

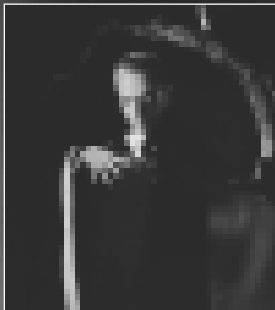
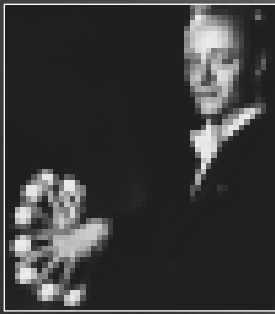
A black and white close-up portrait of a man with dark hair, wearing a tuxedo and a white bow tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a subtle smile. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

“A show-stopping act.” – Marie Mesmer

“The country’s foremost exponent
of manipulative magic.” – Charles Roskam

“Never before have I seen such skilled artistry
in the field of legerdemain.” – Bill Larsen

“He does things with ‘Zombie’ never yet dreamed of,
entirely new to this veteran reporter of nearly
2,500 acts.” – Goodliffe



PHOTOS BY BRUNO OF HOLLYWOOD, CIRCA 1949.

NEIL FOSTER

IN A CLASS

BY

H I M S E L F

With these words written in the early 1950s, four reviewers helped launch the career of one of the century's most brilliantly creative magicians, Neil Foster. In style, presentation, and effect all agreed that his work epitomized the ideal. Cards, coins, billiard balls, cigarettes, and canes *really* seemed to appear and vanish. His 45-minute "Concert of Magic" was sheer poetry in motion — one of the finest, most beautiful, technically perfect and original shows ever presented. And in his hands, the Zombie became an inspired work of beauty. If he had performed that effect only, people would remember his name.

Neil Foster was born on October 21, 1920 in Aurora, Illinois to Sarah Eunice and Edgar Neil Foster Sr. The youngest of three boys, his was a happy childhood, blessed with good parents, an especially close alliance with his older brother, Dean (often they were dressed to look like twins), and a great aunt, Marietta Hubbard Earl ("Nanna"), who helped raise him when his mother fell ill, and whom Neil called "the dearest soul I ever met."

At that time, of course, television was unheard of, radio was just beginning to come into its own, and school assemblies did not exist. Although there were lots of vaudeville shows, a nine-year-old kid didn't get to see much. So when The Great Blackstone and his *Show of 1,001 Wonders* appeared at the Paramount Theatre, Sarah took Neil and his younger brother, Stanton.

"Sensational" is a mild word to describe the marvels of that afternoon. When Neil left, his imagination was on fire.

Was it the birdcage that vanished from the master's outstretched hands? The Artist's Dream from which Blackstone produced so many beautiful scarves and a lady

BY DALE SALWAK

dressed in a butterfly costume that filled the stage? The Cannon illusion? Or the Floating Lady?

It was all this, and more, that worked on this shy, retiring lad's imagination and touched his innate artistic sense. When he returned home, he learned for the first time that parents don't know everything — they couldn't explain the miracles witnessed that afternoon. Like so many others, Neil received the inspiration for his life's work from Blackstone.

Foster read everything the public library offered on the subject, including books by Howard Thurston and Walter B. Gibson. Pamphlets put out by Swift and Company disclosed how to make tricks from household items. A chance meeting with William F. Becker, a professional magician also living in Aurora, fed Neil's talents. By age 12 he had created a 20-minute show, but it would take him many years to realize the deeper meaning of Thurston's words: "I can fool their eyes and I can fool their minds, but if I can't win their hearts then I have failed."

Neil also learned that there are places where he could actually *buy* tricks. He sent away for Abbott's Catalog No. 3 and devoured its contents. Little did he dream that, years later, he would be the one to compile and create the artwork for catalogs 15 through 19 and 21. His friend Steve Cucik knew of some magic shops in Chicago, those of Art Felsman, Joe Berg, Jim Sherman, Sam Berland, Ed Miller, and Laurie Ireland. As kids it was a thrill to ride the Cannonball Ltd. on a Saturday morning, make the rounds to see what was new, buy something with the little money they had then, just in time, catch the train home.

In 1935, Neil attended his first convention in Peoria, Illinois, the Midwest Magician's Conclave, which honored Nicola. He also met "Dorny" Dornfield and Percy Abbott. This event would have to hold him until he went to Colon, Michigan ten years later and experienced his first Get-Together.

