to her 1943 Christmas card—which was an ingenious fold-over design that could make up to thirty different pictures—the one for 1944 was a modest wartime wish for Victory, along with an invite to see her holiday shows at Macy's.

A couple of oversize cards—8X10 or larger—went out in the 40s, one featuring a miniature newspaper filled with Dell's press clippings, and another with a cartoon of the entire family skiing. The family consists of Dell, Maggie and Fifi (her Manchester toy terriers), and assorted rabbits, pigeons and canaries. But her smallest Christmas card was one of her best. Hopkins really went all out with her 1946 Christmas card. Called "A Purse Full of Holiday Cheer from Dell O'Dell," the five-inch card was die-cut in the shape of a pocketbook. Inside, the recipient could pull out a folded, 21-inch greeting with seven cartoon bunnies wishing "Good Cheer and Much Happiness" for 1947.

Dell and Charlie spent a fortune on this yearly tradition. At one-and-a-half cents per stamp, they shelled out at least \$300 on postage in 1946 alone, not to mention the printing charges. Sending out these cards was a great deal of trouble, but the investment returned many times in publicity, goodwill, and attendance at their shows.

### **Postcards, Puzzles, and Paper Dolls**

Dell loved milking the role reversal of being a female magician. One instance appears on a postcard drawn for her around 1944 by Harry Bjorklund. It shows Dell onstage with a handsome male assistant. A woman in the audience says to her friend, "I hope she doesn't make him disappear." Bjorklund also drew a cartoon postcard in the same style for Charlie. A number of other postcards feature a photo from 1948 with Dell in the fancy headdress she was then wearing as part of her act—each has a different show review printed on the reverse. Still other postcards contain brain teasers, of the "Count-the-number-of-F's-in-this-sentence" variety. One of my favorite postcards contains this Elmer Fuddish poem:

De wabbits is a funny wace  
The things they do is a disgwace  
You'd be surprised if you but knew  
The awful things dem wabbits do  
And often, too.

From postcards to puzzles. Dell learned early on that handing out novelties was not only a good way to get her name and address circulated, but also a perfect excuse to socialize with her audiences. She had Charlie build her several metal carts—much like airline beverage carts—that she rolled around between tables after each show at a night club. She had printed instructions for stocking these carts so that assistants would know just how many of each item to place inside. There is no telling how many packet puzzles she gave away between shows. Collectors can seek

out the Square Puzzle (and its 5-piece variant, the Coo Coo Square Puzzle), the Mystifying Magical Card, the Initial D Puzzle, the Stretching Sticks, the Cross or Crescent Problem, the Horse and Rider, and more. Dell also shipped boxes of these puzzles overseas for the boys during World War II.

The list of miscellaneous paper novelties is endless. In 1930, Dell gave out small photos of herself with a tiny Coca Cola bottle attached on a chain. Much later, she distributed cards with various optical illusions (“Is this magician’s hat higher than it is wide?”). Kids loved the die-cut paper moustache that read on the reverse, “Can she fool you? Yep! Right under your nose!” When she worked for Standard Oil at an auto trade show in 1939—one of the earliest magicians to work such venues—Dell stamped her name and the Esso logo on a match trick and a set of Buddah Papers. When she played the Village Barn in Greenwich Village in 1940, she had paper hats and cardboard noise-maker paddle made. The most literally ephemeral item was a thin piece of paper that revealed Dell’s name in cursive when a lit cigarette was touched to it.

Of all her promos, though, audiences went most nuts over her loop pencils and dancing dolls. Since they are both so well known, and since I cover them in detail in *Don’t Fool Yourself*, and since they both survive today in great quantities, I won’t say much here. The dancing doll made its debut in 1940, and Dell used it through the early 50s. The die-cut cardboard puppet with the chubby face, bloomers and separate booties did not change over the years, but the envelope did, with at least six variations to fill a collector’s life with purpose. And as far as the loop pencils go, most feature her address, but some promote specific appearances, and others date from her TV show and magic shop days. I’m not sure there was an entertainer who got more out of the Holetite pencil than Dell. She ordered them by the truckload from Jimmy Sanders of Nashville, and half the men she met in life left her with one dangling from their lapels.

### **Posters and More**

But what about posters? Even though night club performers used far fewer posters than magicians who played other venues, Dell had her first and only half-sheet designed in 1943. Her friend Abril Lamarque, amateur magician and art director for *The New York Times*, created a poster with a Kriegsmann glamour photo of Dell holding two rabbits above a caricature of her producing doves and pulling a rabbit out of the nest of boxes. In bold red and yellow, the poster proclaims Dell “the World’s Greatest Lady Magician.” It is not especially rare today, as Dell printed thousands to give away to her fans. More scarce, actually, are the window cards that promote her various performances in Southern California during the 50s. Rarest of all—if it even exists—would be a poster from her circus in 1925. I’ve seen lithos for her father’s show, but, alas, none for the Della O’Dell Circus.

Where to stop? Sheet music, magic magazine covers (*Sphinx* once, *Linking Ring* twice, *Genii* three times), programs, comic books (*Calling All Girls*, April 1943), newspaper and magazine articles, tickets, business cards, envelopes, costume sketches, home movies, even rabbits! Of the

10,000 figural rabbits Dell claimed to have in her collection, I purchased nine from Doris Carrer's estate. Where the other 9,991 rabbits are, I have no idea. Dell even had a Traveling Magician Rogers group. If it still exists, I wonder if the person who now owns it knows its provenance. There are, of course, things the Dell O'Dell enthusiast must do without. She had no stone lithographs, no souvenir tokens, no pocket mirror, no hardbound book she authored, no real Houdini connection. But the mementoes of her forty years in show business can keep any magic collector hunting for a lifetime. Dell has been gone for over fifty years, and the fact that people still seek out her stuff would thrill her. Just as this article was going to press, I acquired a miniature glass Coke bottle with a 2 X 3 ½ inch photo card of Dell attached with a string. She gave these away during her Coca Cola promotion days in 1930. I had never seen one with the original bottle still present. Happy collecting!