



### **Anthony Darkstone Brook In Conversation With Walter Blaney**

The following article was written way back in 2002 and as the saying goes, it has, “withstood the test of time” . Since then, Rory Johnson, who wrote an article on Walter for MAGIC magazine used this article as a basis for his feature. In 2008, I was greatly honored when at the Texas Association of Magicians Convention, I was invited to Produce & Host a Live Talk Show with Walter as the main guest. Other guests on my show were Trixie Bond, Scott Wells, MarcoM, Chuck Lehr , Bruce Kalver , Frances Willard, Glen Falkenstien, Bill Palmer, Walter’s daughters Beck Blaney, Dr.Carol Blaney and Gold Medal Champion Shannon Blaney. And, last but not least, David Copperfield who was a Live phone-in guest. The photos accompanying this article depict some of those wonderful moments.



### **Anthony Darkstone Brook In Conversation With Walter Blaney**

The phrase, ‘World Class Entertainer’ can only truly be applied to an elite few notable magicians. In the vanguard of that group one name resonates with singular clarity. That name is Walter Blaney. In more ways than one Walter Blaney stands tall in the world of magic. His 6ft – 6inch frame houses the presence of a formidable performer, creative genius and the inventive mind of some of magic’s greatest stage illusions.

Lance Burton, David Copperfield, Paul Daniels and Sylvan are just a few of the world’s leading magicians that have used Walter’s magical creations in their shows. David Copperfield is quoted as saying that one of his favorite illusions is none other than Walter Blaney’s – Ladder Levitation.

Apart from having the excellent reputation within the international magic fraternity as an exceptional inventor of stage illusion methodology, Walter is a highly experienced and

accomplished performer. When performing he uses the word 'zaney' and becomes Walter 'Zaney' Blaney. This reflects his zany image and exceptional comedic talent. His style of magic is extremely unique and highly original. From the moment he walks on stage wearing a Stetson and twirling a lariat he exudes charm and emanates that remarkable star quality that only a few talented Entertainers possess.

Many of the world's best magical personalities hail from Texas. Names such as Bob Blau, Bobo, Bev Bergeron, Trixie Bond, Gene Anderson, Mark Wilson, Scott Hollingsworth, Steve Burton, MarcoM, Oscar Munoz, Howard Hale, Chuck Lehr, and Eric Evans spring readily to mind. There are many more. It will take too long to list them all. As Houston is my second home and as I also have close family and friends there I readily confess to a certain bias in favor of Texas magicians. I'm proud to call many of them my friends. If we were asked to elect someone who epitomizes the whole genre of Texas magical talent we would, without hesitation, choose Walter Blaney.

David Copperfield put it very succinctly when he said, "Walter, your talents as both a performer and an incredible inventor of illusions have made a real impact in the world of magic."



As a result, it will come as no surprise to anyone that Walter was appointed as an International Magic Ambassador for The International Brotherhood of Magicians and was officially commissioned as the Texas Ambassador of Goodwill by six Texas governors including George W. Bush. In the late 60's Walter was also a US Congressional candidate. Apart from being a FISM prizewinner and the winner of many other awards including the prestigious Siegfried & Roy Silver Lion Award, Walter holds the Order of Willard from The Texas Association of Magicians and is a Past President of that organization. He has been awarded a very high accolade from the Magic Circle - a MIMC with Gold Star.

He is also a highly respected member of the Society of American Magicians and has been inducted into the S.A.M Hall of Fame. He is also President Emeritus of The World Alliance of Magicians and was its first President.

His career has spanned over 50 years and he has performed all over the world, appeared on several leading Television shows and has played and lectured to great critical acclaim at many magic conventions. He has written many articles on magic and his chapter entitled 'Bread & Butter' in Dave Charvet's The Banquet Magician's Handbook is packed full of practical advice and is hailed by many as a masterful and valuable dissertation on the art of performing magic.

In August 2000 at the Texas Association of Magicians convention in Dallas, Texas some 1800 other magicians and I saw Walter give a superb performance at the legendary Majestic Theater. It was an honor to rise to our feet and give him a richly deserved standing ovation. Although

Walter and I are both members of I.B.M Ring 39 in Houston, Texas and of the S.A.M, The Magic Circle, The Panel of The Magic Web Channel and the TAOM we have, because of time and distance, not had as many opportunities to get together. So it was indeed a special pleasure to get together with Walter and spend a while conversing.



**ADB: Thanks a lot Walter for taking time in your busy schedule to converse. It is much appreciated. Let me begin by quoting you as saying that watching Harry Blackstone Sr. at the famous Majestic Theater in Dallas, Texas during your boyhood years created the desire within you to perform magic. Tell us a little about those early years.**

WB: I guess I loved all kinds of entertainment as far back as I can remember. I saw a marionette show when I was six years old, and that became my first hobby. I was eight years old when Texas had its Centennial World's Fair in Dallas. In their Hobby Pavilion I exhibited my marionette stage, made from old apple boxes, and my handmade marionettes. I won third place and so was encouraged to continue.