Six years of meeting and serving the public from behind his brother's grocery store counter helped Neil gain confidence. Always a serious student of magic, by now Neil was playing engagements in churches and service clubs, under the banner of Prof. Retsof. When one reviewer wrote of him as "Ratsof" he stopped using the name.

A picture of Neil in his backyard, taken by his mother, shows him dressed in a hand-me-down black swallowtail coat, cummerbund and tie (made by his mother), and silk top hat (found by his brother, Dean). His first magic table came up to his chest. It had chrome legs, with a top like a box with all kinds of traps and wells and a servante. He included the Pudding in Hat trick and closed his show by

producing a large American flag.

Membership in the Rotary Club (his classification was "magician") broadened his network and opportunities to perform. On one show Neil borrowed a watch, vanished it, and re-produced it inside a bottle found inside a loaf of Rainbow Bread, without realizing that his sponsor, L. R. Hood, was the owner of the bakery. After the show, Hood came up and said, "I noticed you made most of the props. I wish you'd go over and buy yourself \$50 worth of equipment and let me take care of it."

Neil loved to tell one story of Hood's friendship with T. Nelson Downs. Both were telegraphers and enjoyed ticking out messages to each other in Morse code. Eventually, Downs went to Europe and headlined as the "King of Koins." As Hood went into the baking business. Years later when Hood was in New York City, he saw Downs' name on the marquee. Hood always carried his clicker with him, and so as Downs performed to soft music in the theater, Hood clicked the message "Not so good." Downs looked out kind of surprised and said from the stage, "I'll try that again." Hood clicked a four-letter word. Downs chuckled and said, "I'd like to see you after the show." They had a wonderful reunion.

It has been said that if we are to make our dreams come true then we will pay for them in heartaches, and if we get what we truly want we'll give our heart in exchange. Neil knew this truth firsthand. His father's death in 1944 left him with the knowledge that parting from someone you care for is the worst kind of pain, the slowest to heal, and the most deeply felt. Then, as he would do for his wife many years later, Neil stayed home and devoted his time to caring for his invalid mother. When she died in 1947, he felt alone and isolated. He didn't know what he would do with his life.

One early August evening he was walking towards town and suddenly the words came into his mind: "Everything will be alright. Go to California." There was no fanfare of trumpets, an angel did not appear, only these words were heard, as if spoken to him.

The move felt right. Just a few days earlier, Neil had heard of the Los Angeles-based Chavez College of Manual Dexterity and Prestidigitation. Manipulative magic fascinated him ever since he first tinkered with the tiny Multiplying Billiard Balls in an A.C. Gilbert Magic Set. He had taught himself card manipulation from a series of news photos showing Cardini doing card fans, which ran in *The Chicago Tribune*.

Soon, Neil climbed aboard the El Capitan from Chicago. He settled into the Finkel Arms Apartments at the corner of Ninth Street and Figueroa in Los Angeles, not far from the studio, and began nine months of intensive training under the scrutinizing eyes of Benny and Marian Chavez, seasoned veterans of vaudeville and the founders of the school, along with assistant teachers Al Lewis and Walter Cummings. "Ben taught me that magic is just an excuse for my being before an audience," Neil wrote. "For it matters little what you do; it's how you do it." He graduated with distinction and Benny persuaded him to stay on as an instructor for the next three years. Channing Pollock was among his students.

"That's when you really begin to learn," Neil said, "because when you teach someone else you not only have to know how, but why. And you have to make it interest-



Neil at age 15, posing as "Prof. Retsof" in his backyard in Aurora, Illinois.

ing. It forces you to really dig into your subject.”

Neil also guested on a number of TV broadcasts; performed in clubs and private parties at the homes of Edgar Bergen, Gloria Swanson, James Stewart, and Orson Welles; and worked for the USO. His demonstration of shuffling a pack of cards with one hand, then back-palming all 52 cards and reproducing them one at a time for a game of solitaire, was great encouragement for disabled veterans. Many of them took up card manipulation to exercise injured muscles.

At this time Neil was constantly building his repertoire, searching books for unknown principles and effects, always adding his own touches, continually looking for the unique and unusual.

Ironically, the first Zombie he bought didn't appeal to him, and he sold it to one of the students. Then as an instructor he had to watch the other fellow go through the routine. Gradually he took an interest in this trick again and bought another from George Boston at the Abbott shop on Sunset Boulevard.

