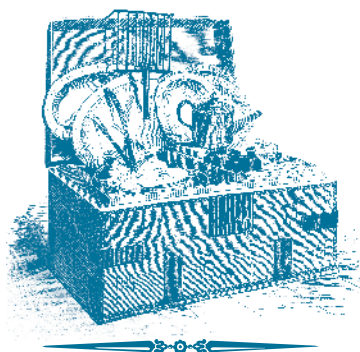


UP FRONT



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

Novelty Acts

Many people who grew up in the region might remember attending a birthday party and being enthralled by magician Harry Albacker in his turban and harem pants, or catching Bobby Jule's signature juggling act at the theater. Both of these locals gained an international reputation with their respective acts and recently both of their collections have been gifted to the History Center's artifact and archival collections. Together they tell the story of the golden age of variety and novelty acts in the mid-20th century.

Albacker, who worked from the 1960s through the 1990s, called his act the "longest running magic presentation in show business." Born in 1925, he began performing in vaudeville acts while attending Aspinwall High School, at times earning more from his acts than his teachers made. Albacker's parents were not pleased with his career choice, preferring that their son enter the mill like other local boys.

In contrast, Joe Pegnato's parents—he took the stage name Bobby Jule—were very supportive of his interest in juggling while growing up in Homewood. Joe watched his older brothers attempt it and was impressed with the juggling acts he saw at theaters.

Determined to become an accomplished juggler, he sent away for his own clubs and began to practice in his house and attend as many shows as he could. He booked his first show in 1942 and had a successful career for 40 years.

Although Jule's first performance was at the Enright Theater in East Liberty for its *Kiddies Saturday Morning Show*, it was Albacker who became an exclusive children's performer.

Albacker's children's show did not develop until many years after he returned from serving in World War II, when he reluctantly agreed to a request by the Three Rivers Arts Festival for a children's act. He enjoyed it so much, he never looked back. Driving his van up and down the East Coast and into Canada, he performed in a variety of venues including fairs, carnivals, malls, parties, and television—including a stint on WTAE's *Adventure Time* in



Pegnato donated his traveling case complete with his props, as well as an extensive collection of photographs documenting hundreds of fellow variety act performers he met in his many years on the road.

HHC Collections, gift of Joseph Pegnato, 2013.31.

Joseph Pegnato picked the stage name Bobby Jule because many jugglers of the era had the stage name Bobby, and Jule was the nickname of his brother Angelo. This professional photograph is from 1961.

HHC Detre L&A, Joseph Pegnato Collection, MSS 0956.

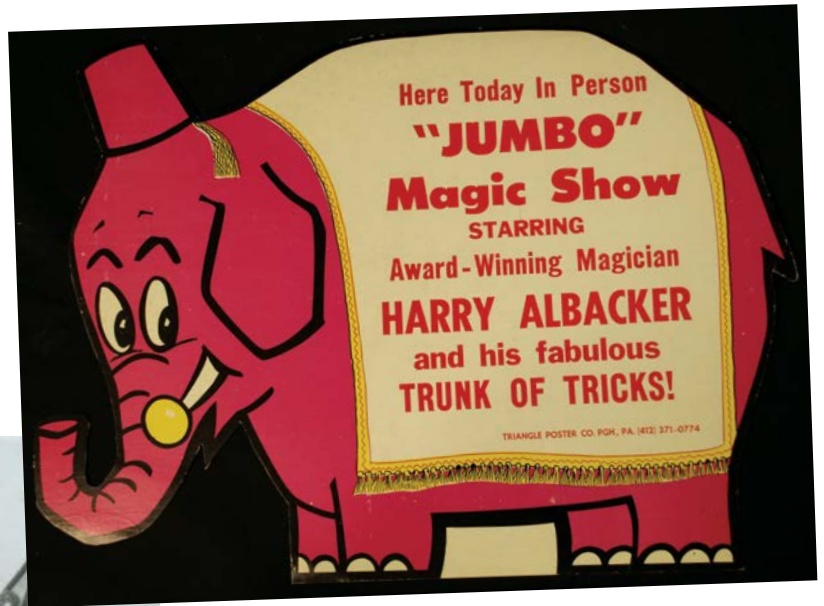


A sign advertising Harry Albacker's magic show that alludes to his interest in animals and an Arabian theme.

HHC Collections, gift of Barry Mitnick, 2010.69.

Albacker, in his signature look, often billed his show, "Harry Albacker and His Original 'Funny-Bunny' Show," but also performed as "the Magic Man," "The Only Dead Magician Alive," and "Harry Albacker and his Educated Animals."

HHC Detre L&A, Harry Albacker papers and photographs, MSS627.



the 1960s and '70s. Performing with animals was another signature of his, and the animals included rabbits, doves, snakes, chickens, and guinea pigs

Bobby Jule's act remained primarily in adult venues, with his mainstay being dinner theaters and stage performances. He did some television, but always preferred to perform live as his musical accompaniment and comedy came through more clearly. In the end it was television that forced him to become an international juggler as more Americans watched television in the 1950s and fewer attended live shows. In Europe and Asia, live entertainment remained the norm and he had a successful career into the 1980s.

Both collections document the exciting, exhausting, and somewhat lonely life of a traveling variety act. They also demonstrate the extreme competition and closely guarded secrets in both the magician and juggler fields. To see more of these rich collections, visit the History Center's Detre Library & Archives and stay tuned for the opening of the Visible Storage display later this year.