Then "Blackstone the Great" appeared on our beautiful Majestic Theater stage in Dallas, doing an hour show of 1001 Wonders four times a day between movies, for a whole week. I was nine at the time. I saw every show, and BINGO, I cut the marionette strings and from that moment on I became a magician. I figured I had wasted the first nine years of my life.

I met another young magician who kept coming to see Blackstone every day. His name was Mark Wilson. I wonder what ever became of him ????

Seriously, Mark and I rode the streetcar into town each day all week to catch every show. Blackstone came back every two years, and we were always there. One year the Great Dante appeared for a week. Seeing these "Greats" hooked Mark and me on magic forever.

Mark and I have remained good friends all these past 64 years or so. We often said it would be a real thrill to appear on that Majestic stage one day ourselves. Our dream was fulfilled at the Dallas 2000 TAOM Convention. It was even more fun for us because Mark's son Greg and my daughter Becky were also on the bill with us with their own acts. I got to present three of my original stage illusions, and I swear I could feel Blackstone and Dante watching us from the front row. I hope they were pleased with our performances.

**ADB: Yes indeed Walter, I agree, that was a very special TAOM convention for many of us. When people refer to magical greats they generally link them to one particular aspect. For example - Houdini and escapes, Cardini and manipulation, etc. When the**

**conversation turns to Walter Blaney they talk about your levitation illusion. How and why did the most talked about levitation in magic come about?**

WB: Going back to Blackstone Sr., in 1945 he came to Dallas with his big two-hour concert show. He featured the fantastic Maskelyne/Kellar/Thurston "Princess of Karnac Levitation". The thrill of seeing this great illusion is a memory that will never die. I have been enamored with levitations ever since.

First, I spent \$2.00 to buy the plans of "Grant's Chair Suspension", making it up from scrap lumber, and performing it through my high school years. Later in college I made a Super-X type suspension of my own design that allowed me to walk away and all around the floating lady, who was my new bride Joyce. It was made from water pipe, wood sticks and poster board, costing less than fifty bucks. But I used this illusion successfully on every show for fifteen years, from 1950-1965.

While performing it one night in 1954, and at the moment of making "the secret move", I had a flash of inspiration...what if I did THIS, instead of THAT. As soon as the show was over I RAN to write down my idea. I then spent the next month making a small working model out of balsawood... two miniature stepladders, a simple board, all on a small platform. I levitated an eight-inch rather ugly plastic doll, long before there were cute Barbie Dolls.

For the next ten years I would demonstrate my miniature illusion for many of my professional magic friends who came to appear in Houston, where I now live...Aldo Richiardi, Celeste Evans, Don Alan, Mark Wilson, Tom Palmer, Bev Bergeron, Lucille and Eddie Roberts and scores more. I was astonished that my trick fooled every single magician who saw it. And I never revealed its secret to anyone.

Raising my three daughters and flying constantly to my banquet shows nationwide left me no extra time or money to build the real thing, until 1963-1965. When beginning construction I learned right off that it was going to be a lot harder to make a 120 pound live lady float in the air than a 12 ounce doll... a LOT harder. But after tons of money and many start overs, my "magnificent obsession" was perfected. I called it an "Anti Gravity Board", but that name didn't stick, and it became known as the Zaney Blaney Ladder Levitation. I premiered it at the Des Moines 1965 IBM Convention, and everyone was fooled. I was then invited to present it at about fifty magic conventions around the world, and as they say, "the rest is history".

**ADB: You and I share similar views on lateral thinking and especially its application to magic. You have taken this form of thinking to creative heights with many magical illusions such as – Sawing a Lady in Half and The Sword Cabinet. What is the trigger that motivates you to come up with these novel approaches?**

WB: I'll tell you how to get ideas for a good new illusion. You study hard at a university. You get a chemistry professor with a boring, monotone voice that puts the class to sleep. To keep awake, you draw diagrams in your workbook of every new way you can think of to improve old illusions. That is where I drew plans for my Sawing a Lady in Half Illusion, and my Lighted Sword Cabinet. It wasn't until 1978, thirty years since that chemistry class, that I looked through my old workbook and chose to work on these two new illusions.