Each night after an exhilarating day at the studio, he would go back to his room. Still quite a mixed-up, lonely kid, far from Aurora, when he was feeling low he would take out the trick, stand in front of the mirror, turn on the music and experiment widely. It was therapy for him. During that period of his life he developed most of the original moves for his routine, modified the gimmick to his own liking, and added a novel opening (wherein the ball glides back and forth along the edge of an opened fan) and closing (wherein the ball intentionally comes apart and turns into two bouquets). Neil described both effects in the June 1950 issue of *Genii*.

“Zombie helped me get through a very difficult time in my life,” Neil said years later. “But it is a reciprocal world,” added Dan Waldron, “and if the Zombie helped Neil Foster, Neil Foster has also helped Zombie to reach a place in magic which otherwise it might never have attained.” Indeed, whenever Neil appeared at a magic convention, afterwards the dealers could count on a rush to the dealer's booths and a sell-out of the effect.

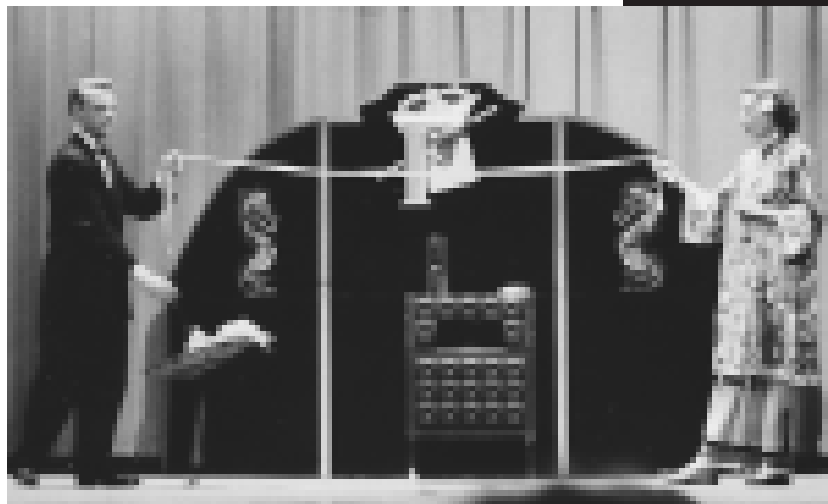
Neil's big break on the national stage came in February 1951 when Vic Torsberg and Joe Berg put him on the SAM-IBM annual public show at Chicago's Eighth Street Theater. He brought down the house. That year he also appeared at the combined SAM/IBM Convention in New York City, and then the IBM Convention at St. Louis in 1952, and each time the result was the same — an immediate standing ovation accompanied by wave upon wave of sustained applause.

When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned on June 2, 1953, Neil was among the few selected to appear at The Magic Circle in the Gala Coronation Show and Festivities. The reviewer for June 11 edition of *The Stage* wrote: “It was an experience as well as a pleasure to witness the fine work of the young American professional Neil Foster. His handling of the Floating Ball was something to marvel at and his manipulations have never been bettered.”

Foster's travels took him to 14 countries, and the honors followed: memberships in the Inner Magic Circle with Gold Star, the Association Francaise des Artistes Prestidigitateurs, the Danish Magic Circle, the All India Magic Circle, and later, the Society of Argentine Magicians and the El Circulo Magico de Chile. Everywhere Neil appeared he scored a hit.



Neil and Jeanne presenting their “Concert of Magic” in New York City, circa 1962.



PHOTOS BY IRVING DESFOR

But no measure of success is worth having unless we have someone with whom to share it. Neil was a lonely man.

How fortuitous that one spring afternoon when he met Jeanne Hammond. She was the club auditor at the Fort Lauderdale Yacht Club, where he was performing both close-up and stage. Jeanne was born in Ashtabula, Ohio and loved accounting as Neil loved magic, but had no experience with show people or show business. Eventually they fell in love, married in Del Ray Beach on April 29, 1955. When they left on their honeymoon it was a honeymoon that never ended.

That year Neil signed with the Sorenson Agency of Ada, Ohio and, together with Jeanne, they played schools in several mid-western states. An expert seamstress, she sewed costumes and added colorful touches to their props; she also brought to the stage a grace and an impeccable timing that complemented Neil's work. Their 50-minute act — “expressing skill and mystery in pantomime with a musical background plus humor and modern magic” — was a huge success and became the foundation for their future “Concert of Magic.” After Sorenson died and the agency closed, Neil and Jeanne went on to sign a lifetime contract with the School Assembly Bureau of the Universities of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas.

