

HOUDINI ON TOUR – A LESSON IN GEOGRAPHY

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Social Studies A.4.2 – Locate on a map or globe physical features such as continents, oceans, mountain ranges, and land forms; natural features such as resources, flora, and fauna; and human features such as cities, states, and national borders.

Social Studies A.8.2 – Construct mental maps of selected locales, regions, states, and countries and draw maps from memory, representing relative location, direction, size, and shape.

English Language Arts B.4.1 – Create or produce writing to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes

- Write nonfiction and technical pieces (summaries, messages, informational essays, directions, instructions, simple reports) that convey essential details and facts and provide accurate representations of events and sequences.

Houdini had only been touring American vaudeville theaters for a year when he left to perform on the vaudeville stages of Europe. Houdini still wasn't really famous at this point in his career. He was just one performer among many on the playbills. Houdini was yet to be a "headliner." This was the main reason that Houdini went to Europe – to make a name for himself so that when he returned to the United States he could be the star of the show. Between 1900 and 1905, Houdini performed in England, Holland, France, Germany, and Russia. He challenged police officers or guards to chain him in such a way that he could not free himself . . . but he always did. When Houdini returned to the United States in 1905, he was an international star. He began a tour of the United States determined to become a famous star in America too. Soon he was the top headliner in vaudeville! While he played American stages, he also traveled overseas to entertain audiences in Australia, Europe, and Canada.

Read the descriptions of the following five cities where Houdini played. Find the cities on a world map. In what country is each city located?

1) Moscow, Russia

Dates performed: May 4 – July 4, 1903, at Establishment Yar (the name of the restaurant where he performed)

Houdini entered Russia under police surveillance. Officers under Czar Nicholas II had to approve Houdini's and all other performances in the country. Houdini told Moscow police that he was Catholic in order to perform at the Yar restaurant. Jewish people were not allowed to live or work in Moscow. He later impressed

the secret police with an escape from a “Siberian Transport Cell,” a safe-on-wheels used to take prisoners to Siberia. News of the 45-minute escape crossed the country.

2) Melbourne, Australia

Dates performed: February 7 – March 19, 1910, at the Opera House

Houdini performed straight jacket, packing crate, and milk can escapes for Melbourne audiences. Twenty thousand people packed the Queen Bridge to watch his *manacled* (confined with handcuffs or shackles) jump into the Yarra River. Between shows, Houdini got his biplane ready to fly at Diggers Rest, 20 miles away. He set an Australian record for the first flight on the continent on March 18, 1910. He flew his plane at an altitude of about 100 feet for 3 minutes.

3) Appleton, Wisconsin, USA

Dates Performed: March 29 – April 3, 1897, at the Opera House

Houdini moved with his family to Appleton when he was a four year-old boy in 1878 after his father became the city’s rabbi. The Jewish community fired Houdini’s father Rabbi Weiss, after five years of service. The Weiss family moved to Milwaukee and then New York City in search of work.

Houdini returned to Appleton as a small time magician with the Rogers’ Orpheum Stars in 1897. He challenged the local chief of police to lock him in handcuffs. Houdini freed himself from three pairs of cuffs within 5 minutes. Houdini hoped the stunt would encourage locals to buy tickets to see his act at the Opera House. Houdini returned to Appleton several times to visit childhood landmarks. He enjoyed bringing news of the city to his mother who lived with him in New York City. On such a visit in 1904, Edna Ferber interviewed him for the local newspaper. Ferber went on to become a noted novelist and play writer.

4) New York City, New York

Dates performed: Too numerous to list (almost each year throughout his 35-year career)

Houdini moved with his family to New York City when he was 13 years-old in 1887. He helped support his father’s income by taking jobs at a messenger company, tool and die shop, and necktie factory. Houdini became a full-time magician with several different partners at the age of 18. He and his partners performed as the Houdini Brothers for area theaters. Houdini met singer and dancer Beatrice Rahner while performing at an amusement park called Coney Island in 1894. Bess became Houdni’s wife and replaced his previous partners as his magic assistant.

Houdini performed in New York City every year throughout his career and featured all of his famous escapes. He played the longest run of his career at the

New York Hippodrome in 1918. For 19 weeks, Houdini performed escape magic and an illusion called the Vanishing Elephant in a show called *Cheer Up*, a patriotic extravaganza during World War I. Houdini introduced a séance act to his Hippodrome show in 1925. He played the role of “Zanetti,” a medium (a person who claimed to be able to communicate with the souls of people who had passed away). Houdini showed the audience a medium could trick their audiences to make them think that he or she had special powers.

The magician lived in a brownstone at 278 West 113th Street in the Jewish neighborhood of Harlem. He shared the home with his wife and several members of his family. He purchased a family plot in Machpelah Cemetery in Queens. Houdini was buried there in 1926.

5) Canada – Montreal, Quebec

Dates performed: September 4-9, 1911 (Orpheum Theatre); February 1-6, 1915 (Orpheum Theatre); April 20-May 2, 1925 (Imperial Theatre); October 18-23, 1926 (Princess Theatre)

Houdini introduced himself to an Orpheum Theatre audience with a packing case escape on September 8, 1911. He came back to the city with a full two and a half-hour show of magic tricks, escapes, and a spirit exposé in 1926. Between shows, Houdini lectured to students at McGill University about séance fraud. He invited several of the students to his dressing room at the Princess Theatre to talk about spiritualism (the belief that spirits of dead people could communicate with the living through a medium [like an interpreter] during a séance). One of the students asked Houdini if he could punch him in the stomach to test his strength. Houdini agreed, but the punches severely hurt the magician, who likely already suffered from appendicitis. Houdini finished his final show in Montreal in pain and left for another engagement in Detroit. He died of peritonitis in Detroit on October 31, 1926.

If you were a famous performer going on tour, in what cities would you most like to perform? Choose one of the cities on your list and research it. Find out about the city – what is the climate and landscape like? For what industries or agricultural products is the city best known? Are there famous attractions in the city you would like to visit? Write a paragraph about the city explaining why you chose it as a destination and answering the questions above.