I didn't invent the old Sword Cabinet, which was about 150 years old. And I didn't invent the "light principle". The old Magicland Catalog in Dallas advertised "Rajah's Tent", a small cloth tent with burning candles outside the back and two sides. A small bunny was produced from the seemingly empty tent. So I connected the dots, applied the light principle to what was the old, seldom seen, essentially dead Sword Cabinet, and VOILA, a new illusion was born. I also seated the hidden assistant a different way and made the table base virtually half as thick as the old boxes required. This, along with flashing lights outside each window, make it a real fooler even when the audience is up very close, as at a trade show in a client's exhibit booth.

I never saw or heard of a that little "Rajah's Tent" trick ever being sold or performed. But I do know there are over a dozen professionals successfully performing my Zaney Blaney Lighted Sword Cabinet today.

As to my method of Sawing a Lady in Half, it looks similar to a Thin Sawing, but there is no

switch of feet, and the lady's feet are alive, barefooted and real. I first made a mock up of my plans out of particle board and corrugated cardboard. I painted it to look like the finished product. I would then sit and stare at this "creature" in my den, over and over for several weeks, trying to decide if this was going to be a horrible White Elephant good for the scrap heap, or maybe the best Sawing method ever. I finally made the decision to build it. At that moment in time I luckily had a close magic friend with a workshop, Sam Gainer, who was also my CPA. Sam and I worked every weekend on the illusion for six months. I then brought this "Noah's Ark" contraption to my den, and worked another six months to complete it, at a cost of over \$10,000 in cash outlay for materials alone, plus the year's work. For those who have seen it, I think they will agree it turned out not to be a White Elephant. Virgil and Julie became magic idols of mine after I saw their shows during college days. Later they became close friends. Virgil told me he did about six different 'Sawings' in his touring days, but liked mine the best. That's good enough for me. With so much love, care, passion and work put into my original illusions, I come to feel like they are my children. And I guess one is allowed to brag on his children now and then, especially if you're a damn Texan, right?

**ADB: Right. You bet it is Walter. Now, pulling a Rabbit out of a Hat has got to be the most stereotyped image that lay audiences have of magicians. With your unparalleled inventive mind, you have come up with a whole new twist on this classic. Let me ask you to tell us about some of your thinking on this?**

WB: Before I premiered my Ladder Levitation in 1965, I was most known for my "Big-Rabbit From an Empty Paper Sack" production. I had introduced it at the 1960 TAOM Convention in Houston. It also fooled magicians everywhere, and it won various magic awards around the country.

Here's its story. I had a Texas theme to my banquet act in the late 50's, and our Texas governor Allen Shivers saw my show and liked it. He was the first of six succeeding governors to commission me as our official Texas Ambassador of Good Will. I then thought of a premise for a new act within my act, a magic powder I called "Instant Texas". Anything you sprinkle it on grows "Bigger and Better, Like Texas".

My magic wand would grow, using an Appearing Cane...a fan of cards, using Fan-To-See...a small flower, using a Botania...and another dozen such props. The climax trick would be to make a small two-pound bunny grow to a gigantic twenty-two pound rabbit, using a Flemish Giant, the world's largest breed.

I spent a whole summer and a lot of money building a special table to hold the big rabbit; the top trimmed with fringe, jewels.... the works. A Plexiglas box held the small rabbit that would vanish as the large one appeared. I used my best magic thinking to create this illusion, and I was ready to begin rehearsal. The poor hidden rabbit was so uncomfortable in its load chamber. Its panting made the table fringe shimmy and shake, a dead giveaway. I was awkwardly trying to steal the load from high-up to a still higher-up position. The magic exchange actually took place on the floor, out of view of all but the ringersiders.

Everything about my trick was conceived all wrong. I finally realized I had to destroy it all and start over. I was so frustrated I said, "Dammit, why is it so hard to create good magic? Why can't you just put a little bunny in a paper bag and pull out a big one." Why not, indeed!

As I said that, I got that flash of inspiration as to a possible method. In one week, and at a cost of less than \$100, I had it finished. The method was actually used on stage by Willard The Wizard, with Frances Willard assisting her famous father. Their effect was entirely different, and so the method seemed to have no connection with my effect. My good friend Frances to this day does not know the method I use in my rabbit production. It ended up being a magician fooler, and still very few magic friends know where that big rabbit comes from.

**ADB: I've seen your Texas Ambassador of Goodwill Certificate and a copy of a personal letter from no less a personage than former President George Bush in which, amongst other things, he writes, ' I can't tell you how much everyone appreciated and enjoyed your appearance. They are still talking about it.' That must be a one of a kind letter. It certainly must have been one of the highlights of your career.**

Yes, George and Barbara Bush became personal friends back in 1968 when I ran as our Republican nominee for a seat in the House of the United States Congress in one of our two districts in Houston. George was the elected Congressman in the other district, but he was running for his re-election as well. He was very kind and was able to help get additional money to my campaign from the Republican Campaign Committee. I ran a strong campaign and had a real chance of winning, even though my district was heavily Democratic. But alas, a funny thing happened to me on my way to Washington...I lost. But I gained the friendship over the years of two of the finest people I've ever known, President George Bush and First Lady Barbara.