But doing four to five shows a day, skipping meals,

sleeping in a different bed every night, and rushing from one school to the next took its toll on Jeanne. In 1958, she had a close brush with death when her lung collapsed as the result of a severe cold. They were forced to leave the road, and for a year Neil worked, at the invitation of Jay and Frances Marshall, as a demonstrator at the Ireland Magic Company in Chicago.

In 1959 Recil Bordner offered him a position as vice-president at Abbott's Magic Manufacturing, and Jeanne was hired as accountant. Together, they revived *The Tops*, the Abbott trade journal formerly edited by the late Howard Melson. *The New Tops* achieved worldwide distribution among magicians under Neil's editorship. The staff of writers he assembled for the first issue comprised a Who's Who in magic: Dorny Dornfield, Ren Fetzer, Karrell Fox, Recil Bordner, Hen Fetsch, George Johnstone, Bruce Posgate, George McAthy, Bob Nelson, Gene Gordon, Dick DuBois, Aldini, Sid Lorraine, Tommy Windsor, Monk Watson, Roba Collins, Don Alan, Jack LaWain, and Mike Miller. He also edited several magic books distributed by Abbott's and invented many effects marketed by the firm.

Partners in everything, Neil and Jeanne developed a routine that provided independence but also, unfailingly,

quiet, focused time together. She proofread and typed the working copy, then he edited and pasted it up camera-ready. It was a labor of love. They even worked out little signals between themselves. What may have appeared as casual interchanges to anyone else were, in reality, coded messages to each other. When, for example, Jeanne grew tired and wanted to return home from a dinner party, she had only to support her chin with her hand and look straight at Neil, her eyes narrowing. On other occasions a slight roll of her eyes conveyed to Neil her opinion of a guest's comment. Just a look or the tone of voice gave the other a clue.

From his magic to the magazine to their home, Neil's artistic temperament permitted him to add beauty to everything he touched. Any visit to 201 Goodell Street in Colon included a tour of their backyard "Enchanted Garden" with its bird, squirrel and rabbit feeders, profusion of colorful flowers, and statues of David and the Blessed Mary in their "quiet corner." Because Jeanne's poor health had prevented them from traveling as much as they would have liked, they learned to love the garden and spent their summers working it. Often they would say while sitting on the patio that no matter who went first, the survivor would always be able to find the other in the garden. That sense of constancy would become a balm to him.

Inside their neatly appointed home Neil's paintings hung on the walls. A natural artist, for some time early in his career he had seriously considered becoming a professional. Many of his illustrations appear in Abbott catalogs and copies of *The New Tops*, and his oils and watercolors grace many of his friends' homes across the country.

"Nothing gold can stay," wrote Robert Frost in a poem by the same name, a reality we must face in relationships as we do in life. By 1977 Jeanne's health was failing. She had not been well for years, but her dramatic decline alarmed both Neil and friends. This brought him full circle. As with his mother, he was again devoting his life to caring for someone he loved. On March 7, 1979, I returned home from work early in the afternoon, played back the message on my answering machine, and heard Neil's basso voice, firm but sad, come through with three sentences: "Hi, kid. We lost Jeanne this morning. I'll talk with you later."

From the sounds of voices in the background I understood that he had visitors. That night I had a long talk with Neil. He had faced many rough times, but this was the worst: "I know what it is to lose a mother and a dad, it's hard to lose your brothers, hard to lose your friends," he said. "But when you lose your mate, that's the toughest pill of all. That's very hard."

A month later, he and I were sitting on the patio behind his home, overlooking the garden. "She is still here," he said. "I feel her presence so strongly. I know she reminds me to take my pills at the right time. I hope this feeling will remain for quite a while as it is a great comfort."

Her spirit was certainly with him during his inspired appearance that summer at Abbott's Get-Together. As Neil began the Silk Fountain, organist Connie Pelham segued into Rod McKuen's "Jean." Afterwards, Neil told me he had put 62 silks into the fountain — one for each year of her life.

In addition to serving as vice-president of Abbott's, Neil became editor of the company's monthly magazine, The New Tops.