I was so pleased to be invited by George to entertain at their Christmas Party several years ago. I closed my act with my shirt removal trick as I always do, this time on George and Barbara's son Neal Bush, and they were just flabbergasted. It was SUCH fun. And I am a real fan of another son, President George W. Bush. When he was our governor he was the sixth one to make me his Texas Ambassador of Good Will. Do you get the idea I am kind of proud of our great state?

**ADB: Of course, and indeed you have every right to be so. Bob Hope, John Wayne, many other film stars and TV personalities and leading political figures have all appreciated your magical performances. Can I persuade you Walter to share some of the highlights of those wonderful memories ?**

One of the happiest parts of my now 52 year professional career in show-business is getting to know and perform with various celebrities. When you are a longtime fan of these stars, it's great when you find out they are just real, down to earth, regular people who have a passion and talent for what they do.

First, in the magic world, I got to become good friends with many of my early magic idols, and later with current magic idols as well....Harry Willard, Virgil and Julie, MacDonald Birch. John Calvert, Robert Harbin, Jack and Ann Gwynne, Richiardi, Slydini, Fred Kaps, Ken and Roberta Griffin, John Booth, Senator Crandall, Jay Marshall, Paul Daniels, David Copperfield, Lance Burton, Marvyn and Carol Roy, Karrell Fox, Andre Kole... to name just a few that come to mind at the moment.

Outside of magic it was a thrill working with many national celebrities...Elvis Presley, before he became a headliner on the Ed Sullivan Show; Edgar Bergen, who first entertained me every Sunday night on his Chase & Sanborn Coffee radio show; George Gobel, after his TV heyday; many of the "Big Band" leaders of the 40's and 50's, like Ted Weems, Henry King, Tony Pastor, Jan Garber, Shep Fields; Jerry Cologna, Bob Hope's sidekick, who I used in my Head Chopper. And the great John Wayne, who had just made his film "The Alamo".

I especially remember working two nights at the packed Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles opening for Bob Hope. I loved Bob from his early Pepsodent Radio Shows, his Buick TV Shows, all his Roadshow movies with Bing Crosby, and his great World War II shows entertaining our troops. If I had a number one choice of who I wanted to meet and be on the bill with, it was Bob Hope. In my wildest dreams I never thought I would hear Bob Hope walking on stage after my act and in greeting 5000 cheering people, saying, "How about that Texas magician floating that lady in the air...I saw it backstage and still can't believe it". You want memories? THAT is a memory. To Bob Hope...Thanks for the Memory.

When I appeared on The Tonight Show in 1973, Johnny Carson came in to the studio early for camera rehearsal especially "to see if this levitation he had read about in magic magazines for years could fool him". After seeing it Johnny walked over and said it did indeed fool him. We began "talking magic", and he told me his first illusion was Grant's Chair Suspension. I said, "Me too". He said his next one was Abbott's Super-X. I again said, "Me too." And I described how it gave me the flash inspiration for my Ladder Levitation. I offered to show him the "modus operandi" backstage, away from everyone else. He was so excited when he saw the method. That night on the show he gave me a full minute introduction, and after my performance, he and Ed McMahon talked about it for another full minute. Needless to say I loved Johnny Carson. And my heartfelt thanks to Milt Larsen for setting up my booking.

I immediately got to do other TV shows, floating Dinah Shore on her Dinah Show. She was a warm, friendly and most attractive lady. Dinah was 56 at the time, but appeared to be only 36. I

also levitated Kitty Carlisle on Garry Moore's show, and she was another charming and classy lady. Garry Moore loved magic and magicians, and we "talked magic" off and on during rehearsal. On the Merv Griffin Show, Merv was a delightful man. He told me he knew his people had told me what to do, what lines to cut, and "all that crap", but that he was boss, and I should just go out and do my thing my way and have fun. I did, and it was a successful appearance.

When NASA first came to Houston our mayor, who had seen my banquet act many times from the head-table, chose me to entertain the Mercury astronauts, the space scientists and 4000 Houston VIP's at a big barbecue welcome party. It was probably the best audience I have ever had in my over 3800 banquet appearances.

Twenty-five years later Admiral Alan Shepard called me and asked if I could entertain the Mercury astronauts and their wives at their 25th reunion, as I was the first entertainer they saw when coming to Houston. There would be just eighteen people in this "Right Stuff" group. I said I would love to do it, and I would refuse any fee, since they were all my heroes. I just asked for a photo signed by the remaining six astronauts, which I got...and Gus Grissom's wife Betty signed for him. What a splendid group this was. I floated Scott Carpenter's wife Maria on the Board, just five feet from this small, intimate group. They asked that I stay for the rest of the evening, as they considered me a part of their "family" that night. What great fun getting to know each of them on a one to one basis. I must have repeated the birdcage vanish for John Glenn a dozen times, as he especially loved that trick. And I had everyone hanging spoons on their noses. Their signed photo on my wall serves up that evening's happy memory.

**ADB: As President Emeritus and co-Founder of the World Alliance of Magicians you have some very specific views on Trade Secrets, Proprietary Rights and Intellectual Property Rights. Your thoughts on these topics will be greatly welcomed.**

Wow, where to begin? The history of our World Alliance of Magicians, or WAM as it is called, is a whole other story in itself.

But briefly, when Fox TV presented their first prime-time TV exposure special with the Masked Magician, 24 million people saw some of our best stage illusions exposed. Most magicians hoped that this was a "one shot show", and that would be the end of it. But a second show soon occurred, and 20 million watched. When a third show was announced, a dozen top magicians met at The Magic Castle to discuss what might be done to try to stop Fox-TV.

Some helpful magician-lawyer friends explained to us that there must be a public protest raised by magicians against Fox-TV before Fox could prove a precedent had been set, thereby giving them free reign. So we founded WAM, a non-profit California corporation. We hired an entertainment public relations firm and were able to get the magician's point of view out to the public nationwide just two weeks before show number three aired.

Only 8 million watched this third show, and WAM played a substantial part in this smaller viewing audience. We never claimed that WAM was the sole factor, but sadly, a few well known magicians spoke out against us, saying WAM brought more attention to Fox's show and increased the size of the viewing audience. Amazing. I had always thought 8 million was a smaller figure than 20 or 24 million.

The 'naysayers' then claimed WAM advocated "screaming and hollering", boycotting sponsor's products, picketing on the streets, and wasting our treasury money on futile lawsuits. All this was absolutely, 100% totally false. Fortunately the IBM, SAM, The Magic Castle and The Magic Circle stood behind WAM, as did many magic societies all over the world who joined our alliance. This gave the magic world far more clout in our fight than any single magic society would have.

Before Show #4 was to air, we had time to plan, and our best plan was to contact the CEO's of all the major corporate sponsors of these exposure shows. In a cordial, quiet and rational way we gave our best reasons why it is wrong to expose magician's secrets, explaining how it not only hurts the livelihood of hard working magicians and their families, but it takes away the

wonder, surprise and delight our magic brings to the public in a world with already too little magic left in it today. The corporate response was terrific.

Many companies wrote letters of apology, saying they had not realized what problems all this had caused, and stating they would ask their advertising agencies to remove their sponsorship from these shows, and instead place it in the legitimate pro-magic specials occurring on TV - exactly as WAM had suggested. To name but a few...Coca-Cola, Kelloggs, McDonald's, Wendys, 3M and Robitussin.

On Fox's show #4 there were only THREE national sponsors. All the rest of the commercials were just promos for other Fox-TV shows. But the story doesn't end here. Most magicians don't know that Valentino went to Brazil to present his exposure show there. With WAM's help, the Brazilian magicians got him thrown out of their country. But he has now struck a gold mine in Japan, already presenting THREE two and a half hour prime-time specials, in June, October and December 2001.

WAM was helpful in organizing magicians in Japan to contact the commercial sponsors. But it was made more difficult when top professionals there, like Princess Tenko and The Napoleons, actually joined forces with Valentino on stage in these exposures. This incredible fact is beyond our understanding. Furthermore, it appears certain that Fox-TV is planning more exposure shows in the USA in 2002. It's not a pretty picture.

**ADB: David Copperfield, Lance Burton plus many other magicians have all signed your license agreement. Please explain why you insist that all purchasers of your illusions sign this type of agreement?**

My illusion license agreement has to do with the second part of one of your last questions, about trade secrets and proprietary rights to one's intellectual property, etc. One could write a book about this. In fact WAM has published a book on this subject entitled "Protecting Magician's Secrets". A great deal of time and money was spent to research how magician's secrets can be protected by patents, copyrights, trade secret laws and the like, and also where they cannot be protected. It is invaluable to any lawyer a magician might hire to handle a case of magic-secret property rights.

**ADB: I'm sorry to interrupt you Walter but can any magician get a copy of this book ?**

Yes they can. To order one, they can go to WAM's website, [www.MagiciansAlliance.com](http://www.MagiciansAlliance.com) . . It's only \$25.00, sent by Priority Mail anywhere in the world. Any profit goes towards WAM's cost of publishing this book.