THE WIS- DOM OF NEIL FOSTER

Jeanne's passing, as well as a series of physical setbacks of his own, all added up. With regret, he retired as editor of *The New Tops* in December of 1979, exactly 19 years after he had begun. Recil Bordner assigned the task to Gordon Miller, whose wife Marilyn had continued to type the camera-ready copy for Neil after Jeanne had died.

Once again, however, magic would help him through.

The year before, Marian Chavez knew that she was dying and had met with Neil and me to propose that we continue to teach the course. (Benny had died in 1960.) Neil converted his basement and on January 5, 1979 opened the Colon branch of the school, while I assumed the home-study program and taught from Marian's studio in Paramount, California, later moving it to Pasadena.

Gordon Miller was Neil's first student, soon to be followed by Chris Jakway, Mark Brandyberry, William Commins, and so many other talented magicians. "He taught how to do it right, with grace and beauty, something very hard to get from books," wrote Frances Marshall in 1988. "Neil received this gift from others, and it was right that it should be passed on. Each recipient adds something of himself, and gives again to another — that is how our art of magic grows."

Neil's time as a teacher, as well as his subsequent performances at conventions and private parties, gave him great satisfaction and helped to make up for the many lonely hours he had to spend at home. His spirits received a boost when IBM Ring 89 of Battle Creek was named the Neil Foster Ring. At the same time he received a personal letter from President Ronald Reagan in which he wrote, "May God bless you and may you continue to bless this country for many years to come." I also believe that Chavez and the hundreds of devoted friends he had made throughout his magical career helped to sustain him over the rest of his life in Colon, and then in Battle Creek, where he moved two years before his passing.

The call awoke me early in the morning on March 12, 1988: "Dale, Neil has died." Late the night before Neil had phoned me, as he often did, and we had talked for over an hour. On reflection, I realize that this had been his way of saying goodbye, just as Marian Chavez had done the week before her passing. I'll always be grateful for those calls.

Acquiescing to his wishes, there was no flowery funeral, no broken wand ceremony. A memorial service was held Wednesday, March 16 at 9 a.m. at the Schipper Funeral Home in Colon, and Gordon Miller delivered the eulogy. A graveside service was conducted at his burial place in the Greenwood Cemetery near Hinckley, a few miles west of Aurora. Neil lies beside Jeanne who is next to his mother and surrounded by his family — his father, 13 grandmothers and 12 grandfathers, plus many aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Once when asked for the secret behind his success, Neil replied, "The secret is that it took a lifetime." As for all human beings, of course, "trouble, disappointment, and sorrow visited him periodically," but in each instance Neil turned "defeat into triumph" as he listened to what magic historian Dan Waldron called "the inner voice of a deep, abiding love for his craft" that could not be stilled. He also had that unique gift of making each person he met feel as if he or she were very special in his life. People took to him instantly.

"The greatest pitfall so many young people make is trying to get to the top too quickly."

"Each act must have its feature. This is what bills a reputation among your fellow magicians. Remember one thing, when you are hunting big game you use big ammunition."

"A lot of people have talent, but unless they can wrap it up and do something with it, it doesn't mean very much."

"You can rehearse 'til the cows come home, but there's nothing like actual experience before the public."

"Climbing to the top of the mountain is wonderful. When you reach the top it is electrifying. When one has at last reached the mountaintop you may return... but nobody ever stays there all the time. The secret is, when you are up there... look for your valley. You can never find your valley until have reached the top. So pick out a peaceful valley that you will enjoy. Once in awhile return to the top for kicks."

"There is always, in every audience, no matter where, people who have heavy hearts. I feel my purpose as an entertainer is to make them forget, for the few minutes that I appear before them, their everyday problems. My only purpose is to bring love and joy to them."

"Shading is so very important; you do comedy to make them laugh, you win them first with laughter, then slowly you sell 'em skill, you tease 'em, play with 'em, then like the bullfighter you come in for the kill!"

"Your spectators have given you their most valuable possession, their time... In your allotted time as a professional you must fill this time to the peak of your ability and beyond."

"I'm sure everyone has dreams when they are young," Neil wrote in 1971. "If those dreams include doing all the good you can, for as many people as you can, and in as many ways as you can... then try to follow them."

Neil Foster followed his dreams, and we, and the magic world at large, are the beneficiaries. ♦

Dale Salwak met Neil Foster in 1963. They became life-long friends and together taught the Chavez course until Neil's passing. Dale continues to perform internationally while teaching in residence and managing the home-study instruction from his studio in La Verne, California.