**ADB: Thanks Walter. It's good to know. Please continue.**

Back to why I have every purchaser of my original illusions sign my license agreement. It states that they acknowledge that my trade secret still belongs to me, that they have a right to perform the illusion anywhere. They must keep the secret from anyone else, except on a "need to know" basis, like to

their assistants. If they ever choose to re-sell the illusion, they must have my permission.

Permission is readily given once it is established that the new purchaser is a bonafide magician, and is willing to also sign my agreement. This helps to protect my illusion from the likes of Fox-TV or a Valentino who might want to expose the secret, or from a magic builder who would try to make a rip-off copy. It also helps protect the investment of every other purchaser of my illusions.

It's all part of what is required in a new law, "The 1996 U.S. Trade Secrets Act". A company with a "trade secret" must be able to prove in court that it has done everything possible to keep their trade secret a secret. When correctly applied, this new trade secrets law is used today more than the patent laws.

**ADB: As you already know, my son is also a magician and so I can truly understand and empathize with you some of the delight and pride you feel when you watch your daughter Becky perform. It is truly a unique feeling when our children not only follow the family art but also carry it to the next level. We would just love it if you shared some of your family history with us.**

Thanks for a question about my favorite subject, my three beautiful daughters. My youngest, Shannon, lives across the street from me. She has three children, and still finds time to be a gold medal winning ice skater. My middle daughter, Carol, is a Doctor of Chemical Engineering, and has secured eighteen patents for her former company, Kimberly Clark...so she is more of an inventor than I am. Most magician friends know best my oldest daughter, Becky Blaney, who has been a full time magician/comedian for over fifteen years. Becky was just eight years old the year that I was testing and perfecting my Ladder Levitation. I made her lie down on "that darn board" over and over, acting as my trial "floatee". Sometimes she would say, "Oh Daddy, do I have to?" I would always answer, "Only if you want to eat."

At age 18 Becky was the first female to win the Senior Stage Trophy at the IBM Convention in Little Rock. Garry Moore immediately booked her on his "To Tell The Truth" TV show. She presented part of her patriotic Red/White/and Blue themed magic act. Since few owned color TV sets in 1975, it was interesting to see how Garry Moore got around that problem. He simply narrated her act, describing the colors of her various props as they appeared, and it worked out very well.

When they learned that her father was a magician, Becky got me booked on the show a month later, and I floated panelist Kitty Carlisle in the air. It was pretty neat to have a beautiful 18-year-old "agent" booking me on national TV.

After college Becky began learning the difficult trade of professional show-business, first as a "Singing Telegram Magician", having to work under all kinds of tough conditions. Then she was the first hostess, emcee and talent booker at Houston's Magic Island. She next began her own comedy act in Comedy Clubs, and ended up as the headliner act on her shows, appearing in almost every state. She now plays cruises, colleges and corporate dates.

Two summers ago she and Joanie Spina starred in their own "Women of Magic" stage show at the Claridge Hotel/Casino in Atlantic City. I flew up to see them, and it was a really fun show. They got very good reviews and were held over a third month. So you can bet I am proud of Becky's accomplishments in magic, just as I am with my other two daughters in their respective fields. They are the sweethearts of my life.

**ADB: You have made many kind remarks and positive comments regarding my articles that deal with the topics of the Presentation of Magic. So I know that the Performance & Presentation of Magic is of paramount importance in your concept of good magic. After some 50 years of performing all kinds magic all over the world please tell us what Performance & Presentation means to you?**

I guess performance and presentation can be defined in various ways by different performers. I started out doing a two-hour stage show, but it was near the end of the popularity of such stage shows. Most of the grand masters of the stage were ending their careers in the 1950's. It was to be years later when Doug Henning and David Copperfield began the revival of the big touring shows.

Luckily I learned that people actually paid good money to be entertained at a banquet. So I took the best dozen tricks from my stage show and built a thirty-minute banquet act. Each trick had to have real "entertainment value". That eliminated most of the box, flower and silk tricks. I found I was best at audience participation and so focused on these routines. Simply by doing so many banquet shows I kept finding bits of business that added more laughs. Soon I had to cull out the tricks that got the least response. As the years rolled by I realized I was doing only about six tricks, and it was a forty-five minute act, perfect for the featured banquet entertainment.

Early on I had the pleasure of seeing and meeting "Mr. Electric" at the Mural Room of the Baker Hotel in Dallas. Marvyn Roy, before he had met his fabulous Carol, graciously joined me at my table after his show. He kindly gave me the advice to "come up with a theme for an act"...whether it be with buttons, bottle caps or whatever, just as he had found success with lightbulbs. Marvyn's suggestion got me to thinking...I'm tall, I'm a Texan, and maybe I could become a "Mr. Texas". So I set about "Texizing" my act.

Instead of pumping green liquid in my "funnel routine", I would pump oil. In my pickpocket routine where four men are passing around lady's hats in a comedy hat game, I could use Western hats. Soon everything I did had a Texas/Western tie-in. And I have been doing this act for about 47 years, and it still works for me, some 3800 banquets later. The "themed act" is not

for everyone. It simply worked right for me, and I am still grateful to my dear friend Marvyn Roy for his helpful guidance.

Another thing I learned from experience is that "how you are presented" is half the battle. Getting your physical arrangements right is so important...the right size platform, platform placement in the room, proximity to your audience, getting on at a decent time in the overall client's program, your lights, sound, music and more. I have discussed all these things in a chapter I wrote for a wonderful book by my good friend David Charvet, "The Banquet Magician's Handbook", available now through Mike Maxwell of A-1 Magical Media in California for less than \$30.00. Another chapter by the seasoned George Johnstone, and one by Charvet himself gives a lot of information and experiences on how to be presented right. I highly recommend it and wish I had had this book when I was starting my career.

Another aspect of performing is to develop a likeable personality on stage. I made a practice of observing other successful acts and the stars of show-business. For example.....Edgar Bergen. Besides his ventriloquial skills, you liked Edgar, and you liked Charlie McCarthy, Mortimer Snerd and Effie Clinker. They were all loveable characters. Ditto for Jay Marshall and Lefty. But I've seen some vent acts where you couldn't stand the brash dummy, and the act was simply not a success. I've seen magicians with tremendous skill flop because there was no warm rapport with the audience.

I remember when my daughter Becky was beginning her Comedy Club career; she was not successful and couldn't figure why. I watched her at a club every night for a week and saw immediately why. She had adopted a sardonic, derisive, cynical style, which came from working with other comics who also had these characteristics. Becky was a warm, cheerful, fun-loving gal with zillions of friends who loved her to death. That was not the Becky Blaney I saw on stage. I audio-taped and played each line for Becky to listen to after every show. We'd go over each line on how the real Becky, the offstage Becky, the friendly, fun-loving Becky would say the line. It took over a year for Becky to finally get her real personality on to the stage each night. That may sound easy...as in "just be yourself". But I can assure you; it's very hard work.

**ADB: I'm not going to put you on the spot by asking you to name your favorite magician but if you could have a few hours of conversation with three of your favorite people - either living or deceased – and they don't necessarily have to be magicians - who would you, choose?**

For me, without a doubt, number one would be my dad. He was always fun, supportive in everything I chose to pursue, and gave me confidence to take risks and go for my goals. He taught me the virtues of honesty, integrity, and hard work. Whatever virtues I might possess have come from my dad, the best dad in the world. He inspired me to always try to be the best father possible to my children. I miss my dad, and I would dearly love one more good conversation with him. Number two would be Thomas Edison.

I was born on his birthday, February 11th, and always wanted to become an inventor. I'd love to say to him, "Tom, you light up my life." We all owe him so much. What would we do without lightbulbs, phonographs and motion pictures? Marvyn Roy might be doing a thimble act. I might still be doing Grant's Chair Suspension...in the dark. And number three, hmmm. There are so many masters of magic in the past I would love to converse with. I'll mention one who is still going strong, John Calvert. When just a boy starting out in magic, I loved to read about the exciting world travels of John Calvert, never dreaming we would become good friends one day, starting about a dozen years ago. At the last TAOM Convention in Corpus Christi I got to spend most of my time with John and his lovely wife Tammy. He is so easy to talk and joke with, has so much knowledge and experience in his life in magic, as well as life in general. At 90 years of age, he is a constant inspiration. His show was the easily the highlight of the Corpus Convention. John Calvert epitomizes a philosophy I hold dear, "THE SECRET OF LIFE IS TO DIE YOUNG.....AS OLD AS POSSIBLE."

**ADB:Thanks Walter, it has truly been an enlightening experience. One last question. The stage is yours – in the audience are all the magicians in the world. What message would you wish to convey?**

WB: Two important things...RESPECT...and PERSEVERENCE.

Respect magic, respect its secrets, respect its history and its past masters. Respect the rights of the magic creators and inventors. Play fair with them so they will have the incentive to continue creating new tricks, illusions and presentation styles. PERSEVERENCE is the key to final success. No matter how hard progress in a magic career may seem to be, just never ever, ever give up. And keep it fun along the way. Remember, we chose magic because we love it and have a passion for it. Of course at anytime you can stop working hard in magic and go do something else. But I hope you won't. Please don't ever quit. Just remember, the secret word is PERSEVERENCE.

In closing, I thank you, Tony, for asking me to chat about magic, the passion we both dearly love. And I thank the readers who have stayed with us long enough to read some of my ideas. And I thank my mother and my father for making it all possible. And I thank my daughters for making it all necessary.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing has been an enjoyable insight into not only one of the most experienced magicians but also slightly more than a cursory glance into one the most finely tuned magical intellects. It is a pity that the world of magic doesn't offer Honorary Doctorates. If it did, Walter would have a dozen or so richly deserved PhD's. If you ever have the pleasure of running into Walter at a convention or elsewhere make sure you shake him warmly by the hand. If you do you will not only have met one of the world's most excellent Entertainers but also one of the nicest magical Texans you are ever likely to meet.

Generally, at this stage it would be appropriate to conclude an article. However, as this article began to take shape, I began to feel that it would be right and fitting that the three most important people in Walter's life - his daughters, - should add a few words of their own. So, unbeknown to Walter, I contacted them and asked each to write a short paragraph. Their words come straight from their hearts and speak volumes. Without any editing or further ado, here are their words: -

### **Becky**

" My first memory of my fun and famous father, was an adventure he took us after supper in our living room. My 2 sisters and I would sit behind him on the rug, and he would take us on a fantasy journey. The rug became a magic carpet that transported us to as many fantastic destinations as Daddy's imagination could conjure up. From these storytelling journeys he taught me how to fly. Every time the characters fell, they got right back up and kept on going till they succeeded. As we were growing up, Daddy hit many stumbling blocks inventing the Levitation. Each time he would work out the problem and continue. When I first hit the road as a performer, I could always count on Daddy to pull me back up after a disappointing show. He had that showbiz knowledge to help me learn from it, and could always make me laugh about it and just go on. The best part was sharing the feeling of flying after a great show.

### **Carol**

I have idolized my dad ever since I was a child, especially at the magic conventions where I could see what a celebrity he was. My childhood worship of him inspired a great curiosity in me to find out *Why and How* he attained such success. And living with him allowed me to learn, first-hand, his methods to success. Thanks to Dad, I got a strong case of claustrophobia from sitting inside of his sawing illusion over and over (and over...) while he measured and contemplated. But it was all worth it - to be able to observe first-hand, all the work, time, creativity and *perseverance* that is necessary to make such a great contribution in one's field! ... I much preferred 'floating' on his ladder levitation for long stretches of time as he built that masterpiece. I can remember those endless relaxing "floats", which provided him with a 'body' as he created his most famous illusion, and which simultaneously served as great preparation for my current activities in yoga and meditation. Who would have thought?

The scientist in me is always trying to correlate his 'genetic traits' with that of his offspring: One can see his influence in all 3 daughters: Like him, we all "perform" in our own unique ways, and each of our expressions appear to be a distinct facet of my Dad's personality. Becky got his 'comedian' trait, Shannon got his 'artistic presentation' trait, and I got his 'inventor trait'.

When I was a child, Daddy used to challenge me on scientific questions, like 'why does the same helium balloon sink down in the den, and float up in the living room?' and I would think hard and reply "because the air in the den is warmer?" - - and that was the start of my scientific career.

## **Shannon**

My Dad, Zaney Blaney. How can I put it, say it, write it? The name speaks for itself: integrity, professionalism, attention to detail and love of life. I was so lucky growing up with a magician for a Dad. He was home during the day, my friends thought he was cool and I was introduced and educated to the world of entertainment. In school, my teachers never believed me when I told them my Dad was a magician. He had to write a note to the teacher so I wouldn't get in trouble.

Best of all though was getting out of school so I could join him on road trips to San Antonio or Dallas for a show. I watched him pack and unpack tons of props. I watched him methodically prepare for a show, checking lights, music and sound, over and over...and over... and over again. I loved being backstage and watching all the goings on of a performance. By the time I was 10, I wanted to be on stage performing and it wasn't long before I was old enough to assist him on many occasions. My favorite show was on the QE2 in 1979 when The Love Boat was the most popular television show and all my girlfriends were extremely jealous of me. Like my sisters, I was always used for a "dummy" when Daddy was building his illusions.

The levitation was the most excruciating because I just couldn't lie still. He made me lay there for what seemed like hours but I am sure it was probably five minutes tops. I would try to sneak around the house so he wouldn't see me; once he did.... there was no escape. "C'mon Shannon, I need you to lie on the board for a minute" he'd say. I had no choice but to hold still. I was lucky when it came to the sawing. My legs were too long so I couldn't fit. Yea! But my poor sister Carol got the brunt of that trick.

Hum! I wonder, maybe we should charge him royalties.

Daddy was, and is the best Dad ever. He has three daughters that love him dearly. We never once have questioned his love for us and we are so fortunate that he taught us how to have a passion for something in life. Something that keeps you awake at night. Something that only dreams are made of yet our dreams came true because we persevered like our Dad.

.....ends.....